

Focus on Learning: The Core Mission of Higher Education

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Institutions of higher education in the United States have achieved world-wide recognition in pursuit of three key missions: research, teaching, and service—missions valued by their stakeholders primarily in that order. The great centers of university research have produced breakthroughs in every field of science that have made our universities the envy of the world. Because of their success, “research” has become embedded as one of the cardinal values and purposes of higher education. Leading four-year colleges and community colleges have established “teaching” as a second cardinal value as many four-year colleges provide ideal residential communities for selected groups of students, and community colleges provide innovative approaches to assist great numbers of underprepared students in achieving success. All levels of institutions ascribe to “service” as an expression of their core values as they work to improve society at the local, state, national, and international level. Research, teaching, and service have provided a rich harvest from the higher education enterprise for American society and the world.

At the end of the 20th Century another key mission or purpose—a corollary of research, teaching, and service—began to sprout in the landscape of higher education. The new mission was not new at all, but it had not been as visible as research, teaching, and service in the policies, programs, and practices of institutions. Awakened from its dormancy, it began to claim territory that could establish it as more than a graft or a mutation of the historical missions rooted for decades. As the 21st Century got under way it became increasingly clear that “learning” had broken through the traditional hardpan of higher education and had established its own patch in the Groves of Academe. For some who toil in the vineyards of higher education “learning” will be no more than an upstart, an inconsequential sprout destined to wither and die. For others “learning” is the core business of all educational institutions—a transcendent value that arches over research, teaching, and service—providing a sharply focused perspective that will greatly enrich the work of the educational community.

As a newly-articulated mission of higher education “learning” has been cited by several leaders as part of the triumvirate of traditional missions. In a letter to the editor of *Change* magazine in May of 2000, James Bess, Professor of Higher Education at New York University said, “Institutions of higher education must maintain their unique roles in society—as extraordinary places where *teaching, learning, and research* (italics

added) can unfold, unfettered by the crass, short-term expectations of profit” (p. 6). Two years later, in the lead article of the Association of Governing Board’s newsletter, Berberet and McMillin stated, “It doesn’t take a Ph.D. to know that a college or university fulfills its multiple missions—*student learning, discovery of new knowledge, and community engagement* (italics added)—chiefly through its faculty” (p. 1). Perhaps “learning” is being incorporated as a key mission of higher education, even supplanting some of the established missions, more rapidly than we realized.

The Emerging Focus on Learning

“Learning” is, of course, the transcendent value that undergirds almost all educational activity. The purpose of research is to build on past learning to create new learning. The purpose of teaching is to improve and expand student learning. The purpose of service is to translate learning and provide learning to improve communities and citizens. All educators strongly value learning—as a continuing activity for themselves and as the outcome for others of their efforts. *But “learning” has been more of an implied mission in higher education than a visible mission.* It is the visible missions—research, teaching, and service—that determine the policies, practices, programs, and the uses of personnel in our institutions. And it is the visible missions on which all rewards are based.

One of the highest honors that can be bestowed on a university professor is that of Distinguished Research Chair. Ernest Boyer’s seminal work, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, was an attempt to right the balance that had tilted too far in the direction of traditional research over other forms of scholarship. Boyer hoped to establish “teaching” as an equal value to “research” in the reward systems of universities, but it is a purpose yet unrealized. In a review of teaching and learning practices in higher education between 1980 and 2000, cited by Berberet and McMillin, the authors concluded, “With few exceptions, teaching changes have not been tied to higher education’s incentive and reward system. Research remains the primary avenue to individual and institutional prestige” (p. 13).

Aping the university’s value system, community colleges, in the 1990s, created the concept of the Endowed Teaching Chair, identifying teachers for their teaching prowess rather than for their ability to help students learn. The following excerpts are cited from a description of an endowed teaching program at a leading community college: “The purpose of the endowed chair program is threefold: to recognize and promote teaching excellence at the college; to spotlight outstanding members of the college’s teaching faculty; and to provide the college with financial resources needed to support teaching excellence....The program enables the college to honor outstanding members of the teaching faculty and provide resources needed for the advancement of teaching....The criteria for selection of a faculty member for an endowed chair includes a faculty committee’s judgment of the candidate’s record of teaching excellence, contribution to the advancement of instruction within his or her field, and the degree of esteem expressed by his or her colleagues.” In this program teaching trumps learning at every turn.

