

O'Banion, T. (January 1999) "The Learning College".

The Learning College

In 1997, the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community College published my book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, which is now in its third printing. In 1998, the book was awarded the Philip E. Frandson Award for Literature in the Field of Continuing Higher Education by the University Continuing Education Association, and many of the issues reviewed in the book have become the themes of national conferences and journal articles across American high education. A monograph, *Creating More Learning-Centered Community Colleges*, published by the League for Innovation in 1998, has sold over 12,000 copies. In the following brief article, O'Banion summarizes the key principles he outlined in the book that constitute The Learning College.

"The Learning College places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime." The model is based on the assumption that educational experiences are designed for the convenience of learners rather than for the convenience of institutions and their staffs. The term "The Learning College" is used as a generic reference for all educational institutions.

The Learning College is based on six key principles:

- The Learning College creates substantive change in individual learners.
- The Learning College engages learners as full partners in the learning process with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The Learning College creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
- The Learning College assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The Learning College defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The Learning College and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for learners.

Principle I—The Learning College Creates Substantive Change in Individual Learners. The need for colleges to support this first principle is a self-evident, general truth, easily verifiable in personal experience. It is so elementary that it is often unstated and overlooked. This first principle must be stated and restated until it becomes an embedded value undergirding all other principles.

At its best, formal schooling is every society's attempt to provide a powerful environment that can create substantive change in individuals. But formal schooling is no longer at its best in most societies. In the Learning College, this first principle must form the framework for all other activities. The learners and the learning facilitators in the Learning College must be aware of the awesome power that can be released when

learning works well. Learning in the Learning College will not be business as usual. Powerful processes will be at work; substantive change will be expected. Learners will be exploring and experimenting with new and expanded versions of what they can become. And it is important for educational leaders planning to initiate major change to become more learning centered to realize and to make visible to all of their stakeholders and constituents that what they are about to do will create substantive change in individual learners.

Principle II—The Learning College Engages Learners as Full Partners in the Learning Process, with Learners Assuming Primary Responsibility For Their Own Choices. At the point a learner chooses to engage the Learning College, a series of services will be initiated to prepare the learner for the experiences and opportunities to come. Until there is a seamless system of education across all sectors of education based on the principles of the Learning College, the services will be heavily focused on orienting the learner to the new experiences and expectations of the Learning College, which are not usually found in traditional schools. Two key expectations will be communicated to new learners at the first stage of engagement: (1) Learners are full partners in the creation and implementation of their learning experiences, and (2) Learners will assume primary responsibility for making their own choices about goals and options.

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

The Learning College will also provide orientation and experimentation for learners who are unfamiliar with the new learning environment of the Learning College. Some learners will need training in using the technology, in developing collaborations, in locating resources, and in navigating 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.

It will be the Learning College's responsibility to provide clear and easily accessible information in a variety of formats. This information should include guidelines for making decisions about dates, workloads, resources, and learning options; details about processes and options new to the learner; and agreements regarding expectations and responsibilities. It will be the learner's responsibility to review and provide information, experiment with processes and options, make choices, and commit to full engagement in the choices made.

Principle III—The Learning College Creates and Offers as Many Options for Learning as Possible. The learner will review and experiment with options regarding

time, place, structure, and methodology. Entry vouchers will be exchanged for the selected options and exit vouchers will be held for completion.

Each learning option will include specific goals and competency levels needed for entry as well as specific outcome measures of competency levels achieved. Learning Colleges will constantly create additional learning options, including prescribed, preshrunk portable modules; stand-alone technological expert systems; opportunities for collaboration with other learners in small groups and through technological links; and tutor-led groups, individual reading programs, project-based activities, service learning opportunities, lectures, and laboratories. It is important that traditional options needed by some students also be retained to provide for the multiple needs of students.

A major goal of the Learning College will be 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 the 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.

