

## **The Learning Revolution in American Higher Education**

In the last five years a Learning Revolution has spread rapidly across all levels of American higher education. In 1994, the cover of *Business Week* declared a Learning Revolution in progress; in 1995, a special section in *TIME* magazine announced the developing Learning Revolution. In 1996, the first national conference on "The Learning Paradigm" was held in San Diego, California, and the Association of Community College Trustees released a special issue of the *Trustee Quarterly* devoted entirely to *The Learning Revolution: A Guide for Community College Trustees*. In 1997, the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges jointly published *A Learning College for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Terry O'Banion now in its third printing as the "bible" of the Learning Revolution. In 1997 and 1998, the League for Innovation and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) sponsored three national teleconferences on the Learning Revolution and the Learning College. In a few short years, the Learning Revolution has taken American higher education by storm and has found community colleges—the American version of colleges of further education—to be particularly interested in implementing the Learning Revolution. In a 1998 survey by the League for Innovation in the Community College, 73% of the nation's community college presidents indicated they had undertaken an initiative for their institutions to become more learning-centered community colleges.

The Learning Revolution in education is part of a larger social transformation going on in the United States and in the world. Peter Drucker, in *Managing for the Future*, succinctly captures this special period of change: "Every few hundred years throughout Western history, a sharp transformation has occurred. In a matter of decades, society altogether rearranges itself—its world view, its basic values, its social and political structures, its arts, its key institutions. Fifty years later a new world order exists. . . our age is such a period of transformation." The Learning Revolution, "in a matter of decades," will fundamentally change the education enterprise.

### **A Revolution with a Purpose**

*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.* In a seminal work, *An American Imperative*, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education in 1993 said "We must redesign all our learning systems to align our entire education enterprise for the personal, civic, and workplace needs of the twenty-first century." The Wingspread Group went a step further and indicated the challenge institutions of higher education will face if they are to implement the Learning Revolution: "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."

While there seems to be a revolution or reform movement about every decade in American education, the Learning Revolution is quite different from reform efforts of the past. The Learning Revolution has two distinct goals that makes it different: (1) to place learning first in every policy, program, and practice in higher education, and (2) to overhaul the traditional architecture of education.

### **Placing Learning First**

It is generally inferred that learning is the primary purpose of education; but policies, practices, and value statements often reflect other priorities.

Any student of education can cite the three primary missions most often articulated for American universities: teaching, research, and service. In many universities, however, the reward system places higher value on research over teaching and service. New tenure-track faculty are often warned by colleagues and mentors against investing too much energy in their teaching assignments. Universities have established distinguished research chairs as a clear designation of the primacy placed on research.

In contrast, the community college places such strong value on teaching that the institution is often referred to as “the teaching college.” For example, in community colleges, the value placed on teaching is clearly reflected in their mission statements. Robert Barr, director of institutional research and planning at Palomar College in California, says: “It is revealing that virtually every mission statement contained in the catalogs in California’s 107 community colleges fails to use the word learning in a statement of purpose. When it is used, it is almost always bundled in the phrase *teaching and learning* as if to say that, while learning may indeed have something to do with community colleges, it is only present as an aspect of teaching.”

One of the most significant documents ever written on the community college in America, *Building Communities* (1988)—the report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges—repeatedly highlights the central value placed on teaching in the community college: “Building communities dedicated to teaching is the vision and inspiration of this report. Quality instruction should be the hallmark of the movement. The community college should be the nation’s premier teaching institution.” Aping the universities propensity to place its highest value on research by establishing distinguished research chairs, the community college has established distinguished teaching chairs as a clear symbol of the primacy it places on teaching.

When research and teaching are the most visible values in an educational institution, the policies, practices, programs, and personnel in that institution are aligned to reflect those values. If learning is placed first to become the most important value, the policies, practices, programs, and personnel will be realigned to reflect the change in focus. Recognition by key stakeholders in the institution that learning should be placed first is the beginning of the Learning Revolution.