Even so, there is an emerging focus on learning at all levels of education and in an increasing number of other countries that suggests a possible transformation in core educational practice, and, perhaps, even in the traditional missions of higher education.

The Learning Revolution

In the last fifteen years a Learning Revolution has spread rapidly across all levels of American higher education. In 1994, the cover of *Business Week* declared a Learning Revolution in progress; in 1995, a special section in *TIME* magazine announced the developing Learning Revolution. In 1996, the first national conference on “The Learning Paradigm” was held in San Diego, California, and the Association of Community College Trustees released a special issue of the *Trustee Quarterly* devoted entirely to *The Learning Revolution: A Guide for Community College Trustees*. In 1997, the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges jointly published *A Learning College for the 21st Century* by Terry O’Banion which, for the first time, outlined the principles and practices of a Learning College. In 1997 and 1998, the League for Innovation and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) sponsored three national teleconferences on the Learning Revolution and the Learning College. In a few short years, the Learning Revolution has taken American higher education by storm and has found community colleges to be particularly committed to implementing the Learning Revolution. In a 1998 survey by the League for Innovation in the Community College, 73% of the nation’s community college presidents indicated they had undertaken an initiative for their institutions to become more learning-centered community colleges.

From 2000 to 2010 the League for Innovation has continued to champion the Learning Revolution. The League coordinated two major million dollar grants at the beginning of the decade, one to create vanguard learning colleges and the other to create models of learning outcomes. In addition, the League launched a monthly series of *Learning Abstracts* and began to sponsor an annual Learning Summit. Now, in 2010, the League is publishing this *Focus on Learning: A Learning College Reader* as the Learning Revolution continues to impact and change higher education.

The Learning Revolution in education is part of a larger social transformation going on in the United States and in the world. Peter Drucker (1992), in *Managing for the Future*, succinctly captures this special period of change: “Every few hundred years throughout Western history, a sharp transformation has occurred. In a matter of decades, society altogether rearranges itself—its world view, its basic values, its social and political structures, its arts, its key institutions. Fifty years later a new world order exists. . . our age is such a period of transformation” (p. 95). The Learning Revolution, “in a matter of decades,” has the potential to fundamentally change the education enterprise in the United States and in Scotland, Australia, Jamaica, Turkey and other countries where it is taking hold.

A Revolution with a Purpose

In a nutshell, the purpose of the Learning Revolution is to “place learning first” in every policy, program, and practice in higher education by overhauling the traditional architecture of education. In a seminal work, *An American Imperative*, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education in 1993 said “We must redesign all our learning systems to align our entire education enterprise for the personal, civic, and workplace needs of the twenty-first century” (p. 19). The Wingspread Group went a step further and indicated the challenge institutions of higher education will face if they are to implement the Learning Revolution: “Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses” (p.14).

While there seems to be a revolution or reform movement about every decade in American education, the Learning Revolution is quite different from reform efforts of the past. The Learning Revolution has two distinct goals that make it different: (1) to place learning first in every policy, program, and practice in higher education, and (2) to overhaul the traditional architecture of education.

Placing Learning First

It is generally inferred that learning is the primary purpose of education; but policies, practices, and value statements often reflect other priorities.

Any student of education can cite the three primary missions most often articulated for American universities as noted earlier: research, teaching, and service. In many universities, however, the reward system places higher value on research over teaching and service. New tenure-track faculty are often warned by colleagues and mentors against investing too much energy and time in their teaching assignments. Universities have established distinguished research chairs as a clear designation of the primacy placed on research.

In contrast, the community college places such strong value on teaching that the institution is often referred to as “the teaching college.” For example, in community colleges, the value placed on teaching is clearly reflected in their mission statements. Robert Barr, former director of institutional research and planning at Palomar College in California, says: “It is revealing that virtually every mission statement contained in the catalogs in California’s 107 community colleges fails to use the word learning in a statement of purpose. When it is used, it is almost always bundled in the phrase *teaching and learning* as if to say that, while learning may indeed have something to do with community colleges, it is only present as an aspect of teaching.”

