

The Search for the Learning- Centered College William J. Flynn; Palomar College, San Marcos, CA

In 1988, Building Communities identified a dual influence on our colleges. The first was the colonial influence with its focus on the student, general education, and loyalty to the college. The second was the German model, with its emphasis on the teacher, specialization, and loyalty to the discipline. Although many sectors of our society change and adjust to new influences and trends, **higher education has been resistant to any meaningful change.**

These multiple challenges – pervasive technology, increased calls for accountability, and unprecedented competition – force us to consider what was once an impossible thought: We may forfeit our mandate to provide cost-effective, accessible, undergraduate education. Given the enormous size of our educational system, the sheer scope of change required, and the entrenched forces opposing such change, significant innovations are scattered. What is needed is not only incremental or even institutional change but also transformation. Unless we can transform our institutions to be relevant, competitive, accessible, and accountable, we may lose the franchise.

What We Are: The Instruction Paradigm

In this paradigm, the **focus is on the teacher**, who usually employs **lecture as the primary method** of delivering instruction. **Learning is clearly the responsibility of the student**, and its **measurement is not a high priority**. This centuries-old model of the scholar **possessing knowledge and transferring it to eager students** has changed little since before the invention of the printing press.

An **emphasis on instruction rather than learning** is ingrained in the culture and structure of our colleges. For example, in the mid-1990s, Robert Barr investigated the mission statements of virtually every community college in California, 100 or more of which enrolled some 1.5 million students. He concluded that the institutions' mission statements "*failed to use the word learning as a statement of purpose.*"

The degree or certificate awarded recognizes accumulation of credit hours, not a demonstration of **interrelated knowledge and skills**. **Which is the purpose of our SLOs, PLO's, and General Education Outcomes.**

Independent, discipline-centered departments are repositories of specialized and somewhat isolated knowledge, **rarely interacting with colleague departments**. Significant resources and planning are committed to maintaining traditional values and keeping teachers current in their disciplines through professional development programs. A subtle but perceptible caste system exists on many campuses in which the faculty are the "upper class" and other employees the support staff. To insure that a teacher has the requisite preparation to convey knowledge, minimum academic qualifications are required in the faculty hiring process. Simply put, **any expert can teach. (Learning???)**

We all agree that students present us with multiple learning styles, that **critical thinking** should be incorporated into every course. Yet **little concrete evidence exists that we implement our beliefs or that we practice what we preach**. We have been, and remain, teaching institutions. It is the student's responsibility to learn. It has always been so.

What We Must Become: The Learning Paradigm

Barr and Tagg argued that the very mission, vision, culture, and structure of a college must undergo a paradigm shift from the instruction paradigm to the learning paradigm, **from being an institution that provides instruction to students to an institution that produces learning in students**. Once that shift is made, everything has the potential for change. This deceptively simple semantic change has profound implications for what our colleges can become, and redefines how we design and shape the complex relationship that will exist in the future between the teacher and the student.

This paradigm shift results in several benefits for the college: **Faculty are the designers of powerful learning environments**. Curriculum design is based on an **analysis of what a student needs to know to function in a complex world rather than on what the teacher knows how to teach**. The college is judged not on the quality of the entering

class but on the **quality of the aggregate learning growth possessed by its graduates.** (Relies on participation by **everyone.**) Compartmentalized departments are replaced by cross-disciplinary cooperatives. And every employee has a role to play and a contribution to make in maintaining a learner-centered environment.

Colleges must reconfigure the way they interact with students. Emphasis must shift from delivering instruction in traditional methods to **discovering the many ways in which learning can be stimulated in every student.** Although lecturing is a valid method of delivering information, encouraging discussion, and promoting interaction, using other collaborative ways to enhance learning must be examined and adopted. **Faculty must be trained to become proficient in both *stimulating* and *assessing* student learning. Inspiring & facilitating learning!**

Barriers to Change

Given the nature of our colleges – their history and traditions, their commitment to shared governance and consensus building, and a substantial institutional culture that seems to resist change – the impediments to organizational transformation in our colleges are formidable.

The concept of **shared governance** implies that all campus constituencies have an active role to play in determining the goals, direction and operation of the college. **No other entity in society embraces this collectivist approach to managing its affairs.** Faculty zealously guard the curriculum as their exclusive property, but they selectively determine what role they will play in institutional management decisions on a case-by-case basis, effectively **holding a veto over meaningful change.** Significant intellectual energy and precious time is committed to positioning and posturing within the campus political climate. Reaching a critical mass of consensus requires long deliberation and consultation. **With every hand on the tiller, the collegiate ship of state does not change course easily or often. Only the most effective and committed do optional....for others there must be a 'forcing function' to inspire participation.**

Too often, competitive instincts tend to be focused inward on rivalries between or among individuals, departments, divisions, faculty, and administration. Little or no attention is paid to the environment outside the academic community or to potential threats to higher education as a whole. **Compartmentalization hinders a process-oriented perspective.** Quality is defined as adherence to self-defined standards (accreditation), and there are few meaningful reward systems to recognize initiative, innovation, or efficiency. **There are few collegewide discussions on refining and improving the educational process, or on how each employee can contribute to creating a powerful learning environment.** **Treat each class/intervention like you were teaching/assisting your own children or grandchildren.**

All of us – faculty, administrators, classified staff – are caught up in defending a system not of our creation. It is the system in which we were educated. **It is the system that annoys or infuriates us when, as parents, we see our children endure some of its inanities. Yet when we are inside it, when we work in it, when we teach in it, we become the system, and amazingly, we resist changing it.**

This precisely is the challenge America's community colleges face with the new millennium: the need to transform themselves into colleges that **place learning (not grades) first in every decision and action.** The alternative is to be assimilated or even eradicated by the most powerful competitive forces we have ever known.

