Who are the innovators?

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As we approach the second decade of the new millennium, there is a renaissance of innovation in education, a resurgence of interest and experimentation that begs for analysis and review. To that end, the League for Innovation in the Community College proposed to conduct a national study on the nature of innovation in the community college using recipients of its Innovation of the Year award from 1999 through 2008 as a data set. With funding from MetLife Foundation, researchers examined these innovations and explored the perspectives of the winners of these awards. In September 2009, a survey created by the researchers with assistance from a focus group, field-tested on a sample of winners not included in the project, and vetted by a National Advisory Committee was distributed electronically to the 400 award winners; 117 respondents returned surveys for a return rate of 29%. In addition to the survey, more than 40 of the award winners were interviewed using interview questions created by the researchers and vetted by the national advisory committee. The full report and all project findings can be accessed at www.league.org/natureofinnovation. In the present article the authors report only on the survey of the Innovation of the Year Award winners, including who the innovators are, how they work, and why they choose to innovate.

Introduction

In a time of social and economic ferment and increasing calls from American society for the community college to play a role in addressing current challenges, innovation is often cited as one of the great strengths of American culture and of the community college in particular. In her keynote address at the April 20, 2010, annual convention of the American Association of Community Colleges, Melinda Gates said, "The task ahead of you is to innovate at the necessary scale, so that your in-

novations have an impact on the entire community college system of more than 1,000 institutions and six million students" (Gates, 2010).

The call from Gates to innovate is echoed in numerous recent documents and statements from foundations, governmental agencies, research reports, and policy leaders. The call is based in the belief that the community college can respond to the current social and economic challenges in innovative ways, and community colleges will respond to that call because innovation is in their DNA. The community college itself is an innovation, an American social invention, radically different from the English-based four-year college and the German-based university that comprise the higher education landscape in the U. S. Additionally, the community college has become a crucible of innovation, experimenting and adapting to keep its promise to provide a second chance to underprepared and underrepresented students who never dreamed of college before there was a community college.

But the college itself is not the innovator. The innovators are the faculty, administrators, and staff who were attracted to the philosophy and the programs of the community college as a reflection of their own deepest held values. They signed on to the community college to make a difference, and when they realized they had taken on the toughest tasks in all of higher education, they did not retreat. Indeed, in the face of overwhelming challenge they mustered their creative forces and became innovators.

The National Study on Innovation

Since 1982, the League for Innovation in the Community College has been recognizing the most outstanding innovators in its member colleges with the Innovator of the Year Award. League membership includes over 750 member colleges representing every state and every kind of technical/community college both urban and rural, large and small. Each member institution may submit an innovation for this prestigious award. Criteria for the awards include Quality, Creativity, Timeliness, Efficiency, Cost Effectiveness, and Replication. Faculty committees select the winners based on a review of applications from interested individuals and teams whose innovations meet the criteria. Over 560 awards to several thousand innovators have been made since the program began.

Capitalizing on the rich repository of innovations and of award-winning innovators, the League

was engaged throughout 2009 in a national study on the nature of innovation in the community college. Funded by a grant from MetLife Foundation, the three authors of this article served as the team to study the kinds of innovations awarded, the characteristics of a community college culture that support and encourage innovation, and the perspectives of the award winners regarding the impact of innovation and the impact of the award itself on the winners. The full report, *The Nature of Innovation in the Community College*, is available from the League for download at no cost at www.league.org/natureofinnovation.

In the article the authors report only on the survey of the Innovation of the Year Award winners. The 25 item survey was created from a study of the literature on innovation (Adams, 2005; Ellis, 2005), was vetted by a Focus Group of 20 leading experts on innovation, and was critiqued by a national advisory committee of innovative leaders. The Award winners from 1999 through 2008 constituted a substantial number of over 400 participants for the survey.

On September 9, 2009, the survey was distributed by the League using an electronic service, Constant Contact, to 400 winners of the Innovation of the Year Award. A follow-up reminder was sent two weeks later. Of the 400 winners, 117 returned surveys for a return rate of 29 percent. The return rate was lower than expected, possibly for two reasons: a) The time constraints of the project forced distribution of the survey to be in September, near the beginning of the fall term and one of the busiest months of the years for faculty and staff. b) Several studies have indicated that the return rate on electronic surveys is lower than paper and pencil surveys for various reasons, including concerns about confidentiality and perceptions of surveys as excessive email or "spam" (Cook, Heath, and Thompson, 2000; Sills and Song, 2002). The researchers did not compare the responders with the non-responders. In any case, the 117 responses were sufficient to provide a rich database regarding who these innovators are and why they innovate.

Who are the innovators?

Almost half of the innovators, 43.5%, are full-time faculty while only 2.5% are part-time faculty—reflecting the challenges community colleges face in their efforts to incorporate part-time faculty into the life of the institution. A little more than one-fourth, 26.4%, of the innovators are administrators—recognition that administrators

are fully engaged along with faculty in addressing the problems and opportunities they face through innovation (see Table 1).

