



New Advocates for the Learning Revolution

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On October 14, 2009, Jamie Merisotis, President of the Lumina Foundation, gave the Howard R. Bowen Lecture at Claremont Graduate University titled "It's the Learning, Stupid" (2009). His speech was a signal that the foundation would become a leading advocate of all things learning, and the foundation soon began to convene a number of national leaders for conversations related to learning. *The Emerging Learning System* (Lumina Foundation, 2016) reports on the most recent convening and reflects the views of 44 national educational leaders on the inadequacies of the current educational system and the need for focusing on learning as the primary outcome of higher education.

Authors of the report concluded, "In the end, the group agreed that the work now underway is overwhelmingly aimed at making repairs to a broken system when what is truly needed is a restructured system. Some in the room even called for a 'learning revolution.'" (p. 13), which echoes the conclusion of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993) 23 years earlier: "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).

This work from Lumina is a welcome addition to the decades-long effort of community college leaders to create a Learning Revolution that would place learning as the overarching mission of all education. One of the first leaders to advocate this view was George Boggs, President Emeritus of Palomar College (CA) and President Emeritus of the American Association of Community Colleges. In a speech to his faculty at Palomar College on September 3, 1985, Boggs said, "Our central mission is student learning" (p. 3). Under Boggs' leadership, Palomar launched a major effort to create a new strategic plan that would reflect that mission. On February 12, 1991, the Palomar board approved a new vision statement that is one of the

clearest and best statements ever made about placing learning as the central mission of the college.

The vision statement of Palomar College reflects a subtle but nonetheless profound shift in how we think of the college and what we do. We have shifted from an identification with process to an identification with results. We are no longer content with merely providing quality instruction. We will judge ourselves henceforth on the quality of student learning we produce. And further, we will judge ourselves on our ability to produce ever greater and more sophisticated student learning and meaningful educational success with each passing year, each exiting student, and each graduating class. To do this we must ourselves continually experiment, discover, grow, and learn. Consequently, we see ourselves as a learning institution in both our object and our method. (Palomar College, 1991)

George Boggs began to speak and write in national venues about the new focus on learning, and when he became President/CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in 2000, he launched a Mission Project for the association that would capitalize on the changing dynamics in higher education that place learning first as the central mission of all educational institutions. The new AACC mission statement—Building a Nation of Learners by Advancing America’s Community Colleges—was released to wide acclaim in April 2001 at the convention celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the first continuing public community college in the nation—Joliet Junior College—following a yearlong effort of councils, committees, and focus groups. George Boggs may have been the first person to articulate that learning is as important—if not more so—than research, teaching, and service, which have been the traditional missions of higher education. He was the first to organize a community college around the mission of learning, and, leader that he is, he went a step further and embedded the idea of learning into the culture of the leading community college organization in the nation.

Boggs was joined in the 1990s by a number of colleagues who helped advance the idea of learning as the central mission of education. One of the most significant articles was written by Boggs’ colleagues at Palomar College. *From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education* (1995), by Robert Barr and John Tagg, has been the most cited article in the history of *Change Magazine* and reached beyond community colleges to appeal to all institutions of higher education.

While the Learning Paradigm was the first idea to reflect this new movement, the idea of the Learning Revolution soon began to take hold as well. In 1995, *Educational Record* published an article titled “Community Colleges Lead a Learning Revolution” (O’Banion). Diana Oblinger, former CEO of EDUCAUSE, and Sean Rush wrote a book in 1997 titled *The Learning Revolution*. The League for Innovation in the Community College published a *Leadership Abstracts* in 1997—“The Purpose, Process, and Prospect of the Learning Revolution in the Community College” (O’Banion) that said, “In a nutshell, the purpose of the Learning Revolution is to place

learning first in every policy, program, and practice in higher education by overhauling the traditional architecture of education” (para. 3).

The League for Innovation has been a major catalyst for the Learning Revolution: In 2000, it launched a five-year national initiative—the Vanguard Learning College Project—involving 12 flagship colleges that led the Learning Revolution; in 1998, it initiated a monthly series—*Learning Abstracts*—and in 2003, began to sponsor an annual national conference—*Learning Summit*—both of which continue today.

This foundational work on the Learning Revolution idea paved the way for what would prove to be truly bold steps to a desired reality—the idea of the Learning College or the Learning Paradigm College. In the 1997 book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (O’Banion), the author suggested six Learning College principles and cited six case studies of community colleges that were in the process of becoming Learning Colleges. The purpose of the Learning College is to place learning first and provide educational experiences for learners any way, any place, any time. The idea of a college focused on learning continued to be championed by community college leaders with a stream of publications including *The Learning Paradigm College* by John Tagg (2003) and *Establishing & Sustaining Learning-Centered Community Colleges* by Christine McPhail (2005).

One of the cornerstones of the Learning College idea is that every policy, program, practice, and all personnel will meet the standards of being learning centered. One way of checking that standard is to ask, “Does this policy, program, practice, and these personnel improve and expand student learning?” followed by the question, “How do we know this policy, program, practice, and these personnel improve and expand student learning?”

That cornerstone becomes dislodged when educators confuse the issue by substituting learner centered for learning centered, as does the report from the Lumina Foundation: “Participants coalesced around the notion of a *learner-centered system*” (p. 13). Learner centered means pretty much the same thing as student centered, which is a value held by all educational institutions for over a hundred years. Learning centered is a new term that is at the heart of learning reforms, and educators need to clearly understand what it means. The following illustration may help clarify the difference between learner centered and learning centered.

A client (student, customer, learner) decides to go to an expensive spa for a week to lose five pounds (behavioral objective, learning outcome, exit competency). The client is treated exceedingly well in keeping with the high fees paid. Facials and body wraps are provided daily along with a special diet of spa cuisine. The surroundings are beautifully landscaped; soft music plays in the background; the hectic pace of the outside world is soon forgotten. There are many options to choose from including aerobics, hip-hop classes, guided walks, meditation, and quiet moments of reading. The client is pampered beyond his wildest dreams. The spa is truly client centered, student centered, customer centered, learner centered.

At the end of the week the client packs to leave the spa and, as a final act of self-assessment, steps on the scale in his well-appointed bathroom. To his dismay not one pound has been lost. He has paid a high price for a learner-centered experience but did not achieve his learning-centered goal of losing five pounds.

It is not enough to make students feel good about the environment on the campus or the services they receive. It is not enough to impress students with the dazzling performance of great lecturers. It is not enough to provide all the latest in information technology. If we cannot document expanded or improved learning—however defined and however measured—we cannot say with any assurance that learning has occurred. And it is much more likely that we will be able to document learning when we place high value on learning-centered policies, programs, and practices and when we employ personnel who know how to create learning outcomes, learning options, and learning-centered activities.

Fortunately, we do not have to choose between learner-centered and learning-centered perspectives. In a Learning College, it is important for faculty and staff to be both. The Learning College integrates these concepts and requires both care and service for the individual and attention to quality learning outcomes.

We celebrate the work of the Lumina Foundation and other foundations and agencies to place learning first in all our work. When leaders from community colleges and other higher education institutions and agencies work together, we can build on a rich foundation to better create learning-centered policies, programs, practices, and personnel to improve and expand learning for all our students.

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