One of the most significant documents ever written on the community college in the U. S., *Building Communities* (1988)—the report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges—repeatedly highlights the central value placed on teaching in the community college: “Building communities dedicated to teaching is the vision and inspiration of this report. Quality instruction should be the hallmark of the movement. The community college should be the nation’s premier teaching institution.” Aping the

universities propensity to place its highest value on research by establishing distinguished research chairs, the community college has established distinguished teaching chairs as a clear symbol of the primacy it places on teaching.

When research and teaching are the most visible values in an educational institution, the policies, practices, programs, and personnel in that institution are aligned to reflect those values. If learning is placed first to become the most important value, the policies, practices, programs, and personnel will be realigned to reflect the change in focus. Recognition by key stakeholders in the institution that learning should be placed first as a key mission is the beginning of the Learning Revolution.

Overhauling the Traditional Architecture

Every faculty member and administrator in education has been frustrated at some time or another with the traditional architecture of education that limits how they can teach or manage and how students can learn. Roger Moe, former majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate, has said "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy." The current system is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound. These traditional limits on the architecture of education apply to American education but may differ in other countries depending on their educational history and the extent to which their leaders have implemented reforms in recent years.

The educational system in the U. S. is *time-bound* by credit hours and semester courses. College students are learning in blocks of time that are artificial. Excellent teachers know that learning is not constrained to one-hour meetings held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and they have been frustrated in teaching within these prescribed boundaries.

The system is *place-bound*. Learning is initiated, nurtured, monitored, and certified primarily by teachers in classrooms on a campus. We have experimented with distance education that takes courses off campus, but while it has increased student access, it retains the old model of education. Distance education, for the most part, is a nontraditional delivery system for traditional education. Work-based learning was supposed to break up that model, but it doesn't—it extends the model and is controlled by it because work-based learning is built around the current structure of the school. It still binds the student to a place.

The system is *efficiency-bound*. Our model of education reflects in great part the adjustment to an agricultural and industrial economy of an earlier era. Public school students are still dismissed early in the afternoon and in the summers so they can work on farms that no longer exist. Reflecting the industrial economy, education responded by creating a lock-step, put-them-in-boxes, factory model—the basis of American education today. Academic credit, based on time in class, makes learning appear orderly. This model creates an efficiency system to award credentials. Grades are collected and turned into credits, and these compilations are supposed to represent profound learning.

Finally the system is *role-bound*, which may be its greatest weakness. In education, we make the assumption that one human being, the teacher, can ensure that thirty very different human beings, one hour a day, three days a week for sixteen weeks, can learn enough to become enlightened citizens, productive workers, and joyful lifelong learners. Then we assume that this one human being can repeat this miracle three more times in the same sixteen-week period for ninety additional individuals. We provide little comfort and support when teachers fail to live up to this role-bound myth.

Reformers have been consistent in their criticism of the constraints on learning reflected in the industrial model of schooling in the United States. In 1962, John Dewey argued, “Nature has not adapted the young animal to the narrow desk, the crowded curriculum, the silent absorption of complicated facts.” More than 20 years ago, K. Patricia Cross, a leading advocate for educational reform throughout her career observed: “After some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have concluded that our commitment to the lock-step, time-defined structures of education stands in the way of lasting progress.” More recently, the Tofflers have noted that “America’s schools. . . still operate like factories, subjecting the raw material (children) to standardized instruction and routine inspection.”

Today, this inherited architecture of education places great limits on a system struggling to redefine itself. The school system, from kindergarten through graduate school, is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound.

The Learning College

As the Learning Revolution spread throughout all levels of education in the United States innovators and reformers began to create programs and practices to reflect the emerging focus on learning. Learning Communities were being created everywhere, and research established their potency as an effective new program to retain students and improve their performance. Learning Outcomes became the coin of the realm for organizing and focusing what needed to be learned; the accrediting associations began to require learning outcomes of all institutions. Peter Senge’s Learning Organization captured the imaginations of scores of leaders who tried to transform their organizational structures and practices to reflect the new emphasis on learning. Studies on the brain were translated into educational practice to expand students’ potential for learning. Learning Portfolios were designed to capture the substance of what students were learning. And a host of learning-centered innovations flooded the journals and conference forums: Classroom Assessment Techniques, Project-Based Learning, Contextual Learning, Work-Based Learning, Authentic Learning, First-Year Experience, Service Learning, Active Learning, and Collaborative Learning are examples.

