



# A Learning College *for the* **21st Century**

BY TERRY O'BANION

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN describing the institution whose values and culture they champion as “the teaching college.” At one time or another most community college advocates have compared their institution with the university by declaring their commitment to teaching over research. To drive the point home, community college advocates often note the university’s propensity to use graduate students to staff large lecture sessions while they, more committed to quality teaching, make teaching the priority of professional staff.

The community college literature, not unexpectedly, is full of references reflecting this viewpoint regarding the importance placed on teaching in the community college. One of the most significant documents ever written on the community college, *Building Communities* (1988), the report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, echoes this view over and over: “Building communities through dedicated teaching is the vision and the inspiration of this report” (p. 8). “Quality instruction should be the hallmark of the movement” (p. 25). “The community college should be the nation’s premier teaching institution” (p. 25).

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It is noteworthy that this architecture constitutes the pegs from which hang the negotiated elements of so many union contracts, as if educational staff were struggling to change or control these cumbersome structures. Schooling today is no different than schooling was one hundred years ago. "For better or worse, the book, blackboard, and lecture continue to dominate education" (Green and Gilbert, 1995, p. 10).

In the campus literature of community colleges, the value placed on teaching is clearly reflected in their mission statements. Robert Barr, 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" (p. 2).

There is nothing inherently wrong with placing great value on teaching except that it has led to placing more value on teaching than on learning. As a result, educational institutions accommodate the needs, interests, and values of their employees more often than the needs, interests, and values of their customers. This accommodation has created an embedded time and place-bound architecture of education—so many minutes in class, so many classes a day, so many days a term, so many units a diploma or degree, etc.—that restricts students and faculty to a learning environment designed for an earlier agricultural and industrial society.

Changes in education come about slowly—perhaps too slowly for the rapid pace of change that marks modern social systems. In *The Monster Under the Bed* (1994), Davis and Botkin declare, "Over the next few decades the private sector will eclipse the public sector and become the major institution responsible for learning" (p. 16). More pointedly, Lewis J. Perelman (1992) observes, "So contrary to what the reformers have been claiming, the central failure of our education system is not inadequacy but *excess*: our economy is being crippled by too much spending on too much schooling. The principal barrier to economic progress today is a mind-set that seeks to perfect education when it needs only to be abandoned" (p. 24).

These critics may overstate the case, but the urgency to change education is evident even within established educational circles. The Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993), in an open letter to every pres-

ident of an institution of higher education in America, urged "We must redesign all of our learning systems to align our entire education enterprise with the personal, civic, and workplace needs of the 21st century" (p. 19). "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).

In any case, individual critics and group commissions are calling for major changes in educational systems in every sector of education in America. Paul Privateer (1994), a professor at Arizona State University, has perhaps captured the flavor of these calls for change best. "American education in general is at a strategic anxiety point in its evolution. We're at a very odd midpoint between the death of one kind of paradigm of learning and the yet-undefined formation of an entirely new way of learning" (p. 22).

Community colleges are often the first institutions of higher education to feel the impact of change because they are positioned so closely to main street values in American society. Too, through experience they have become responsive to new needs and new opportunities, developing a well-deserved reputation for innovative and entrepreneurial solutions. Given these characteristics, it is not surprising to find community colleges in the vanguard of exploring new approaches to learning.

At the moment, most community colleges are struggling to operate within established paradigms that are dying. Their response has been to bolt on new programs and activities, often at increased costs, to old structures—to improve on the model of "the teaching college." Community colleges have been national leaders in applying information technology, developing collaborative learning models, and incorporating assessment and outcome measures—all for the purpose of improving on the function of teaching. These innovative applications *are* improving the teaching process in community colleges, and they should be encouraged; but there will be a limit on improving learning outcomes when these innovations are applied in the context of the traditional teaching model.

Tweaking the current system by adding on the *innovation du jour* will not be sufficient. The reform movement of the past decade has been trimming the branches of a dying tree. A few community colleges, how-





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ever, are beginning to recognize the need for change and have launched efforts to re-engineer their institutions around new concepts that place learning first. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will result in replacing dead trees with new stock or only grafting temporary solutions to a dying tree.

**Flagship Institutions on the Move**

A handful of community colleges are leading the way to create “the learning college of the 21st Century,” and while none of these colleges claims to have achieved its goals fully, they are at least engaged in institutionwide efforts to construct a new kind of institution that places learning first. The early efforts of three of these leading-edge institutions are instructive for other community colleges that will soon join the journey.

