
By Terry O'Banion

Is Teaching and Learning a Priority? Conduct an Audit and Find Out*

For decades community colleges have claimed the sobriquet of "the teaching and learning college" as the clearest expression of their culture and values. But do community colleges really place a priority on teaching and learning? Suggesting that a college's true values are embedded in the written policies and statements, practices, and related behaviors of the institution's stakeholders, the author poses a number of key questions as guidelines for an audit of a college's commitment to teaching and learning.

THE COMMUNITY college should be the nation's premier teaching institution" (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 25)—*but is it?* In the largest survey (HERI, 1991) of its kind ever conducted, 99 percent of the community college faculty responding considered "being a good teacher" an essential or very important professional goal. On the same survey, however, only 8 percent rated "faculty are rewarded for being good teachers" as "very descriptive" of their own institutions.

There is a major dislocation in the culture of higher education when faculty place such high value on good teaching but believe that their institutions place such low value on rewarding it. This disparity is only one example that reveals the unresolved tensions within higher education that make it difficult to explain education to our constituents outside the academy. Former Harvard President Derek Bok contends that "the public has finally come to believe quite strongly that our

institutions . . . are not making the education of students a top priority" (1992, p. 15).

Is the community college the "teaching college" as we have claimed for decades and as the Futures Commission indicates we should be? Do we really take the student where she is and "take her to where she wants to go"? Do we place learning first? Community colleges can answer these questions by making a serious audit of their teaching/learning values and climate as reflected in their policies, practices, and related behaviors.

Auditing Teaching and Learning Practices

The teaching and learning climate of an educational institution is the visible product of a particular institutions invisible values. What faculty, administrators, board members, and staff truly believe about students and their abilities to learn and about teachers and their abilities to teach is reflected in the climate of teaching and learning. It is a case of yin and yang in which values influence climate, and climate in turn influences values. The values and climate are made most visible in the written policies and statements,

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practices, and related behaviors of the stakeholders in the institution.

An audit of these policies and statements, practices, and related behaviors is an important first step for leaders who wish to make teaching and learning the highest priority of the community college. The following is an attempt to develop guidelines that can be used to conduct an institutional audit of current teaching and learning policies and practices. The audit should be tailored to the special needs of an institution, but the guidelines are fairly generic and should apply to most any community college that wishes to improve and expand on its current commitment to teaching and learning.

For the audit to be effective it must be related to some larger undertaking such as an accreditation study or institutional renewal project. The questions suggested here can be used as a framework for guiding committees and external evaluators, and they can be used to provoke discussion and examination. In some cases, those leading the audit may want to develop surveys of the questions to gather information from large groups of faculty and students. In all cases, institutions making an audit should select only those questions that pertain to their culture and add other questions that reflect their special needs and interests.

Institutional Policies and Statements

Every community college has a mission statement. In every mission statement there is some reference to ideals of good teaching and to interest in and support of students to ensure learning. Mission statements, however, are not usually living documents that stimulate creative response. At a minimum, they meet legal requirements and are trotted out and sometimes updated for representatives of accrediting associations and institutional committees responsible for launching yet another long-range plan.

For community colleges wishing to make teaching and learning the institution's top priority, the mission statement is a good place to begin. It is likely in need of an update reflecting a special emphasis on teaching and learning as the heart of the educational enterprise. This updating may occur after insti-

tutional leaders have prepared more specific institutionwide statements that document values related to teaching and learning.

- Does the mission statement make clearly visible the college's commitment to core values related to teaching and learning?
- Has the college prepared special statements of values, goals, and practices indicating commitments to teaching and learning as a high priority of the institution?
- To what extent does the governing board demonstrate understanding and commitment to good practices in teaching and learning?
- Is the president committed to making teaching and learning an institutional priority? How does he or she express that commitment?
- To what extent have faculty and staff been involved in developing the various institutional statements, and how do they support a continuing climate of commitment to teaching and learning?
- Could outside consultants and visitors recognize the institution's commitment to teaching and learning by observing practice rather than being told about the commitment? Is practice aligned with mission?
- Are the various statements living documents that are used continually to guide leaders and revised to reflect new goals and new practices?

Student Success Policies

Academic policies should ensure student success and reflect values derived from the mission and other institutionwide statements on teaching and learning. These policies are among the most important indices in the institution for auditing how institutional stakeholders really feel about students and their abilities to learn. Unfortunately, many academic policies reflect values and practices designed for a different time, different place, and different students. If community colleges are to provide opportunities for students to be successful, they need to review and analyze current academic policies related to students and revise them according to their value statements to make them student success policies.

