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A Learning College for the 21st Century:
An Interview with Dr. Terry O'Banion

by James L. Morrison and Terry O'Banion

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Responding to our questions regarding this learner-focused paradigm, following is a timely and thought provoking interview with Dr. Terry O'Banion, author of *A Learning College for the 21st Century*.

Dr. O'Banion is president and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College, an international consortium of leading community colleges in the United States and Canada, dedicated to experimentation and innovation. In a recent study of 11,000 higher education leaders across the United States, the League was cited as "the most dynamic organization in the community college world". Dr. O'Banion was recently announced as one of eleven national higher education leaders designated as "idea champions" who set the agenda for all of higher education-- the only community college individual among those selected. (Change Magazine, http://www.aahe.org/change.htm *January/February 1998)*

James L. Morrison (JM): Your latest book is entitled, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. What is it about the new millennium that provokes a definitive change in education?

Terry O'Banion (TO): Every social invention in the world— religion, government, marriage, business, etc.— is using the new millennium to forecast a new start, and education is no exception. There is something charming about the ways human beings are constantly reinventing themselves, and the millennium is just a handy marker to reference our latest proclamations about our hopes and dreams for the future.

My colleagues and I do propose definitive changes in education, but that has as much to do with the failure of past reform efforts in education as it does with opportunities promised for the 21st Century.

JM: Could you review what you mean by "failure of past reform efforts"?

TO: In my educational career— which now spans four decades— I have seen four or five major reform efforts in education. In every case the reform was designed to tweak an inherited system of education that no longer worked. Reform has usually meant that we add on a new program or service, expand the number of teachers or class hours or buildings, increase the standards, but leave the traditional concept of "school" in place. This tweaking of the old system still has a lot of currency. Governors, legislators, business leaders, and parents still think we can reform education if we reduce class size, extend the school day and school year, require standardized tests in every state, and make education available to everyone through distance education programs. All of these reform efforts are designed to provide more of what should not be provided in the first place, more inadequate education for the times in which we live. Ten years from now there will be numerous reports on the devastating failures of the great reform efforts that hovered on both sides of the millennium.

Substantive reform will mean blowing up the culturally embedded concept of school. We have inherited a model of schooling based on an agricultural economy: School still let out in the early afternoon so students can gather the eggs and milk the cows before dark. In the 1920s and 30s, influenced by the success of the industrial revolution, we grafted an industrial model of education onto the agricultural model. Schools began to operate like factories: 30 students in hour-long classes for 16-week semesters supervised by one teacher.

Substantive reform will radically change the inherited model of schooling to create a new paradigm of education.

JM: You have described that new paradigm as a "learning college." What is a "learning college," and how does it differ from a "teaching college"?

TO: The learning college places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, any place, anytime. The model is based on the assumption that education experiences are designed for the convenience of learners rather than for the convenience of institutions and their staffs.

Unfortunately, "learning" in the traditional model of education has not been our primary mission. Ask any educators what the purpose or mission of a university is and they respond: research, teaching, and service. The highest reward in a university is the distinguished research chair, and promotion through professional ranks is based on juried articles and books published. In 1968, when I submitted my first evaluation to my dean at the University of Illinois, my papers came back with a suggestion that I add the number of pages to each publication I had listed. No one ever—in eight years as a professor—asked me for information regarding my teaching ability, much less data about the kind or quality of learning I had helped my students achieve.

In community colleges we reserve the highest rewards for teaching, actually referring to ourselves as "teaching colleges." Aping the universities' propensity to reward distinguished behaviors, we have created distinguished teaching chairs in hundreds of community colleges, giving high visibility to what we value most.

In a "learning college" learning is the mission, the purpose, the core value. Every policy, program, and practice is designed to support and create improved and expanded learning for students.