## Overhauling the Traditional Architecture

Every faculty member and administrator in education has been frustrated at some time or another with the traditional architecture of education that limits how they can teach or manage and how students can learn. Roger Moe, former majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate, has said "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy." The current system is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound. These traditional limits on the architecture of education apply to American education but may differ in other countries depending on their educational history and the extent to which they have implemented reforms in recent years.

The system in America is *time-bound* by credit hours and semester courses. College students are learning in blocks of time that are artificial. Excellent teachers know that learning is not constrained to one-hour meetings held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and they have been frustrated in teaching within these prescribed boundaries.

The system is *place-bound*. Learning is initiated, nurtured, monitored, and certified primarily by teachers in classrooms on a campus. We have experimented with distance education that takes courses off campus, but while it has increased student access, it retains the old model of education. Distance education, for the most part, is a nontraditional delivery system for traditional education. Work-based learning was supposed to break up that model, but it doesn't—it extends the model and is controlled by it because work-based learning is built around the current structure of the school. It still binds the student to a place.

The system is *efficiency-bound*. Our model of education reflects in great part the adjustment to an agricultural and industrial economy of an earlier era. Public school students are still dismissed early in the afternoon and in the summers so they can work on farms that no longer exist. Reflecting the industrial economy, education responded by creating a lock-step, put-them-in-boxes, factory model—the basis of American education today. Academic credit, based on time in class, makes learning appear orderly. This model creates an efficiency system to award credentials. Grades are collected and turned into credits, and these compilations are supposed to represent profound learning.

Finally the system is *role-bound*, which may be its greatest weakness. In education, we make the assumption that one human being, the teacher, can ensure that thirty very different human beings, one hour a day, three days a week for sixteen weeks, can learn enough to become enlightened citizens, productive workers, and joyful lifelong learners. Then we assume that this one human being can repeat this miracle three more times in the same sixteen-week period for ninety additional individuals. We provide little comfort and support when teachers fail to live up to this role-bound myth.

Reformers have been consistent in their criticism of the constraints on learning reflected in the industrial model of schooling in the United States. In 1962, John Dewey argued, “Nature has not adapted the young animal to the narrow desk, the crowded curriculum, the silent absorption of complicated facts.” More than 20 years ago, K. Patricia Cross, a leading advocate for educational reform throughout her career observed: “After some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have concluded that our commitment to the lock-step, time-defined structures of education stands in the way of lasting progress.” More recently, the Tofflers have noted that “America’s schools. . . still operate like factories, subjecting the raw material (children) to standardized instruction and routine inspection.” Today, this inherited architecture of education places great limits on a system struggling to redefine itself. The school system, from kindergarten through graduate school, is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound.

### **A Vanguard of Colleges Leads the Way**

A small vanguard of leading community colleges is beginning to experiment with new approaches to placing learning first and changing the historical architecture to implement new practices and programs to make education more learning centered. These colleges are committed to institutionwide efforts to explore and implement the Learning Revolution, and they have begun to initiate activities and achieve outcomes that may be informative for other community colleges.

The process of launching a learning revolution at these institutions has included a host of key steps including: (1) building a critical coalition and involving all stakeholders; (2) creating an emerging vision of a learning-centered institution, which includes revised statements of mission and values that focus on learning; (3) fully supporting the initiative in word, deed, and dollars; (4) realigning current structures to accommodate collaboration and teamwork; (5) creating an open system of communication; (6) evaluating outcomes thoroughly; (7) committing to the long haul; and (8) celebrating changes and accomplishments.

The listing of these key elements does not do justice to the complexity of the task or to the progress that this vanguard of colleges has made. They are only the first steps of a long journey that hundreds of community colleges are likely to begin in the next several years as they commit to becoming more learning-centered colleges.

Terry O'Banion  
President and CEO  
League for Innovation in  
the Community College  
January, 1999