*Lane Community College—Eugene, Oregon*—Since 1993, Lane Community College has been involved in an institutionwide “restructuring” process designed to make sure the college changes to respond to changing times. In a memo to all college employees, President Jerry Moskus noted there had been major changes in the environment, technology, politics, leadership, and growth in the past five years, and urged, “To continue to be a strong, effective community college, Lane must rethink nearly everything it does.” To begin that task, all faculty and staff members at Lane were invited to participate in special sessions to create a new organizational structure based on a new vision of the future.

That new vision, developed by faculty and staff and approved by the board of trustees, is captured in a brief statement: “Lane Community College provides quality learning experiences in a caring environment.” Throughout the document on restructuring, the language of *learning* reflects the values and focus of the emerging vision. For example:

- Lane is centered on learning and will assume new responsibilities only when they involve learning.
- Everyone at Lane—students, staff, etc.—must be engaged in learning. The organization must be a learning organization.
- A high-quality learning experience can only be provided by a college devoted to services that meet the needs of customers both external (students and other beneficiaries) and internal (staff are each other’s customers).
- Rules and procedures must all be evaluated on the basis of whether they promote learning.

Halfway through 1995, Lane has made measurable progress toward this vision. The college has been restructured to better meet the learning needs of students and the community. For example, instructional departments have been grouped into six “clusters” that parallel the six career strands in the State of Oregon’s education reform act. The college also is working hard to nurture a caring environment through extensive staff training in teamwork, conflict resolution, change management, and diversity. A cadre of trained staff plan staff development activities and help other staff practice their new skills. Recently, Lane’s transition was given a real boost when voters approved a \$42.8 million bond measure. The bond will enable the college to make current facilities more learner-friendly and to build and equip small learning centers at 10 of the high schools in the college’s 5,000-square-mile district.

*Palomar College—San Marcos, California*—Changing the language it uses to reflect and encourage new values and behavior, Palomar college has also been a leader in moving toward “the learning col-

lege.” In 1989, Palomar created a Vision Task Force whose work led to the notion of shifting its mission, indeed, its driving paradigm, from instruction to learning.

Faculty and staff at Palomar have ferreted out the previous emphasis on teaching and instruction in all their official and unofficial documents and now emphasize learning in all their communications. As part of the comprehensive effort to move the college from the “old” paradigm “to provide instruction” to the “new” paradigm “to produce learning,” faculty are beginning to reflect some significant changes.

Keying off a new mission statement and an educational master-planning goals document focused on learning, faculty in an April 1995 Colloquium on Innovation and Student Learning made a number of recommendations that support the development of “the learning college.” Among these recommendations, faculty suggested that Palomar should:

- Establish a research and development fund to support innovation and student learning.
- Create a systematic program of outcomes assessment that will give faculty the tools to compare educational programs and approaches and provide evidence of actual learning outcomes.
- Suspend sabbaticals and professional development programs for one year and divert the funds of approximately \$300,000 into a budget for new programs and systems.
- Encourage and support the development of open-entry/open-exit classes which span the entire school year.
- Explore and develop alternate scheduling patterns based on the needs of students.
- Explore ways to reward faculty and staff for innovations, including academic rank tied to learning outcomes and rewards to teams of faculty who create successful learning outcomes.

A general recommendation from this colloquium suggested that “Palomar College should actively identify the barriers to innovation and student learning imposed by the State of California. We should then share these barriers with our local state representa-



tives and ask them to help us overcome them." Faculty also recommended that Palomar apply to become a Charter Community College, a concept under review by the state legislature that will allow colleges to waive many of the barriers to creating innovative programs that place learning first.

*Maricopa Community Colleges—Phoenix, Arizona*—In 1993, Maricopa was invited to participate as one of 30 institutions of higher education in the Pew Higher Education Roundtables. The purpose of the Pew Roundtables is to assist colleges and universities in a restructuring process intended to address rapid change. In the earliest discussions at Maricopa, participants agreed that profound, systemic change was needed, focused on: 1) the need for a new learning paradigm that is learning-centered and student-centered, and 2) the need for more collaboration and integration within the Maricopa District.

Roundtable members began discussions by identifying characteristics of the traditional learning paradigm and the desired learning paradigm. These discussions confirmed the need for a new vocabulary and resulted in agreement on key concepts of the desired learning paradigm as follows:

- Learning is a process that is lifelong for everyone and should be measured in a consistent, ongoing manner focused on improvement.
- Everyone is an active learner and teacher through collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual respect.
- The learning process includes the larger community through the development of alliances, relationships, and opportunities for mutual benefit.
- Learning occurs in a flexible and appropriate environment.