As one way of encouraging my colleagues to begin to consider what is implied by placing learning front and center in the education enterprise, I urge faculty, administrators, trustees, and support staff to ask the following question as often as possible: How does this action improve and expand student learning? Here are some examples of how to apply this question:

- Does this budget improve and expand student learning?
- Does the purchase of these five new computers improve and expand student learning?
- Does the employment of these three new part-time faculty improve and expand student learning?
- Does the refurbishing of this biology laboratory expand and improve student learning?
- Does this series of workshops for our staff development program improve and expand student learning?

- Does this new registration process improve and expand student learning?
- Does the planting of three sycamores on the south end of the campus improve and expand student learning?

JM: What were the key developments in the last decade that led to this new paradigm?

TO: The primary factor that supports a new paradigm was the growing mountain of evidence that American students performed abysmally on almost all measures compared to their counterparts in other countries. The just released Third International Math and Science Survey placed American 12 graders 19th out of 21 countries in math, ahead of Cyprus and South Africa. In science we were 6th from the bottom. We have an educational system that reflects the values of a developing country.

Reflecting on these kinds of results, some educational leaders in the early 1990s began to suggest that our educational system was not getting better, it was getting worse. School was cited not as the solution but as the problem itself. At the same time, a number of key developments made it possible for us to begin thinking about how school in the future could be different from school in the past.

The assessment movement of the 80s gave us a repertoire of new assessment practices and a better understanding of how to establish and measure learning outcomes. New research on the brain began to be related to learning. Gardner expanded our notion of IQ and its restrictions into a concept of multi-intelligences and suggested we learn to appreciate and provide for more diverse learning. Other researchers suggested we learn about cognitive styles and create learning environments to recognize the numerous ways our students learn. Still other researchers discovered new information about how the brain functions and began to suggest activities related to brain-compatible learning.

We also gained a new appreciation for organizing ourselves and operating with processes that proved to be more effective and efficient. These adaptations from TQM, Chaos Theory and Learning Organizations have influenced a great many educational institutions.

Finally, information technology became ubiquitous and freed us from the time-bound, place-bound, and role-bound models associated with traditional education. All of these developments achieved a confluence in the mid-1990s—and armed with an overwhelming amount of data about the failure of schools to stimulate substantive perform—a new paradigm of education began to emerge that places learning first by overhauling the traditional architecture of education. My colleagues and I refer to the paradigm as the "learning college."

JM: Quoting from your book (page 71) "Technology is the cornerstone of the learning college in that it frees learning from time and place constrictions." This anytime/anywhere mode of learning is key to this new paradigm, is it not?

TO: The anytime/anywhere model of learning is an important element in the learning college, but is not enough by itself. In fact, one of the problems with current reform efforts is the tendency of many leaders—especially political leaders—to believe that the distance education experiments such as Western Governors Virtual University will solve the problems related to education. Making the current model of education—the teacher in charge, content chopped into units, learning certified by standardized tests—available to more students "anytime/anywhere" will increase access to education, but may not expand and improve student learning one whit.

One of the downsides of technology is that distance education and information technology in general have the great potential to expand really bad teaching and really bad educational models.

Anytime/anywhere, yes, but much, much more. Consider a learning college that enrolls 150 students every Monday for 52 weeks a year, one-half of whom never set foot on campus and one-fourth of whom never work directly with a teacher. Consider a learning college in which small groups of self-selected students work on "projects" until they can demonstrate to external agencies they have achieved the competencies established for a B.A. degree. Consider a learning college in which each learner's educational program is customized to each learner's cognitive style, interest, abilities, experiences, schedule, social and economic assets, etc. These examples only hint at what is involved in an education that goes beyond providing current courses anytime/anywhere.

JM: On page 72 of your book, you say that an additional value to the learning college is that "technology is ism-free." Please expand on this idea.

TO: One of the great values of technology is that it is color blind. Technology does not discriminate against overweight learners, or older learners, or ugly learners, or learners with uncombed hair. Technology is ism-free—free of sexism, racism, and ageism.