However, these innovations, programs, and practices tended to operate in a vacuum. Many were quite effective, but they seldom unfolded as part of an overall strategy to place learning first and overhaul the traditional architecture of education. It was business as usual for American education—piecemeal reform. But, as reported in *The Progress of Educational Reform (1995)* “While piecemeal implementation of reforms may lead to

progress, it will not be the same magnitude as a systemic strategy focused on student learning.” What was needed was an overall framework, a systemic design, of what a college would look like if it placed learning first and overhauled the traditional architecture of education. The Learning College was the first such effort to fill that bill.

The Learning College places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime. The model is based on the assumption that educational experiences are designed for the convenience of learners rather than for the convenience of institutions and their staffs. The term “The Learning College” is used as a generic reference for all educational institutions.

The Learning College is based on six key principles:

- The Learning College creates substantive change in individual learners.
- The Learning College engages learners as full partners in the learning process with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The Learning College creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
- The Learning College assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The Learning College defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The Learning College and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for learners.

Principle I—The Learning College Creates Substantive Change in Individual Learners. The need for colleges to support this first principle is a self-evident, general truth, easily verifiable in personal experience. It is so elementary that it is often unstated and overlooked. This first principle must be stated and restated until it becomes an embedded value undergirding all other principles.

At its best, formal schooling is every society’s attempt to provide a powerful environment that can create substantive change in individuals. But formal schooling is no longer at its best in most societies. In the Learning College, this first principle must form the framework for all other activities. The learners and the learning facilitators in the Learning College must be aware of the awesome power that can be released when learning works well. Learning in the Learning College will not be business as usual. Powerful processes will be at work; substantive change will be expected. Learners will be exploring and experimenting with new and expanded versions of what they can become. And it is important for educational leaders planning to initiate major change to become more learning centered to realize and to make visible to all of their stakeholders and constituents that what they are about to do will create substantive change in individual learners.

Principle II—The Learning College Engages Learners as Full Partners in the Learning Process, with Learners Assuming Primary Responsibility for Their Own Choices. At the point a learner chooses to engage the Learning College, a series of services will be initiated to prepare the learner for the experiences and opportunities to

come. Until there is a seamless system of education across all sectors of education based on the principles of the Learning College, the services will be heavily focused on orienting the learner to the new experiences and expectations of the Learning College, which are not usually found in traditional schools. Two key expectations will be communicated to new learners at the first stage of engagement: (1) Learners are full partners in the creation and implementation of their learning experiences, and (2) Learners will assume primary responsibility for making their own choices about goals and options.

The services will include assessing the learner's abilities, achievements, values, needs, goals, expectations, resources, and environmental/situational limitations. A personal profile will be constructed by the learner in consultation with an expert assessor to illustrate what this learner knows, wants to know, and needs to know. A personal learning plan will be constructed from this personal profile, and the learner will negotiate a contract that outlines responsibilities of both the learner and the Learning College.

The Learning College will also provide orientation and experimentation for learners who are unfamiliar with the new learning environment of the Learning College. Some learners will need training in using the technology, in developing collaborations, in locating resources, and in navigating learning systems. Specialists will monitor these services carefully and will be responsible for approving a learner's readiness to fully engage the learning opportunities provided.

It will be the Learning College's responsibility to provide clear and easily accessible information in a variety of formats. This information should include guidelines for making decisions about dates, workloads, resources, and learning options; details about processes and options new to the learner; and agreements regarding expectations and responsibilities. It will be the learner's responsibility to review and provide information, experiment with processes and options, make choices, and commit to full engagement in the choices made.

Principle III—The Learning College Creates and Offers as Many Options for Learning as Possible. The learner will review and experiment with options regarding time, place, structure, and methodology. Entry vouchers will be exchanged for the selected options and exit vouchers will be held for completion.

Each learning option will include specific goals and competency levels needed for entry as well as specific outcome measures of competency levels achieved. Learning Colleges will constantly create additional learning options, including prescribed, preshunk portable modules; stand-alone technological expert systems; opportunities for collaboration with other learners in small groups and through technological links; and tutor-led groups, individual reading programs, project-based activities, service learning opportunities, lectures, and laboratories. It is important that traditional options needed by some students be retained to provide for the multiple needs of students.

A major goal of the Learning College will be to create as many learning options as possible in order to provide successful learning experiences for all learners. If the learner's goal is to become competent in English as a second language, there should be four or five learning options available to achieve the goal. If the learner's goal is to become competent in welding a joint, there should be four or five learning options available to achieve that goal.