Throughout 1994, the results of the roundtable discussions were shared with all faculty and staff in the Maricopa District, and several projects were initiated to move the district toward "a learning college." An example of the scope of these efforts, Project Apollo, is a \$6 million-plus partnership with Oracle Corporation designed to develop and implement learner-centered financial records, human resources, and electronic mail systems. This is a major undertaking that will capitalize on the so-



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phisticated technology base already established at Maricopa to make it more learner-centered. Chancellor Paul Elsner has said, "The learner-centered system will result in greater opportunities for students who will be empowered to serve as navigators of their own learning paths."

In addition to project Apollo, in January 1994 Maricopa launched "Strategic Conversations" with its governing board members and internal and external communities. The Strategic Conversations represent a significant shift in the way Maricopa's governing board conducts its business. These conversations, up to two hours long, are now open to active participation from members of internal and external communities and have been used to develop and revise new statements of vision, mission, goals, and values. Each strategic conversation is structured by a cross-functional team which prepares a brief background paper, conducts interactive exercises, and facilitates the participation of those attending the meeting. The purpose of the conversations is to promote learning and a greater understanding of the challenging issues facing Maricopa and its communities. This new process encourages individual and organizational learning.

The focus of each conversation differs. Some conversations have been on creating definitions of learning organizations, reviewing examples of established programs at Maricopa that already reflect the learning organization, changing roles for staff, and assessing individuals and the Maricopa organization as a reflection of "the learning college."

These three leading community colleges are examples of institutions attempting to move from "the teaching college" to "the learning college," but these brief descriptions of their early efforts do not do justice to the range of activities in which each is involved or the amount and quality of work contributed by staff and faculty. Nor do these brief descriptions capture fully the

substantive change that is occurring in these institutions. It will take a number of years before these pioneering community colleges can unfurl their visions more fully and develop the comprehensive changes to which they are committed. In the meantime, what they do will be worth watching, and what they have already experienced suggests emerging guidelines that may assist other community colleges that commit to the journey. Community colleges that plan to move their institutions toward becoming "a learning college" should:

- Develop their own language to reflect a new focus on learning rather than on instruction and teaching.
- Identify barriers and limitations of traditional models of education.
- Develop definitions and frameworks for a desired learning paradigm.
- Realign current structures to accommodate collaboration and teamwork within the college community.
- Review the role of technology in transforming the learning environment.
- Involve all institutional stakeholders in the change process.
- Organize and review all activities related to these changes in the context of evaluation.

These leading-edge institutions may be the ones that survive into the 21st century, but even they are caught, as Robert Frost said, "betwixt and between the forest brown and the forest green." Saddled with old paradigms and insecure and reluctant faculty and administrators, how are these institutions to ride into the sunset of the 20th century well-equipped for the new adventures





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promised just over the hill in the 21st century? The truth is, most institutions will not be part of this future if they continue to tweak the old paradigm for incremental changes; only those institutions that are capable of swift and radical change will see the promised land.

**Toward Radical Change**

We need dozens of models of radical change in education today to encourage experimentation by all sectors of education. In the following section, the basic elements of one model are outlined. *The learning college places learning first and provides educational services for learners anyway, anywhere, anytime.* The model is based on the assumption that educational experiences should be designed for learners rather than for institutions and their staffs. The term "the learning college" is used throughout as a generic reference for all educational institutions.

*The Learner Engages the Learning College.* For the next decade, at least, there will be formal institutions (high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities, owned and operated by many entities) that will attract learners to participate in their activities, on established campuses and other locations through technological links. At the point of engagement (first day of 10th grade, summer admission to fall freshman year, beginning graduate school, in-plant six-week training module—and in the future on any day of the year) the learning college will initiate a series of services to prepare the learner for the experiences and opportunities to come. In a seamless educational system, learners will begin this preparation at the age of four or five and continue it throughout their lives.

The services will include assessing the learner's abilities, achievements, values, needs, goals, expectations, resources, and environmental or 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.

As part of the negotiated contract, the learner will purchase learning vouchers to be used in selecting from among the learning options provided by the learning college. The assessment information, the terms of the contract, historical records from previous learning experiences, and all pertinent information will be recorded on the learner's "smart" card which serves as a portfolio of information, a lifelong record of lifelong educational experiences. The "smart" card, similar to an ATM card already widely used by banks, will belong to the learner, who will be responsible for keeping it current with assistance from specialists in the learning college. While the smart card will contain information on learning outcomes and skill levels achieved, work experience, and external evaluations, other learning colleges and employers will develop their own systems to verify what they need to know about the learner.

