

## **THE PURPOSE, PROCESS, AND PRODUCT OF THE LEARNING REVOLUTION IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

*Terry O'Banion*

The 1990s mark the spread of a Learning Revolution in higher education. In 1994, the cover of *Business Week* declared a learning revolution in progress; in 1995, a special section in *Time* announced the developing learning revolution. In 1996-97, the pace of the learning revolution picked up: the first national conference on "The Learning Paradigm" was held in San Diego; 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*; the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges jointly published *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. For the remaining few years of this century, "The Learning Revolution" will continue to be a leading theme of articles, books, conferences, commissions, studies, and hopefully practices in education.

This current revolution in education is part of a larger social transformation. 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 all together 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. The revolution was triggered by the first wave of education reform launched in the early 1980s with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and found its central theme in the second wave of education reform launched in the early 1990s. Substantive change is already beginning to appear in institutions of higher education as national associations and individual institutions begin to implement the revolution.

### **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 the 1993 book, *An American Imperative*, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education 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 education, the Learning Revolution is quite different from reform efforts in the past. The Learning Revolution has two distinct goals: 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**

Community colleges, for the most part, have positioned themselves as institutions committed to teaching. They take great pride in referring to themselves as "teaching colleges." *Building Communities*, the 1988 report of the Commission on the Future of the Community College, is a tribute to the community college's commitment to teaching: "Building communities through dedicated teaching is the vision and inspiration of this report"; "The community college should be the nation's premier teaching institution".

Because of its long commitment to teaching, the community college is the ideal crucible for the Learning Revolution. Every community college teacher wants to be a better teacher, and every community college teacher understands that the purpose of teaching is to help students make passionate connections to learning. These are

bedrock values that will sustain and guide the Learning Revolution in the community college in the twenty-first century.

### **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.

The system 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.

If we are to make any progress toward implementing the Learning Revolution, we need to replace the current educational system with a system designed for the kind of society in which we live, designed for the kinds of students who attend college, and designed to take advantage of what we know about new research on learning and about new applications of information technology.

### **Process and Product from Vanguard Colleges**

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 its institutions more learning centered. These colleges are committed to institution wide 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.

## Process

As with any large-scale change initiative, process is as important as product. 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 at hand 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.

## Product

When the powerful purpose of the Learning Revolution combines with the thoughtful process of practitioners across the country, a clearer picture of the learning college will emerge. For now, the vanguard institutions point to some key characteristics of learning-centered colleges.

In short, learning-centered colleges are institutions where: (1) programs and services create substantive change in individual learners; (2) learners are engaged as full partners in the learning process, assuming primary responsibility for their own choices; (3) there are as many options for learning as possible; (4) learners are assisted in forming and participating in collaborative learning activities; (5) the role of learning facilitator is defined by the needs of the learner; (6) all college employees identify with their role in supporting learning; and (7) success is measured by documented, improved, and expanded learning for learners.

## Conclusion

This revolution, guided by its core purpose of transforming education into a learning-centered enterprise, is quickly spreading across the community college landscape. As it continues, the closely connected process and product will necessarily develop and adapt to the needs of unique learning environments. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from studying the efforts of those on the vanguard; and, much to be done as the revolution continues.

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