Leadership for Learning

BY TERRY O'BANION

What it takes to build a learning college.

In the last decade of the 20th century, educators across the country came face to face with a stark reality: All their efforts to make substantive reforms in the educational enterprise—involving billions of dollars, new regulations, new standards, new programs, new practices—had failed. The little red schoolhouse that Carnegie built was not made of bricks; it was made of sticks and straw and had been crumbling for decades.

What went wrong has been well documented (Perelman 1992; Wingspread Group on Higher Education 1993; O'Banion 1997). In a nutshell, education leaders continued to prop up Carnegie's little red schoolhouse by bolting new programs and practices on an outdated architecture. Initially, even information technology supported the traditional architecture of education.

The challenge to bring about change was formidable. "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy" (Moe 1994). Tweaking a broken system by adding an innovation did not produce substantive change. The inherited architecture of education was time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound. A new way of thinking about the entire educational enterprise was needed, and the Wingspread Group on Higher Education issued the call: "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" (1993). This clear and simple statement echoed an emerging vision for the future: The "Learning Revolution" places learning first by overhauling the traditional architecture of education.
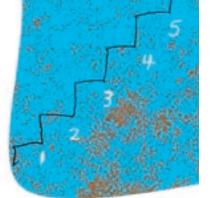
Academic leaders who support such changes know and value something about learning worth sharing, worth teaching—something for which they are willing to provide leadership. Such leaders understand that learning as a process and product should be the foundation of every policy, practice, and program and the way personnel are used across the institution. A framework for their understanding and for their leadership behavior is explained through thorough examination of two key questions: (1) Does this action improve and expand student learning? and (2) How do we know this action improves and expands student learning?

Q: Does This Action Improve and Expand Student Learning?

Actions on the part of leaders to improve and expand student learning include the following:

Create a culture that places learning first. Later we will address the need to create a "culture of evidence." First, we note the need to create an "evidence of culture"—one that places priority on learning. A community college's staff development program can provide learning opportunities for leaders through readings, workshops, consultants, conferences, and site visits to established learning colleges. As core leaders become learned, they model for

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others the commitment to learning as a lifelong process for everyone.

Create an organizational structure and communication system that places learning first. Evidence of a culture that places priority on learning will also be manifested in the kind of organizational structure and communication system that emerges for the institutional stakeholders to do their work. Senge's Learning Organization offers an appealing approach. The model learning organization reduces hierarchies, creates an open flow of information for all constituencies, focuses on whole systems, and encourages flexible structures where members work in teams to accomplish pre-established goals.

Tap and develop learning-centered faculty and staff. Does this candidate for a faculty position improve and expand student learning? If colleges would just ask this question about every new position in the college and follow up with appropriate assessments and interviews, the college culture would quickly become more learning centered. The easiest and best way to ensure that a college becomes a learning college is to select new faculty and staff who are committed to learning-centered values and who practice learning-centered behaviors. All prospective staff should be asked to provide evidence of learning-centered behaviors in their past roles and examples of behaviors they would like to practice in the future.

Recognize and reward faculty and staff for learning-centered behaviors. In a staff development program that establishes minimum levels of performance, individuals and groups should be recognized for their achievement and the accomplishments celebrated appropri-

ately. Certificates of achievement could be calculated into increases on the salary scale. Opportunities for faculty and staff to share their successful application of learning-centered practices with their colleagues—internally and externally—can serve to motivate many to further expand and improve on their roles in helping students learn.

Focus the board of trustees and the community on learning-centered philosophy and practices. Leaders must make sure that the institution's governing board supports and champions the learning college ideal. True change requires years of commitment and tension for all stakeholders. There will be some strong resistance and possibly outright rebellion. There will be confusion and doubt. If leaders are to manage these normal elements of the change process, the governing board will need to be informed and involved to the maximum degree possible. The community also should be informed and involved in this process. If the surrounding community understands that the change is intended to better serve students, this likely will result in enhanced opportunities throughout the local community to drive and support change.

Q: How Do We Know This Action Improves and Expands Student Learning?

Actions of leaders that demonstrate evidence of improved and expanded student learning include the following:

Champion a "culture of evidence." Just as they play key roles in creating evidence of a culture that places a priority on learning, so do leaders play key roles in championing a "culture of

evidence." Leaders influence the daily work of the institution enormously when they begin to ask basic questions: How did you arrive at that conclusion? How has this idea worked in other situations in which you have been involved? Do you think we can measure the effectiveness of this practice? How would you go about assessing the effectiveness of this policy? What can I tell the board to demonstrate that the program you are proposing will improve and expand student learning? At the end of this term, this project, this task force, this committee meeting, what indices will we use to assess our success in achieving our goals? A constant focus on every institutional action in terms of whether and how it affects student learning will move the institution down the path of thoughtful inquiry and rational decision making based on evidence rather than anecdote and personal whim.

Create a systemic approach to institutional effectiveness. Building on the assumption that improved and expanded learning begins with the individual student, learning outcomes for individual students are the best framework available for tracking growth and success. Each student in a learning college should begin in initial stages of matriculation to be involved in identifying personal and professional goals couched in the nomenclature of learning outcomes. This personal road map should be flexible, practical, multifaceted, and electronic; and it should be one of the key resources from which evidence is extracted to arrive at a measure of institutional effectiveness.

Examine the effectiveness of the traditional grading system and propose a new system. The grading system of A through F is one of the most powerful elements of the historical architecture of education. Grades begin to stamp a person's value in the early years of schooling and accumulate weight with each passing (or failing) year. Eventually grades are pooled in a grade point average (GPA) and stick with the student, like the scarlet letter, for the rest of his or her life. The GPA influences

participation in athletics and social events, plays a key role in determining high school graduation and admission to college, influences decisions regarding scholarships and financial aid, and becomes an issue in social standing and parental approval.

It is a little discouraging, therefore, when we come to understand that the "course grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material" (Dressel 1983).

Educators generally agree that grades are an inadequate measure of what a student knows and understands about a body of knowledge. There have been numerous attempts to redress certain wrongs by creating alternative systems based on proficiencies, competencies, skills, standards, or outcomes. "Learning outcomes" is currently championed as the best alternative to grades, and hundreds of colleges and schools are experimenting with various approaches. The challenge is to define learning outcomes for courses and programs, teach subject matter reflected in these outcomes, assess the student's achievement of the outcomes, and document the outcomes.

Leaders who wish to improve and expand student learning and who wish to review evidence of that learning—leaders who value learning—will practice a number of the steps outlined in this brief review. Some learned leaders are already practicing these steps to create learning colleges for the 21st century. Their journey is guided by

the two key questions: Does this action improve and expand student learning? How do we know this action improves and expands student learning?

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