The third group of innovators at 17.9% is non-faculty professional staff. The researchers had a difficult time determining the appropriate categories of employees for community colleges to be included in the survey since there is no consistent language among colleges. Indeed, some colleges have created a dozen or more categories. The category of non-faculty professional staff includes a variety of technical and specialized staff, with and without degrees, who play an important role in the efficient functioning of the institution. Their importance is further underscored by their involvement as innovators and as members of teams of innovators.

Support and classified staff comprise only 5.1% of the innovators in this study. Such a small percentage may be an indication of how college leaders perceive the role of support and classified staff in academic affairs, student affairs, and college operations. It may also reflect written or unwritten policies that place limitations on or fail to encourage the involvement of support and classified staff in creating and implementing innovations.

Innovators were asked to identify the areas of their primary responsibility within the college during the time of the award-winning innovation (see Table 2). Instruction, with 37.6%, is the area where most of the innovators worked. The second most common response was "Other" with 18.8%. Ten different areas were provided for responses, but 22 respondents felt their work could not fit into any of the ten options. These respondents added numerous descriptions of their areas which, in the view of the researchers, could for the great majority easily be categorized into the existing options.

Table 1: Innovator's primary role at the college

	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Full-time faculty	51	43.5
Administrator	31	26.4
Non-faculty professional staff	21	17.9
Support/classified staff	6	5.1
Other	4	3.4
Part-time/adjunct faculty	3	2.5
No Response	1	<1
Total	117	100

Student services is the third highest area at 17.9%. Combining instruction and student services, the majority of innovators, 55.5%, worked in one of these two areas at the time they were awarded the Innovation of the Year award. Innovators were fairly equally distributed among the other categories at 3% to 5%, except for Business/Financial Services and Facilities where no innovators represented these areas.

Do innovators work alone, or do they work in teams?

In the present study, award winners clearly worked as members of a team. Only 14.5% of the awards were given to individuals, with 85.5% going to teams. Teams ranged in size as indicated in Table 3 below.

Teams of two to three individuals were the most prevalent, with 32.4%; the least prevalent team number at 9.4% consists of eleven or more. It is known that many of the colleges in the League for Innovation encourage collaboration among staff as an institutional value, which may be reflected in the primacy of teams over individuals among award winners.

Innovators were also asked about the importance of teamwork in creating innovations (see Table 4). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of four statements about teamwork on a five-point scale ranging from Highly Unimportant to Highly Important. Of the 102 respon-

Table 2: Innovator's area of primary responsibility at the college

Area of Responsibility	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Instruction	44	37.6
Other	22	18.8
Student Services	21	17.9
Faculty/Staff Development	7	5.9
Workforce Development	5	4.2
Library	5	4.2
Continuing Education	5	4.2
Information Technology	4	3.4
Distance Education	4	3.4
Business/Financial Services	0	0.0
Facilities	0	0.0
No Response	0	0.0
Total	117	100

dents who identified themselves as a member of a team, regardless of size of the team, 44% rated "Team member contributions to creating and implementing were about equal." as Highly Important. Five percent rated the item Highly Unimportant and 11% rated it Somewhat Important. The data indicates that most innovators either felt the contributions of individual team members were fairly distributed, or, if not, at least it was not an issue about which they expressed concern.

The other three statements were rated fairly high, with 78% rating "The innovation was better for being a team—not individual—effort" as Highly Important. "Involvement of a team has improved the innovation's chances to endure" was rated Highly Important by 74% of the respondents. "The collaborative process produced benefits beyond the innovation" was rated Highly Important by 70% of the respondents. Combining the ratings of Somewhat Important and Highly Important, the three statements were rated thus by 93%, 93%, and 94% of the respondents, respectively. These ratings indicate that innovators place high value on teamwork in creating and implementing innovations. They believe that innovations are better and have a better chance of surviving when created by a team. Equally important, these innovators pointed out that working on a team produced benefits beyond the value of the innovation. Administrators would be wise to note these values and to create policies and practices to encourage more teamwork and collaboration around the innovative process. Considerable value may accrue to the institution in its innovative work—and possibly in daily operations—when such values are supported and encouraged.

Why do innovators innovate?

There is extensive literature on the nature of innovation in terms

Table 3: Number on a team

	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Team of two or three	38	32.4
Team of four to six	34	29.0
One person	17	14.5
Team of seven to ten	17	14.5
Team of eleven or more	11	9.4
No Responses	0	0.0
Total	117	100

of originality and adaptation. (O'Banion, 1989; Orange, 2002; Innovate America, 2004). Though educators in general may place more value on innovations that can claim originality, innovators themselves are cautious to claim originality because they are not always sure of the origins of their own ideas. In reality, few ideas spew forth from Zeus' head that do not reflect the contributions of other creative individuals. It is more likely that most innovations are, in at least some way, adaptations of other ideas or products already in existence.

