



# Efforts to Transform Higher Education

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Transforming higher education is not an easy task given the complexities and variations of institutions, the high value placed on independent thought and action, the evolution of extensive bureaucracies, and the myriad processes and practices tied to tradition. This module highlights four movements that show evidence of progress in addressing current needs (*Changing Expectations for Higher Education*). First, the role of teaching in higher education is evolving as institutions apply a new model calling for the scholarship of teaching. Second, focus on learning as the primary outcome of education is replacing emphasis on the delivery of education. Third, assessment has become a priority in classrooms and institutions as emphasis has moved to measuring student success and institutional effectiveness. Finally, developmental education is maturing in higher education and gaining higher status as institutions address the need both to raise the performance levels of students and to include those who previously did not pursue higher education.

## New Model of Scholarship in Teaching

Ernest Boyer (1990) offers clear leadership in changing the role of faculty. He identifies four basic tasks:

1. **Advancing knowledge** is the most essential form of scholarship; the other functions flow from it.
2. **Synthesizing and integrating knowledge** gives meaning to isolated facts, “putting them into perspective...making connections across disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists.”
3. **Applying knowledge** occurs when the scholar asks, “How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? How can it be helpful to individuals as well as to institutions?”
4. **Representing knowledge** through teaching “means not only transmitting knowledge but transforming and extending it as well...” In other words, the teacher is also seen as a learner.

As colleges and universities attempt to apply the Boyer model of scholarship in teaching, a number of people have reflected on their success to date. Donald A. Schon (1995) believes that a new epistemology is needed. He uses a metaphor to compare traditional research to high ground where manageable problems lend themselves to solutions through the use of research-based theory and techniques valued within academic institutions. Classroom research and scholarship about learning, however, are messy, more like a swamp. Schon notes that the techniques needed for conducting classroom and learning research do not fit the usual models.

## Learning Made Central

At the same time that colleges and universities are attempting to embrace the Boyer model for scholarship in teaching, Terry O’Banion and a group of colleagues

have identified the need to put learning first in community colleges. He provides six principles to serve as guides for institutions attempting to transform themselves into what he terms “learning colleges.”

Two widely read 1997 publications by O’Banion, a monograph entitled *Creating More Learning-Centered Community Colleges* and the book *A Learning College for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* offer guidelines for becoming a learning college and cite examples of some attempts. As he lays out his descriptions of the learning college, he poses two key questions that should be asked whenever decisions are made within such a college: First, does this decision improve learning? and second, how do we know? It is the second question that requires an attitude of reflection and assessment.

O’Banion expands upon a paradigm shift described by Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995) in the article “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education.” They offered a shift from the instructional paradigm, which places teaching at the center, to a learning paradigm which regards learning and the learner as central. They contrast these paradigms as they relate to mission and purpose, criteria for success, teaching/learning structures, learning theory, productivity/funding, and the nature of roles of faculty.

- Barr and Tagg advocate the following in teaching/learning structures: holistic considerations precede parts; environments need to be ready when the student is; whatever learning experience works is what should be used; cross-discipline/department collaboration is commonplace; learning results are specified; assessments occur pre/during/post learning; external evaluations of learning are welcome; assessment is made public; and a degree equals demonstrated knowledge and skills.
- When considering learning theory, they state the following conclusions: knowledge exists in each person’s mind and is shaped by individual experience; knowledge is

created, constructed and “gotten;” learning is a nesting and creating of frameworks; learning skills, like riding a bicycle, require practice and are not forgotten once mastered; learning is student centered and student controlled; an “active” learner is required but not a “live” teacher; learning environments are cooperative, collaborative, and supportive; and talent and ability are abundant.

- Regarding the nature of faculty roles, they have the following vision: faculty are primarily designers of learning methods and environments; faculty and students work in teams with each other and other staff; teachers develop every student’s competencies and talents; all staff are educators who produce student learning and success; it is challenging and complex to empower learners.