- Does the college have a required student assessment program designed to identify specific areas in need of remediation, counseling, or experience prior to undertaking more challenging activities?
- Does the college have a mandatory placement program, developed in tandem with the assessment program, designed to remediate, counsel, or provide experiences that will ensure success in more challenging activities?
- As the most important prelude to success in class, are all students in every term required to explore with a highly competent academic adviser their educational, vocational, and life goals, and their program and course choices to achieve those goals?
- Are new students required to participate in a series of well-designed orientation activities to acquaint them with the values and challenges of a college education, the social responsibilities of educated citizens, the culture and norms of college in general, and this college in particular?
- Has the college made it clear that students must register before the first day of class to ensure the benefits of attendance on the first day and during the first week? In other words, has the college abandoned late registration policies that interfere with sound teaching and learning practices for late registrants, on-time registrants, and faculty?
- Has the college established an early academic alert system designed to initiate special interventions of counseling, remediation, reduced course and workloads, and special support services for students whose assessments indicate a proclivity for failure and for students who show early signs of failure?
- Are students required to attend classes with very few exceptions, and are these exceptions and procedures for their approval carefully spelled out?
- Are exceptions to these student success policies extremely limited, carefully spelled out, and strictly enforced by all college staff?
- Do faculty and staff members who are assigned responsibilities for implementing the student success policies participate in developing and approving the policies?

Curriculum Review and Development

The curriculum is the expression of the collective faculty wisdom regarding what is worth learning. Three hundred years ago what was worth learning in formal schooling was fixed in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and every student took the same curriculum. Today the world is a bit more complex, and that is reflected in the comprehensive curriculum of the modern community college, which supports five different curricula in one organization: transfer/liberal arts, vocational/technical education, remedial/developmental studies, general education, and continuing education/community services. Distinct faculty groups serve the transfer and technical curricula, and some of these faculty are also advocates of and participants in the other curricula.

This is a complex arrangement, a bane and a blessing of the community college and one of its distinct characteristics. The arrangement is made more complex since these curricula are not fixed and are, or should be, in a constant state of flux as they are revised to reflect changing social and economic needs. Technical programs must be constantly updated, new programs initiated, and programs no longer relevant deleted to keep up with rapid changes in technology and economic conditions. Transfer programs must be updated to reflect such social changes as an emphasis on multiculturalism and women's studies and new knowledge constantly emerging in the established disciplines. New immigrants and underprepared high school students require curriculum changes in developmental education. Pressure to serve communities in new and deeper ways and to expand services to business and industry call for revisions in the continuing education/community services curriculum. The development of a sound program of general education has been a continuing quest of community colleges for decades.

It is the curriculum in the community college to which faculty apply their best expertise in making teaching and learning an institutional priority. In universities, course content often represents the research interests of faculty or scholarly trends in a discipline. In community colleges, faculty usually

tailor course content to community and student interests, addressing the needs of heterogeneous populations (Mellander and Robertson, 1992, p. 12). To ensure that the current curricula are designed to best meet the needs of current students and to ensure that they will be constantly updated to reflect changing needs, faculty must be energetic activists in curriculum review and development.

- Does the college have an established process, such as DACUM, to ensure the continuing review and development of the curriculum? Are all curricula in the college on a rotating schedule for review every three to five years, with allowances made for early review in areas of rapid change?
- How many programs and courses have been revised, added, and deleted in the last five years?
- Has the college established a general education program required of all students as recommended by the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges? Is the general education program the usual political compromise of distribution requirements, or is it especially designed with its own internal integrity?
- Is there a well-developed special curriculum for underprepared and ESL students sequentially linked to other appropriate curricula?
- Does the transfer curriculum meet the needs of the majority of transfer students, and does it prepare them to compete on an equal basis at the universities and four-year colleges to which they transfer?
- Does the transfer curriculum articulate efficiently with the developmental studies program and the vocational-technical program so that students can easily access the transfer program?
- Do minority students in the transfer program complete at the same rate as nonminority students?
- Is the vocational-technical program designed to meet community and regional work force needs, and are these programs articulated with training needs and opportunities in the community and region?