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 using advanced technology. Without these complex systems, the Learning College cannot function. These systems reflects the breakthrough that will free education from the time-bound, place bound, and role-bound systems that currently manage the educational enterprise.

Principle IV—The Learning College Assists Learners to Form and Participate in Collaborative Learning Activities. To transform a traditional institution into a Learning College is to turn the university ideal of a “community of scholars” into a new ideal of “communities of learners.” More than just cute word play, the focus on creating communities among all participants in the Learning College—including not just students but also the faculty and other learning specialists—on creating student cohorts, and developing social structures that support individual learning is a requirement of a Learning College.

It has become increasingly clear from research that learning is a social activity. The constructivists Abel, Cennamo and Chung, say “Learning is a social enterprise. Through social interaction, as well as through action on objects, learners make sense of the world.” In the United States, “Learning communities” is a specific term for a curricular intervention that enhances collaboration and expands learning, and these communities have taken hold in hundreds of institutions across the country. There are many other forms of collaborative learning including project-based learning, electronic forums, and collaborative problem-solving activities that illustrate this principle.

In a Learning College, staff will form and recruit students into cohorts of common interest or circumstances. Process facilitators will orient individuals and form them into

groups or communities of learners. Resource specialists will attend to the resource needs of both individuals and groups of learners. Learning facilitators will design experiences that build upon and use group strengths and other dynamics. Assessment specialists will design and implement authentic assessments that can occur both individually and in the context of collaborative learning. The Learning College will be designed not only around the unique needs of individual learners but also around their needs for association. The Learning College will foster and nourish learning communities as an integral part of its design.

Principle V—The Learning College Defines the Roles of Learning Facilitators by the Needs of the Learners. If learners have varied and individual needs that require special attention, then it follows that the personnel employed in this enterprise must be selected on the basis of what learners need. Everyone employed in the Learning College will be a learning facilitator. Every employee will be directly linked to learners in the exercise of his or her duties, although some activities, such as accounting, may be more indirectly related. The goal is to have every employed person thinking about how his or her work facilitates the learning process.

The Learning College will contract with many specialists to provide services to learners. Specialists will be employed on a contractual basis to produce specific products or to deliver specific services; some will work full time, but many will work part time, often from their homes, linked to learners through technology. A number of specialists will be scattered around the world providing unique services and special expertise.

The Board of Regents for the State of Ohio calls for learning consultants who will be mentors, facilitators of inquiry, architects of connection, and managers of collaboration and integration. The ground work is already being prepared for the new role of the learning facilitator to support the goals and purposes of the Learning College.

Principle VI—The Learning College and Its Learning Facilitators Succeed only When Improved and Expanding Learning Can Be Documented for Learners. “What does this learner know?” and “What can this learner do?” provide the framework for documenting outcomes, both for the learner and for the learning facilitators. If the ultimate goal of the Learning College is to promote and expand learning, then this will be the yardstick by which the Learning College faculty and staff are evaluated. Conventional information may be assembled for students (retention rates and achievement scores) and for faculty (service and observation by students, peers, and supervisors), but the goal will be to document what students know and what they can do and to use this information as the primary measure of success for the learning facilitators and the Learning College.

All learning options in the Learning College will include the competencies required for entrance and for exit. These competencies will reflect national and state standards when available, or they will be developed by specialists on staff or on special contract. Assessing a learner’s readiness for a particular learning option will be a key part of the

initial engagement process and thereafter a continuing process embedded in the culture of the institution.

Conclusion

These six principles form the core of the Learning College. They refer primarily to process and structure, and are built on the basic philosophy that the student is central in all activities within the scope of the educational enterprise. There are certainly other principles that must be considered in creating a new paradigm of learning. The kind of content to be addressed, how colleges are funded, and how institutions are governed are examples of key issues that must be addressed and for which principles must be designed. In these six principles, there is at least a beginning direction for those who wish to create a Learning College that places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime. Such a college is designed to help students make passionate connections to learning.

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