There are very few human beings who can match the credentials of technology on this issue. Every person reading this interview can remember an instance in his or her past when some teacher showed a prejudice, either through a disparaging remark or some body language that left its mark. Those instances accumulate for some students to the point that learning becomes impossible. Learning occurs best in environments that are free of teachers who cause harm by their prejudicial and discriminatory behaviors; in this regard technology has a considerable edge.

JM: What is your response to those who comment that technology dehumanizes education?

TO: The idea that technology dehumanizes education is an artifact of earlier times when we did not understand what technology could do for us. Today, when individuals say that technology dehumanizes education, they most likely mean that they do not feel comfortable with technology, or with change, or with loss of control they perceive related to the growing use of technology. Technology may contribute to dehumanization if by the concept people mean that technology can contribute to isolation and lack of face-to-face interaction. It is easy for us to conjure up an image of a student isolated in her semi-dark room interacting with the world only through a computer.

But the printed book is the greater culprit for creating this kind of isolation from others and cutting down on face-to-face interaction, and faculty seldom rail against the printed book as a factor in dehumanizing the educational process. In fact, bookworms are highly regarded by teachers.

Instead of dehumanizing the educational process, we are beginning to learn how to use computers to actually humanize the educational process. Electronic Journals and Electronic Forums, as pioneered in the **Maricopa Community Colleges**, create real opportunities for connectivity and a sense of community among commuting students on a community college campus. Research is beginning to show that the "unvoiced" or marginal student in our classes is provided a new opportunity to connect with other students and with the teacher through technology in ways not available in regular classes. Outside of education, senior citizens are creating all kinds of electronic communities to overcome their sense of isolation, and there are numerous examples of dating and matching systems that provide opportunities for people to overcome their loneliness and isolation.

Just as the telephone became a useful technology to connect families across long distances, the computer will eventually become the technology of choice to humanize all kinds of human interactions. For many years to come, however, I am sure that in faculty discussions some teacher will stand up and make a passionate case that we want to make sure that we do not use technology to dehumanize the educational process.

JM: What are the advantages of this new paradigm to faculty?

TO: The "learning college" will free faculty from the role-bound models of the past in which faculty members worked in isolation in their own classrooms, attempted to be experts in a discipline that was expanding exponentially, lectured as the primary delivery mechanism of education, and certified student success with a primitive 5-point scale of A-F.

In the learning college of the future, faculty will be selected in terms of what learners need and will, therefore, be selected on the basis of specific competencies and interests rather than on the basis of some generalized concept of "teacher," a magician who performs miracles with 30 students in 55 minutes three times a week, repeated with four different groups of students every week.

Matching what faculty do best with what students need most is a radical notion we have hardly begun to explore. But it is a sound concept that will lead to a reconfiguration of the roles of those who will activate learning to the great satisfaction of both teachers and students.

JM: What are the benefit to students?

TO: Learning is good. Learning is natural to the human animal. Learning is a necessity similar to the basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Learning elevates, inspires, expands, confirms. Human beings like to learn. When educational institutions become learning colleges, the benefits to students will become self-evident.

JM: Is this "learner-centered" model unique to community colleges?

TO: The learning-centered model is not unique to community colleges but it may achieve its finest hour in that sector of education. National surveys report that community college faculty are more likely to be student-centered—i.e. they are more likely to be interested in the personal problems of their students and more likely to meet with students outside of class hours—than faculty in other sectors of higher education. In addition, community colleges— influenced by their interactions with their local communities and by their efforts to meet the real needs of local business and industry—are more likely to create reality-based, hands-on, practical educational experiences for their students. All of these factors can contribute to the creation of a learning-centered model of education.

