

Twenty Observations About Change Related to Becoming a More Learning-Centered Institution

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Community colleges live and thrive in the crucible of change—always have, always will. Built on the streets far from the Ivory Tower they confront and embrace on a daily basis an ever-changing community, an ever-changing student body, an ever-changing societal demand for new workers and new citizens, an ever-changing technology, an ever-changing demand for accountability. And now community colleges are being asked to change their core focus to place learning first in every policy, program, practice, and in the way they use their personnel. They are being asked to transform and revolutionize their mission, their organizational structure, their strategic planning, their facilities, their curriculum—all their systems—to ensure that the overall goal is to improve and expand student learning. As difficult as this transformation will be, hundreds of community colleges have embraced the compelling idea to become more learning centered, to become Learning Colleges in the 21st century. Community colleges live and thrive in the crucible of change.

As community colleges begin this journey to become more learning centered they can capitalize on some of the experience we have accumulated in our 100-year history of constantly coping with change. Following are 10 observations about the challenges and 10 observations about the opportunities community colleges face as they respond to and prepare for change related to becoming a more learning-centered institution. *Community college leaders might find it useful to study these observations and assess to what extent they apply in their own institutions.*

Change Challenges

1. We are always telling our story positively (to legislators, to the community, to prospective students, to area high schools and colleges, to our own trustees – and to ourselves) usually in the form of anecdotes about the success of an individual student. There isn't much room left for critical analysis of our shortcomings. In the community college movement, we have yet to create and value a critical perspective.
2. It is difficult to create a common vocabulary so that key stakeholders really understand one another. Language is very important as a factor in the change process. Education tends to borrow its change language from business, and every consultant group has a specialized language. Community college faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees need to find their own voices in the babble of change and develop their own learning-centered language indigenous to the culture of the community college.
3. Vested interests in educational institutions often prevail and provide islands of comfort for many. Power struggles among divisions and campuses and between individual leaders increase the tension. The sounds from the turf wars drown out attempts to hold reasoned conversations about anything—especially about learning.
4. Even when individuals recognize the need for change, they are often overwhelmed about how to articulate the framework for change that will be required, and they are often cynical about their ability and the ability of their colleagues to undertake such grand tasks. Some fall back on old positions: “We tried that before, and it didn't work.” “We have been doing that for years.” “What's new about that?”
5. Many faculty doubt the ability of their leaders to manage the transformation, and many leaders doubt the ability of their faculty to make the change happen. At some point, because of the overwhelming nature of the task, everyone doubts his or her own ability.

6. Everyone complains about the time required to continue the present structure while involved in creating a new structure. In times of major change we must continue to serve three meals a day while the kitchen is being completely remodeled.
7. Many attempts at substantive change fail because administrators, faculty, and staff have had few opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge required for major change. A massive in-house training program is required if the stakeholders are going to manage the change process.
8. Many college leaders are trying to change the way they operate and communicate with each other and with the faculty and staff at the same time they launch major initiatives to change the way they educate their students. They want to use the principles of Senge's "learning organization" to become a more learning-centered institution. These can be complementary or very separate goals; both require an extraordinary amount of time and effort and new learning.
9. There will always be a vocal group who believe that additional resources will solve all problems. It is difficult for educators to consider eliminating some of the things they do and hard to reallocate the use of current resources.
10. Once the change initiative begins to infiltrate the culture of the college, it is exceedingly difficult for any one individual to understand and articulate the big picture of what is going on. Presidents retire or move on; committee, faculty senate, union, and trustee chairs serve one-year terms; a new student body enrolls every term. How do we know where we are going and how we are doing on the journey?

On the other hand, community colleges have a great deal going for them as they embrace and engage in the change process. Over the last one hundred years we have learned some things about our institutions, our colleagues, ourselves that encourage us to move forward in our continuing quest for quality. In our journey to become more learning-centered we can build on the opportunities at hand.

Change Opportunities

1. An overwhelming majority of college stakeholders recognizes the need for change. College stakeholders are generally well-read, up-to-date, and rational; they have a pretty good understanding that the world in general and education in particular are going through a significant period of change.
2. Staff members like being part of a college culture where the need for change and an emerging vision for that change has begun to be articulated by its leaders. What faculty or staff member wants to be part of a community college that proclaims "There is no need for change here."?
3. Community college faculty are strongly committed to the basic values that undergird a learning-centered institution. At the same time, they are rightly cynical about quick fixes and simplistic solutions. At the core of their being, however, every faculty member in a community college wants to be a better teacher; every faculty member in a community college wants his or her students to learn; every faculty member in a community college wants the institution to improve its services to students. These beliefs and commitments provide a strong foundation upon which to build a more learning-centered enterprise.
4. The teaching versus learning construct is a red herring. Community colleges take great pride in their commitment to teaching, but not as an end in itself. Community college teachers have always understood that the purpose of teaching is to improve and expand learning. Because of its historical commitment to quality teaching, the community college is the ideal crucible in which to create a more learning-centered institution. Given the tools and the leadership, community college faculty will take a substantive step forward in the continuing evolution of improving and expanding learning for their students.

5. Community college faculty members have struggled for decades to teach the most diverse and most underprepared students ever to attend college. In the right circumstances they will welcome any improvement and support in which they can perform their tasks more effectively.
6. Classified staff, non-teaching faculty, students, and community volunteers provide untapped resources for providing and supporting expanded learning opportunities. Human beings gravitate to learning-centered environments and appreciate it when their commitments and contributions are recognized. Secretaries can easily articulate the contributions they make to learning on the campus. Research has suggested that students often learn more from each other than they do from faculty.
7. New tools have emerged in the last decade in the forms of improved assessment practices, better understanding of learning outcomes, new research on learning, and an expanding application of information technology that creative community college faculty members have been experimenting with for years. When leaders support and unleash these creative pioneers, community colleges will make giant leaps forward.
8. It is not enough, however, to create and support a wide variety of innovations designed to improve learning. Almost all community colleges support innovative practices, but in most cases the champions of innovation work in isolation from each other. In most community colleges there are many islands of innovation, each struggling to make a dent in the overall scheme of things. If substantive and broad-based change is to occur in the institution, leaders need to corral these innovators into a common force and focus their energy and common interest on the larger picture—which is to improve and expand student learning.
9. Technology can support the status quo or become a driving force in bringing about change. Managed appropriately, technology can release faculty and staff from performing primitive tasks, can substantively deepen and expand opportunities for student learning, and can help orchestrate systems and processes that manage change.
10. Community colleges have matured as institutions of higher education and are not as defensive as they were in earlier decades. Holding a well-deserved seat at the table of higher education, they are now positioned to take on tougher tasks including the continuing transformation of their culture toward a more learning-centered system. Of all the institutions of higher education community colleges are in the vanguard—because of their philosophy, because of their faculty and staff, because of their students' needs—to become the leading Learning Colleges of the 21st century.

There are certainly other challenges and opportunities community colleges face as they continue to cope with change and especially as they struggle to begin or continue their journey to become more learning-centered institutions. For colleges well along on the journey these 20 observations regarding change can provide a basis for review and examination of the progress they have made. For colleges contemplating the journey these observations can be used to assess readiness. All community colleges will find the observations useful as a catalyst for creating campus conversations about change and about learning.

Draft

October 9, 2002