Current Approaches to Change

Terry O'Banion's writings on the traditional limits on higher education (time-bound, place-bound, bureaucracy-bound, and role-bound) echo and expand upon the Wingspread Group's view. All four limitations place significant restrictions on the ability to design a learner-centered environment.

Another paradigm needing reexamination is the notion that learning takes place in a specially designed place called a college. In fact, most of our standard classrooms are anything but specially designed and are not the most conducive locations for **meaningful learning** to occur. Today's student has a choice of accessing information and learning electronically in his or her home at any time by means of the Internet or televised courses.

Our challenge is to plan and implement, in a sensitive but comprehensive way, the evolving role of faculty in an age where technology has made information accessible in efficient and cost-effective ways, thereby challenging the unique franchise undergraduate education has enjoyed for so long. Readily available access to information means that the classroom has lost its place of primacy as the central location where knowledge is acquired.

The best response is to **infuse institutional assessment into the very culture of the college**, enabling faculty to accurately and regularly gauge the educational progress of their students and provide administrators with **solid data on which to make decisions to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness**. However, assessment should not be linked to the negative implications of externally mandated accountability; it should be an **internal quest for continuous quality improvement of the learning process conducted by all college employees**.

Institutional assessment must be incorporated into the very culture of our colleges, enabling faculty to accurately and regularly gauge the educational progress of their students, while administrators have solid data on which to make decisions to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness.

Faculty, in addition to their subject expertise, need to be trained in identifying learning styles, modular curriculum development, and instructional technology and methodology, in order to become **effective assessors of a student's abilities and potential**, designers of learning environments and systems, and trainers in how to access information and data.

The challenge to community colleges, therefore, is to anticipate what the job market will be, and what curricula must be developed to meet the training and retraining needs of the workforce. Colleges must be able to **develop and offer courses and programs in a rapid response mode**, an operating behavior not usually found on our campuses today. Faculty must be given every opportunity to remain current in their fields, while being allowed to develop new competencies and expertise. And they must become **leaders** in streamlining the process of developing, approving, and offering courses and programs in a manner that is relevant and responsive to the needs of their constituencies.

What we currently call the core curriculum (or distribution requirements) also needs transformation. This prescribed set of required courses from an array of departments, assembled **in the hope ('hope' is not an action plan) that a "well rounded general education" will miraculously occur from what is basically a cafeteria menu**, is without design or merit. Coherence, if there is any, is to be supplied by the student. The core curriculum is not **learning-centered or outcomes-based**. A further complication is that community colleges cannot be innovative in developing a truly effective curricula that contains core knowledge and skills because upper level institutions often dictate the shape and content of general education requirements to meet their own internal political needs. The student is trapped in the academic crossfire.

Competence in life involves the appropriate use of knowledge whereas academic success involves the recognition and recall of knowledge. Students leave our colleges knowing things, but are unable to understand concepts or **apply knowledge across particular contexts, because the curriculum has often failed to focus on competency**. To design a true core curriculum, faculty should define collectively what graduates should know and be able to do, and **design learning experiences to achieve those ends. Curriculum should be designed around the critical learning outcomes** necessary for success in a field, building the sequence of courses around students being actively involved in **real-life case studies. A curriculum based on outcomes gives learners the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are valued by employers.**

Looking to the Future

The concept of the learning paradigm provides an overarching metaphor for **organizational transformation, not merely change**. It is not a concept that can be applied to one portion of a college. It must permeate all aspects of its structure, fabric, and culture to effectively complete the paradigm shift. Planning, resource allocation, facilities design, curriculum development, policy governance, the infusion of technology into pedagogy, and the nature and

quality of all supportive services must be aligned with the vision of a college **unified in causing, enhancing, and producing student learning.**

Placing **learning at the core of every decision and action** means rethinking how we organize ourselves, how we structure our colleges, and how we interact with each other as employees of an institution.

Maximizing Resources in the Transformative Process

Colleges need to invest in supporting the crucial and evolving role of faculty as subject experts, learning mentors, and role models, while adding the new responsibilities of learning environment designer and holistic curriculum leader. Freed from the time- and place-bound curriculum and classroom, the 21st century teacher can have more freedom to experiment with new methods, techniques, and approaches to ensuring that all students learn in whatever manner is **most appropriate to the learner.**

Another resource to maximize is the tremendous potential of every college employee. Rather than continuing a hierarchical structure in which there are teachers and those who support teaching, we should engage in a dialogue that examines the potential of all our people to be utilized in the most cost-effective and sensible way so they may become **active contributors to the learning process.**

Professional development programs need to integrate all college employees into a core institutional training program so that a common vocabulary, approach, and commitment to student learning is shared by all.

Conclusion

Today, we are a **nation of lifelong learners.** Kids come to our campuses for community services workshops and seminars that enhance their maturation. Older adults seek enrichment through noncredit programs and activities. Workforce members of all ages come to us for refresher courses, skills upgrades, and retraining. We are evolving as institutions. We are no longer simply technical colleges, no longer merely junior colleges. As technology impacts our lives, our jobs, and our society, and as the very definition of what we call community changes, we will become more than just community colleges. We will become the learning centers of our communities.

This is the agenda for the next century: to move from the comfort of the instruction paradigm to the challenge of the learning paradigm, to retain and enhance the strengths and resources within our colleges while **courageously daring to transform** what we do for the sake of our students. It will not be easy. As Marcel Proust eloquently stated: *"The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."*

Entire article can be accessed...

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/pastprojects/Pages/searchforlearning.aspx>