Instructional Innovation

A major hallmark of a college dedicated to making teaching and learning its highest priority is the extent to which faculty search out and create innovations in instructional processes. Some colleges have developed a climate in which innovation in general is highly prized as a characteristic of institutional culture. Such climates often have their genesis in the visions of innovative presidents, but when a critical core of faculty engage in innovation they can survive changes in presidents and maintain an innovative spirit that undergirds teaching and learning effectiveness.

Sadly, some colleges that were highly innovative in the 60s and 70s have lost that innovative spirit. In some cases, faculty in these institutions are still riding on past reputations and reject new ideas under the assumption that they have already tried everything. Constrained by limited travel funds and a general malaise that pervades many community colleges in difficult economic times, colleges and their faculties turn inward and disconnect from the community of innovators that show up regularly at the annual conferences of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development; the National Council for Staff, Program, and Organizational Development; and the League for Innovation.

Once lost, it takes considerable thought and a great deal of action to renew a college's innovative spirit. A first step is to audit current instructional innovations and related activities. When this is part of an institution-wide audit regarding effective teaching and learning policies and practices, there is great potential for a renaissance of instructional innovation.

- How many and which faculty are currently experimenting with instructional innovations they have borrowed or designed?
- Is there a program or an office that initiates and encourages instructional innovation at the college? If so, are faculty connected and responsive?
- Does the college have formal policies and programs of incentives, rewards, and recognition to stimulate instructional innovation?

- How many faculty members are experimenting with the following current instructional innovations:
 - Classroom assessment
 - Learning communities
 - Electronic journals and forums
 - Instructional skills programs
 - Service learning
 - Multimedia and interactive media
 - TQM in the classroom
- Is there a long-range scheme for developing, planning, managing, and updating information technology to support effective teaching and learning?
- Does the college participate in national and international networks for users of information technology and regularly support faculty participation in conferences and workshops on information technology?
- Does the college evaluate the effectiveness of information technology in improving teaching and learning compared to other instructional approaches?
- Is the college experimenting with instructional programs using information technology that will increase teaching productivity?
- To what extent is information technology used to build community among administrators, faculty, and students?

Information Technology

The use of information technology in improving teaching and learning could be subsumed under the section on instructional innovation, except that it is becoming so pervasive and has so much potential for creating change that it is best treated separately. There are a number of leaders, such as EDUCOM President Robert Heterick, who believe that technology is "the primary vehicle by which institutions of higher education are going to reengineer the teaching-and-learning process" (DeLoughry, 1992, p. A17).

Community colleges are rapidly expanding their use of the computer to improve teaching and learning. Whereas in universities computers are used primarily by professors for research and writing, in community colleges computers are used primarily by students to increase and expand learning. And community college faculty members are the driving force behind the use of computers by students as they adapt new information technology to extend and expand their own teaching.

When computers first appeared in community colleges, they were used almost exclusively for administrative purposes: registration, financial management, personnel, data collection, etc. Most community colleges now have information technology systems in place for managing their administrative functions, and in the last decade creative faculty have used computers in a variety of ways to improve teaching and learning.

- Has the college made a distinction between administrative and instructional computing? Has the college provided resources and appropriate organizational support to ensure the expansion of instructional computing?

Faculty Selection and Development

The faculty make the college. They are the conjunction that connects the teaching and learning processes. In institutions that wish to make teaching and learning the highest priority, most activities focus on the faculty in terms of trying to influence them or in terms of serving their needs. This observation is not to be misconstrued in terms of meeting faculty needs identified by unions and other special groups, although these needs are quite often related to improving teaching and learning even when not couched within that framework.

The overarching goal of the community college—the goal that transcends power conflicts, special interests, and key personalities—is to provide opportunities for students to succeed. And that goal is impossible to achieve without the full support and involvement of the faculty—a simple truth but one sometimes lost in the complex issues of the day. Faculty are too often seen as the enemy or as sluggards by some trustees, presidents, and administrators. Some administrators and trustees seem to care more about the maintenance of buildings than they do about faculty members.

Leaders who understand the key role of faculty in making the institution work—that is, in fully realizing the changes possible at

an institution totally dedicated to teaching and learning as its highest priority—will make the selection, development, and evaluation of faculty an ongoing and strongly supported activity throughout the institution. In addition, there will be systems of reward and recognition in place that make the climate of the college attractive and challenging. Not since the 1960s have college leaders had a better opportunity to revitalize the faculty as the key factor in making teaching and learning the heart of the educational enterprise. Over half of the faculty in community colleges are currently in the process of retiring. The faculty hired in the next five years will determine the real nature of community colleges for decades to come. In this brief window of opportunity, visionary leaders must move quickly and carefully to develop value statements and processes for selecting, evaluating, developing, and rewarding the faculty who will determine whether a college will become an institution easily recognized as being dedicated to teaching and learning.