As an additional service, the learning college will provide orientation and experimentation for learners who are unfamiliar with the learning environment of the learning college. Some learners will need training in using the technology, in developing collaborations, in locating resources, and in navigating the 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.

*The Learner Selects Learning Options.* In the learning college there are many options for the learner—options regarding time, place, structure, and methods of delivery. The learner has reviewed these options and

experimented with some that are unfamiliar. Entry vouchers are exchanged for the selected options and exit vouchers held for completion.

Each learning option includes specific goals and competency levels needed for entry, as well as specific outcome measures of competency levels needed for exit. Learning colleges are constantly creating additional learning options for learners. Some learning options include:

- Prescribed, preshunk portable modules in such areas as general education core courses or specific skills training. These are universally recognized packages developed by national knowledge organizations such as the American Medical Association or major companies such as AT&T.
- Stand-alone technological expert systems that respond to the idiosyncrasies of a specific learner, guiding and challenging the learner through a rich maze of information and experiences. IBM's Ulysses and Philips Interactive Media of America's World of Impressionism are prototypes of the potential of such systems.
- Opportunities for collaboration with other learners in small groups and through technological links. Learning communities developed in the State of Washington and the Electronic Forum developed by Maricopa Community Colleges were early pioneers.
- Tutor-led groups, individual reading programs, project-based activities, service learning, lectures, and laboratories—all of the established learning options, since many of these work well for many learners. These established learning options will not be constrained, however, by the limits of time and place, but will be designed for the needs of learners and framed by specific goals and competency levels needed for entry and specific outcome measures of competency levels needed for exit.

A major goal of the learning college is 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 a dozen or so learning options available to achieve that



goal. If the learner's goal is to become competent in welding a joint, there should be a dozen or so learning options available to achieve that goal. If one option does not work, the learner should be able to navigate a new path to an alternative learning option at any point.

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 based on early developments such as General Motors' Computer Aided Maintenance System or Miami-Dade Community College's Synergy. Without these complex systems the learning college cannot function. These learning management systems are the breakthroughs that will free education from the time-bound, place-bound, and role-bound systems that currently "manage" the educational enterprise.

*The Learner's Needs Define the Roles of Education Providers.* The learning college will contract with many specialists to provide services to learners. Specialists will be employed on a contract basis to produce specific products or deliver specific services; many will work part-time, often from their homes, linked to learners through technology. Learners themselves will play important roles in assisting other learners. "Wonderful teachers" and "great administrators" will be of no use in the learning college unless they can deliver special skills and abilities required by learners. Learners in the learning college will need specialists who can:

- Assess learner abilities, achievements, values, needs, goals, expectations, resources, and environmental or situational limitations; create personal profiles and personal learning plans; negotiate learning contracts; and assist in developing a personal portfolio on a smart card.
- Design and create learning options in a variety of formats based upon the latest learning and adult development theories.
- Design and create expert systems to manage and track the activities of learners.
- Train learners in the use of a variety of technologies and systems.



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- Select, update, and repair software and hardware.
- Assist in creating and convening collaborative networks of other learners.
- Access, synthesize, and update constantly expanding databases of knowledge.
- Establish and clarify skill levels, competencies, goals, and outcomes.
- Establish and maintain a clean and attractive environment for learning for those who elect to participate in learning "on location."
- Guide and coach learners needing individual assistance.
- Arrange new options for new needs.
- Challenge learner assumptions, question their values, and encourage their explorations.

This is but a sample of the skills and abilities that learning providers will need to create optimal conditions for learning. Learners will also benefit if many of the individuals with these skills and abilities exhibit characteristics of intelligence, compassion, integrity, humor, and patience.

In this briefly sketched ideal of the learning college, there is little mention of teaching and instruction. Perhaps it is possible after all to place learning first, to make the first part of Chaucer's observation of his scholar "gladly would he learn" the dictum of a future system of education. The obstacles to creating a learning college similar to that outlined here are overwhelming and familiar to all who desire change. Several years ago, however, it was inconceivable that communism in the Soviet Union would crash and that Republicans would

reign in the U.S. Congress. The surprise of change these days comes about fairly regularly; maybe education is next on the list.

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