The League for Innovation in Community Colleges subsequently sponsored the Vanguard Project initiated by O’Banion. This three-year collaborative project involved twelve colleges in the United States and Canada piloting initiatives and openly sharing their results in an attempt to transform their colleges into learning colleges. The Vanguard Project focused on five areas of work: organizational culture, staff recruitment and development, technology, learning outcomes, and underprepared students.

### **Developmental Education Takes on Status**

Developmental education, long viewed as the stepchild of community colleges, is rising in stature as student success and the learning colleges have enjoyed great attention. Developmental education is defined as courses or services provided for the purpose of helping underprepared college students attain their academic goals. The term “underprepared” student refers to any student who needs to develop his or her cognitive or affective abilities in order to succeed in a postsecondary educational experience. Where once there was a long-standing controversy whether to include remediation in higher education, now that doors have opened wider to include people previously not included in higher education, more people better understand the value of developmental education. As growing numbers of students arrive at college underprepared for success in college level work, educators are more open to mandating assessment, advising, and placement in developmental courses

Robert McCabe (2000) has assumed the personal mission of educating legislators, public policy makers, and educators alike to the need for all to act in concert in addressing the needs of underprepared students in this country. His book, *No One to Waste*, offers a wake-up call. He cites the escalating need for developmental education since

academic proficiency is deteriorating among high school graduates and population growth is occurring mainly among groups previously not well represented in higher education.

Like McCabe, Hunter Boylan (2000) provides a plethora of research and examples of best practice in his book, *What Works: Research-Based Practices in Developmental Education*. This book offers a blueprint for designing new departments or transforming those already in existence. It offers readily understandable information for educators who do not specialize in developmental education.

Dr. McCabe recognizes the need for collaboration among various levels in education and is leading a new project through the League for Innovation in the Community College that does just that. In The Bridge Partnership, community colleges and high schools work together to increase the number of students who aspire to go on to college, to accelerate their preparation, and to smooth the transition to college entry and success. Sixty-five community colleges and more than ninety high schools in twenty states are participating.

### **Moving to Cultures of Reflection, Assessment and Accountability**

Though recommended outside education, a call for greater use of reflection and assessment to improve accountability was also heard within education. In a 1986 speech entitled, *Taking Teaching Seriously*, K. Patricia Cross stated, “I can think of no action that would do quite as much for the improvement of teaching and learning as to let a thousand classroom laboratories bloom across the nation. Their purpose would be to discover more effective teaching methods for the classroom researchers themselves, and to establish a foundation of knowledge about college teaching that maximizes learning.” These laboratories would be steeped in assessment and classroom research (O’Banion, 1997).

Two years later she and T.A. Angelo wrote the book *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty* that offered more than fifty techniques for assessment that faculty could apply immediately. Angelo and Cross identified a fundamental premise “that classroom teachers need a continuing flow of accurate information about what students are learning and how they are responding to the teacher’s efforts to teach them. Classroom assessment is practiced through the use of Classroom assessment techniques (CATs) that can be used by any teacher of any discipline to assess students’ learning during the semester while there is still time to make change.” This book became the bible of thousands of teachers and staff development leaders.

In a paper published in 1997, *Developing Professional Fitness Through Classroom Assessment and Classroom Research*, Cross compares professional fitness for faculty to the physical fitness craze throughout society. She identifies five conditions for the professional development of community college faculty as scholarly teachers, able to apply their knowledge of learning to the improvement of their teaching.

1. Goals must be clear.
2. Practical suggestions must exist for attaining goals.
3. People must be motivated and willing to get, and to stay, actively involved.
4. Prompts and useful feedback must be available.
5. Appropriate rewards must be forthcoming.