- Has the college assessed the retirement patterns of current faculty over the next ten years and determined replacement needs both in number and in kind?
- Has the college developed a statement of values regarding teaching and learning and derived characteristics of replacement teachers needed to achieve these values? Is there a clearly determined procedure for selecting new faculty that involves demonstrated effectiveness in teaching and ensures a cadre of teachers who will implement the values in the teaching and learning statement?
- Has the college created a mandatory staff development program for these new faculty—and for continuing faculty and part-time faculty as well—that will assist them in achieving personal and professional goals derived from the values statement on teaching and learning and the desirable characteristics of teachers? Is the staff development program coordinated by a highly qualified staff member on a continuing basis and integrated into the real-life activities of the college?
- Does the faculty evaluation system reflect the statement on values and characteristics of teachers and provide opportunities for faculty to take advantage of perspectives on their work from colleagues,

supervisors, and students? Does the self-evaluation process provide opportunities to organize portfolios and other nontraditional resources for demonstrating effective teaching and improved student learning? Is assistance provided to teachers from the staff development program in preparing evaluations and in developing new competencies or upgrading skills?

- Has the college established a culture in which the most effective teachers are recognized and rewarded in ways appropriate to their achievement and that ensures respect and a sense of fair play from those not recognized and rewarded? Is good teaching genuinely celebrated at the college?
- Has the development of statements and systems regarding selecting, developing, evaluating, and rewarding faculty involved all institutional stakeholders to the point that they feel ownership of the products?

Institutional Effectiveness

All things considered, if an institution and its consultants could give highly positive responses to most of the questions framed here for an audit of teaching and learning, such a college would be a model of institutional effectiveness. The core indices for measuring overall institutional effectiveness are related to teaching and learning activities. Certainly other factors, such as facilities, governance structures, community relationships, alliances with public schools and universities, and financial arrangements, need to be considered, but these factors, for the most part, are the peripheral structures that support teaching and learning.

The core indices for measuring overall institutional effectiveness related to teaching and learning are illuminated in the question, "Are the students at this college learning what they came to learn and what the faculty feel they need to learn, and is the community satisfied with the outcome?" An audit based on the following questions will provide more specific information regarding answers to this key question.

- Have the retention rates increased at the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution? Are stakeholders satisfied with these improved

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- Have the retention rates increased at the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution? Are stakeholders satisfied with these improved

retention rates as the best students can achieve?

- Have grade point averages, course success rates, and program completion rates increased at the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution? Are stakeholders satisfied with these improved averages and rates?
- Do students express more satisfaction in a variety of areas with their experiences at the college, and are they more involved at the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution?
- Do faculty, staff, and administrators express more satisfaction in a variety of areas with their experiences at the college, and are they more involved in the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution?
- Does the community express more satisfaction with the college because of activities initiated in making teaching and learning one of the highest priorities of the institution?

Although measures are difficult to determine for the questions related to satisfaction, one can infer satisfaction if most of the other questions throughout the audit can be answered positively. If that holds true, satisfaction on the part of students, faculty, and the community is likely to be evident in a number of ways: laudatory editorials in the student and community newspapers; more cordial contract negotiations; more volunteered time; greater commitment to experimentation; increased interaction between students and faculty and among faculty; and more referendums passed by the community in support of the college. These measures of satisfaction may appear idealistic, but they suggest a vision worth pursuing and not impossible to achieve.

Conclusion

Community colleges that conduct this audit may be surprised at how well they perform. There are many values shared by community college faculty that lay the groundwork for significant practices in teaching and learning. In the HERI study cited earlier, 82 percent of community college faculty agreed strongly or somewhat that "faculty are committed to the welfare of the institution." In terms of "overall job satisfaction" 74 percent indicated a satisfactory or very satisfactory rating. Community college faculty like working in the community college environment, and they are committed to the community college. When these faculty are matched with administrators who share the same values, teaching and learning can become a priority, and these extraordinary institutions can lay proper claim to being the "nation's premier teaching institutions."

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