To manage the activities and progress of thousands of learners engaged in hundreds of learning options at many different times, at many different levels, in many different locations, the Learning College will rely on expert systems using advanced technology. Without these complex systems, the Learning College cannot function. These systems reflect the breakthrough that will free education from the time-bound, place bound, and role-bound systems that currently manage the educational enterprise.

Principle IV—The Learning College Assists Learners to Form and Participate in Collaborative Learning Activities. To transform a traditional institution into a Learning College is to turn the university ideal of a “community of scholars” into a new ideal of “communities of learners.” More than just cute word play, the focus on creating communities among all participants in the Learning College—including not just students but also the faculty and other learning specialists—on creating student cohorts, and developing social structures that support individual learning is a requirement of a Learning College.

It has become increasingly clear from research that learning is a social activity. The constructivists Abel, Cennamo and Chung, say “Learning is a social enterprise. Through social interaction, as well as through action on objects, learners make sense of the world.” In the U. S., “Learning communities” is a specific term for a curricular intervention that enhances collaboration and expands learning, and these communities have taken hold in hundreds of institutions across the country. There are many other forms of collaborative learning including project-based learning, electronic forums (Twitter and Facebook, e.g.), and collaborative problem-solving activities that illustrate this principle.

In a Learning College, staff will form and recruit students into cohorts of common interest or circumstances. Process facilitators will orient individuals and form them into groups or communities of learners. Resource specialists will attend to the resource needs of both individuals and groups of learners. Learning facilitators will design experiences that build upon and use group strengths and other dynamics. Assessment specialists will design and implement authentic assessments that can occur both individually and in the context of collaborative learning. The Learning College will be designed not only around the unique needs of individual learners but also around their needs for association. The Learning College will foster and nourish learning communities as an integral part of its design.

Principle V—The Learning College Defines the Roles of Learning Facilitators by the Needs of the Learners. If learners have varied and individual needs that require special attention, then it follows that the personnel employed in this enterprise must be

selected on the basis of what learners need. Everyone employed in the Learning College will be a learning facilitator. Every employee will be directly linked to learners in the exercise of his or her duties, although some activities, such as accounting, may be more indirectly related. The goal is to have every employed person thinking about how his or her work facilitates the learning process.

The Learning College will contract with many specialists to provide services to learners. Specialists will be employed on a contractual basis to produce specific products or to deliver specific services; some will work full time, but many will work part time, often from their homes, linked to learners through technology. A number of specialists will be scattered around the world providing unique services and special expertise.

The Board of Regents for the State of Ohio calls for learning consultants who will be mentors, facilitators of inquiry, architects of connection, and managers of collaboration and integration. The ground work is already being prepared for the new role of the learning facilitator to support the goals and purposes of the Learning College.

Principle VI—The Learning College and Its Learning Facilitators Succeed only When Improved and Expanded Learning Can Be Documented for Learners. “What does this learner know?” and “What can this learner do?” provide the framework for documenting outcomes, both for the learner and for the learning facilitators. If the ultimate goal of the Learning College is to promote and expand learning, then this will be the yardstick by which the Learning College faculty and staff are evaluated. Conventional information may be assembled for students (retention rates and achievement scores) and for faculty (service and observation by students, peers, and supervisors), but the goal will be to document what students know and what they can do and to use this information as the primary measure of success for the learning facilitators and the Learning College.

All learning options in the Learning College will include the competencies required for entrance and for exit. These competencies will reflect national and state standards when available, or they will be developed by specialists on staff or on special contract. Assessing a learner’s readiness for a particular learning option will be a key part of the initial engagement process and thereafter a continuing process embedded in the culture of the institution.

Conclusion

These six principles form the core of the Learning College. They refer primarily to process and structure, and are built on the basic philosophy that the student is central in all activities within the scope of the educational enterprise. There are certainly other principles that must be considered in creating a new paradigm of learning. The kind of content to be addressed, how colleges are funded, and how institutions are governed are examples of key issues that must be addressed and for which principles must be designed. In these six principles, there is at least a beginning direction for those who wish to create a Learning College that places learning first and provides educational experiences for

learners anyway, anyplace, anytime. Such a college is designed to help students make passionate connections to learning.

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