Like Patricia Cross, Dan Apple has placed significant emphasis on the role of assessment in developing the philosophy and practices of Process Education. The fact that a whole section of the *Guidebook* is dedicated to assessment is testimony to the importance that process educators place on assessment. A key distinction made by PE practitioners is that assessment and evaluation are distinctly different from one another and those differences need to be understood (*Distinctions between Assessment and Evaluation*). There is also the belief that all learners need to become strong self-assessors if they are to foster their own growth and become self-growers (*Becoming a Self-Grower*).

### Synergy Found Among the Four Movements

Though these movements appear to be separate, they have a great deal in common and are part of the massive transformation process. All of them focus on improving learning, and all of them identify assessment as critical throughout the process of learning, both to determine what has been learned and to document that learning has occurred. (*Within the text below key words are bolded in order to reinforce the commonality of the themes throughout these movements.*)

For example, the Boyer Commission's report on the scholarship of teaching is often identified as the source of the emerging emphasis on **reflection, assessment, and good measurement** in research. When considering the impact of the new scholarship model for colleges and universities, Schon states, "The epistemology appropriate to the new scholarship must make room for the **practitioner's reflection** in and on action. It must account for and legitimize not only the use of knowledge produced in the academy, but the practitioner's **generation**

**of actionable knowledge** in the form of models or prototypes that can be carried over, by **reflective transfer**, to new practice situations. The new scholarship calls for an epistemology of **reflective practice** which includes what Kurt Lewin describes as action research."

Observations about the Vanguard Project by Kay McClenney (2002), its evaluator, fit very closely with both the scholarship of teaching and the assessment movement.

- "People are foreseeing the need to consider significant changes in the roles of faculty and other professionals." McClenney identified the shift from deliverer of knowledge to **facilitator of learning** and the unbundling of instruction and **assessment of learning** as critical. All role changes need to be dictated by evidence of what works for student learning.
- "The most challenging task is also the most essential task: defining, **assessing and documenting student learning** outcomes." Though Vanguard schools evidenced significant progress in defining what was to be learned, assessing and documenting the outcomes for students continues to require much work.
- "Companion to the assessment challenge is the work of **developing a culture of evidence**. Building such a culture—including the demand for data **about student learning**, the capacity to produce and analyze that data, and the skills and commitment to *use* data for continuous improvement—represents a significant departure from community college traditions of justification by anecdote."

Accrediting agencies are serving as catalysts throughout higher education for fostering **learning, assessing effectiveness**, and increasing **accountability**. The National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPB) representing the nine regional accreditation associations and seven higher education associations has placed new emphasis on **learning** as part of the accreditation process. No longer is it enough for institutions of higher learning to simply evaluate resources, processes, governance, institutional objectives, and institutional missions. "To elevate the importance of **student learning**...core standards should emphasize **student learning**" (e.g., O'Banion, 1997).

The National Association of Developmental Education defines developmental education as helping "underprepared students prepare, prepared students advance, and advanced students excel." Inherent in this motto is a commitment to careful **assessment** of entry-level needs and **assessment of learning** along the way.

## Concluding Thoughts

Parker Palmer (1992) prods educators to consider a movement approach to educational reform. He distinguishes a movement approach from an organizational approach which uses bureaucracies to define the limits of social reality within which change must happen. A movement approach to change begins with individuals and has four stages:

1. Isolated individuals decide to stop leading “divided lives.”
2. These people discover each other and form groups for mutual support.
3. Empowered by community, they learn to translate “private problems” into public issues.
4. Alternative rewards emerge to sustain the movement’s vision, which may force the conventional reward system to change.

The four areas of change articulated in this module enjoy varying degrees of success. This module has not offered an inclusive list of changes in higher education, but it does discuss some of the most significant. The obstacles to change, however, are many. Terry O’Banion may have best articulated them when he identified education as “time bound, place bound, role bound and bureaucracy bound.” The *Faculty Guidebook* is testimony to educators from a wide variety of institutions who wish to stop leading “divided lives.” In contributing to the research and practice that form the heart of this Guidebook, they make their contribution to the transformation of higher education.

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