There are many elementary and secondary schools that are experimenting with learning-centered models. The elementary schools that practice project-based education, as championed by the Autodesk Foundation, is one example. Liberal arts colleges reflect a culture in which the learning-centered concept could prosper, but there is no widespread movement on this issue in this sector to date. Everyone knows the good work of **Alverno College**, but few of us can name up to five liberal arts colleges engaged in an institution-wide effort to become more learning-centered. Research universities will have a difficult time creating more learning-centered practices on an institution-wide basis because all change occurs or fails to occur in the discipline guilds. The national Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities has issued a recent document calling for all land-grant institutions to become more learning-centered, but whether or not they can remains to be seen.

JM: Who are the early adapters of this new paradigm? And what benefits (if any) have they seen?

TO: I am most familiar with the community college sector of higher education, and in my book have identified six pioneering community colleges that have begun their journey to become more learning-centered. These colleges include **Sinclair Community College** (Ohio) **Lane Community College** (Oregon), **Maricopa Community Colleges** (Arizona), **Palomar College** (California), **Community College of Denver** (Colorado), and **Jackson Community College** (Michigan).

These colleges report a new energy among faculty and staff and a creative outpouring of new practices and programs. As one example, the Community College of Denver reports some very important institutional effectiveness data showing increased graduation rates, increased retention rates, and increased success in securing jobs.

On June 30, 1998, during the League's new conference on *Innovations 1998* to be held in Dallas, Texas June 28-July 1, representatives from a number of these colleges will participate in a PBS and League-sponsored national town meeting to report on their progress.

JM: As President and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College, what are your observations about the willingness of community colleges to utilize innovation in their methods of teaching and learning?

TO: One of the identifying characteristics of community colleges is their innovative spirit. Founded almost 100 years ago as nontraditional institutions of higher education, community colleges have never been shy about trying new ways of doing things. It is simply part of their nature.

Part of the reason community colleges are willing to try new things is that they have been assigned the toughest tasks in all of higher education. Never in the history of the world has an institution of higher education tried to educate all of the students in the society who wished to try out their wings in the higher education environment. Because of this very special nature of the community colleges, we open our doors to citizens who have no background of experience in higher education, who have failed in secondary schools and higher education experiences, and who are older than our traditional concept of college students. In addition, community college students, as compared to students in other sectors of higher education, are generally part-time students; they work part-time and many of them hold full time jobs; and many of them are trying to raise families and keep their head above water. Teaching in a community college is a real challenge, and faculty and administrators have been extraordinary at experimenting with innovative ways to provide meaningful educational experiences for these students.

Unfortunately, our innovations have not always been successful in bringing about the changes we all desire. In most cases, our innovations have been "add-ons" and continues the usual approach to educational change which involves tweaking the current traditional education system. Community colleges will continue to be innovative institutions, but until they make a commitment to substantive reform, which I believe involves placing learning first by overhauling the traditional architecture of education, their innovations will not bring about the change they desire.

JM: If readers would like to read your book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* in its entirety, how may it be ordered?

TO: The book was published by the **American Council on Education** and the **American Association of Community Colleges** and may be ordered by calling 1-800-250-6557.

Readers of this interview might also be interested in a more recently published monograph *Creating More Learning-Centered Community Colleges* which I wrote primarily for faculty and administrators who do not have time to read the book. We have already sold about 8,000 of these monographs, and many colleges have ordered one for every member of their faculty and staff. The monographs sell for $15 each and can be ordered from the League by calling 1-714-367-2884. Colleges that are members of the League's Alliance for Community College Innovation receive a 20% discount.

The League for Innovation is also sponsoring an online discussion with PBS throughout 1998 on the topic "Creating a Learning College." We invite anyone interested in this topic to join us at www.pbs.org/als/revolution.

Read More About Student-Centered Education:

Designing and Supporting Courses on the Web, by Judith Boettcher and G. Phillip Cartwright, *Change Magazine,* September/October 1997. http://contract.kent.edu/change/articles/sepoct97.html.

Distance Learning: A Different Time, A Different Place, by G. Phillip Cartwright, *Change Magazine,* July/August, 1994. http://contract.kent.edu/change/articles/julaug94.html.

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