In the current study, however, the 117 innovators divided almost equally along the lines of originality and adaptation. In response to the item "To the best of your knowledge, your award-winning innovation was an original idea," 50.4% claimed originality. Respondents were provided a second choice of "An adaptation of an existing idea, with or without original elements added," and 49.5% claimed that response. Even when the response on adaptation included a flexible tweak of "with or without original elements," the respondents still leaned in favor of originality. The originality issue needs further study to determine if responses are a reflection of the

Table 4: Importance of teamwork

	Not applicable	Highly unimportant	Somewhat un-important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Highly important
The innovation was better for being a team—not individual—effort.	2	0	0	5	15	80
	2	0	0	5	15	78
Involvement of a team has improved the innovation's chances to endure.	4	0	0	4	19	75
	4	0	0	4	19	74
The collaborative process produced benefits beyond the innovation.	5	0	0	4	22	72
	5	0	0	4	21	70
Team member contributions to creating and implementing were about equal.	5	5	11	8	28	45
	5	5	11	8	27	44

Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom number is percentage of the total.

pride the innovators express in their work, an indication that they are not familiar with the variety of educational innovations, or an indication that their innovations can be accurately labeled as original. The researchers believe that in some cases the response can be interpreted to mean that the innovation, while perhaps not original or new in general, is new for the college where it was implemented and honored with an award.

Responses to the question "What prompted you to initiate the innovation?" provided insight into why faculty and staff go the extra mile to create and implement innovations, usually effort beyond required responsibility. Respondents were asked to select all that apply from a list of eight options (see Table 5).

"Improve student learning" was selected by 58.9% of the respondents, followed closely by 54.7% who selected "Improve an existing system, process, practice, procedure." These fall about equally between effectiveness and efficiency—making learning more effective and making the institution more efficient. Effectiveness and efficiency, of course, are symbiotic in the business of education. The third most frequently selected response was "Improve student retention or attainment," another indicator of effectiveness related to student learning. All three of the top motivating factors began with the word "improve," which may be another clue about how innovators view the innovative process.

"Meet a community need" was selected by 39.3% of the respondents, perhaps indicating innovators who view the connections

Table 5: What prompted the innovation?

	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Improve student learning.	69	58.9
Improve an existing system, process, practice, procedure.	64	54.7
Improve student retention or attainment.	51	43.5
Meet a community need.	46	39.3
Other	19	16.2
Respond to a suggestion or recommendation by college leaders.	14	11.9
Address an accountability issue.	13	11.1
I did not initiate the innovation but joined the team later.	9	7.6
Total	117	100

between their college and their community. It would be interesting to investigate whether or not innovators in universities would make the same connection.

Nineteen or 16.2% of the respondents also selected "Other," indicating that the responses provided in the survey did not best reflect the factors that motivated them. About half of the "Other" responses could be subsumed under improving student learning or improving practices, but several were not in the list provided: "increase student affordability," "personal need to do something significant," "effectively serve at-risk youth," and "need for better data for decision making."

Conclusion

The study of 117 Innovator of the Year Award winners provides some insights into who innovators are and why they make the effort to innovate:

- Almost half are full-time faculty; a little more than one-fourth are administrators.
- The majority of innovators (56%) represent instruction and student services.
- A significant majority (86%) of the innovators work in teams.
- Very high value is placed on teamwork by 93% of the innovators.
- Innovators divided almost 50-50 when asked if their innovation was an original idea or an adaptation of an idea.
- Improving student learning was cited by 59% as the reason they innovate, followed by 55% who cited improving an existing system, process, practice, or procedure as the reason.

In addition to identifying who innovators are and why they innovate, this study also created a set of guidelines for faculty and staff who want to innovate and a survey on the Characteristics of a Community College Culture that Encourage and Support Innovation. The guidelines and the survey are both available for downloading at www.league.org/natureofinnovation. The guidelines are useful to individuals and teams that want to capitalize on the experiences of award-winning innovators. The Survey will provide institution-wide data on the perceptions of faculty and staff regarding the ideal characteristics and the actual characteristics that support and encourage innovation. Used together, the documents will prove to be catalysts in creating a culture of innovation in the community college.

The innovators in the present study represent the community college well as leaders who are trying to help the community college live up to its commitment to innovation and to the expectations of

national calls for the community college to be even more innovative. Institutional leaders such as presidents, trustees, and key administrators can use the findings to support the continuing work of innovators; and they can expand innovation by encouraging classified staff and representatives from other areas outside instruction and student services to join in the innovative process. The community college can strengthen its role as a crucible of innovation by accessing the individual and collective creativity and innovative thinking of everyone in the institution, an essential element in maintaining its leadership as an American social innovation.

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