

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

KEY NOTES

What might emerge if the fortunate institutions that are relatively impervious to critique were to think deeply and systematically over a number of years about student learning and student success?

Might it be possible to reframe the problem of learning outcomes in a less threatening way that might galvanize new sources of energy and support within the faculty? Such an approach begins from the premise that content matters, and that critical thinking, the love of ideas, and the power of argument are the ultimate goals.

Many faculty—especially some of the newer ones—would be drawn to an intellectually rich collaboration focused on learning about learning.

The goal of this collaborative effort would be to advance, test, refine, and apply the new and evolving theories of learning based on new understandings of the workings of the human mind, using the latest technologies.

The pressures on colleges and universities today are daunting. Well before the financial crisis struck, issues surrounding access, affordability, endowment spending rates, and higher education's tax-exempt status were receiving Congressional scrutiny and public attention. Institutional leaders were concerned about the Spellings Commission's call to increase accountability and assessment of learning outcomes, possibly via methods imposed by the federal government. Diana Chapman Walsh, president emerita of Wellesley College, notes this backdrop and the fallout from the ongoing financial crisis. She proposes leveraging some of these serious outside pressures to explore new opportunities for institutions, faculty and students to create more vibrant intellectual communities focused on learning. Walsh emphasizes the need for collective action, through which higher education leaders can turn scarcity into abundance by significantly improving student learning. Excerpts of her remarks are reprinted here.

THE PRESENT PERIOD of high ferment in higher education is no time to be a Pollyanna. The need to open access to college, to be more transparent and accountable, and to navigate difficult economic currents is undeniably urgent. I do wonder, though, whether we could bring ourselves to see this as a moment not only of unprecedented challenge but also of uncommon promise. Can we look for abundance at a time of scarcity? This is the question I want to explore.

My focus is specifically on student learning, leaving aside for now the related but wider questions of accountability, costs, access, efficiency and effectiveness. And I'm thinking about learning in and beyond the classroom, learning in its

broadest sense: all that we want our students to master—values, character, efficacy, and ethics, side-by-side with learning how to think, write, speak and act, and to continue to learn through a lifetime. And it's in this more expansive view of student learning that we may find some possibilities for a hopeful turn.

It is, after all, the expansiveness of our ambitions for our students that poses the greatest challenge to assembling convincing evidence about where and how our efforts are paying off (or not). How do we even begin to think about measuring or controlling for the fits and starts, the twists and turns, the failures and second tries, the chemistry of personal relationships, the serendipitous connections, and all that sum to a successful college career, a successful intellectual journey, and successful lives rendered meaningful by curiosity and a drive to learn?

Derek Bok, in his book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, has narrowed the target by specifying a manageable list of desired outcomes—a helpful, indeed a necessary, step. Richard Light and others have been demonstrating the value of pragmatic, on-the-ground research on specific innovations that are carefully defined and tested.

But I want to return to the conversation Mike McPherson and Morty Schapiro have been catalyzing, purposefully and productively in successive sessions of the Ford Policy Forum. In 2007, the forum focused on the Spellings Commission in a discussion McPherson and Schapiro characterized as “an uncomfortable interchange” with the commission chair, Charles Miller. David Brenneman, who participated in that forum, spoke of a “troubling disconnect” between policymakers



and the higher education community and expressed concern that "...the academy in general has not embraced efforts to define and measure student learning." He argued that the institutions best positioned to invest resources in tracking student outcomes are those for whom the critique (and not only that from the Spellings Commission) resonates least. Because these schools are so successful, Brenehan said, they can ignore the outside critics as essentially irrelevant to them. "It hardly seems worth bothering to respond," he said, "except out of a sense of responsibility for the larger higher education enterprise."

I want to suggest a middle-range answer to the question of "Why bother?"—even if institutions don't feel directly stung by the critique; an answer that need not hinge on institutional altruism or good citizenship alone, although surely those are important considerations.

Collective action would be essential to making this happen. In times of scarcity, it is natural to want to draw inward, but collaboration offers one of the few possibilities for transforming scarcity into abundance.

What might it look like if the fortunate institutions that are relatively impervious to critique were to lead the way in taking serious steps to ensure that their ostensibly good teaching is actually maximizing the learning and success of all their students? What might emerge if they were to think deeply and systematically over a number of years about student learning and student success?

To be sure, many of these successful colleges and universities already are investing in teaching and learning centers, many are making good-faith efforts to assess the quality of courses, curricula, and new initiatives, strengthening their institutional research capabilities and collecting their own data, as well as marshaling better comparative data through consortia. More work on assessment is being supported now by a number of major foundations and national organizations, and a number of scholars are making important advances in measurement strategies and methodologies. Regional accrediting bodies are pushing for evidence of student learning. The focus on outcomes is a major secular trend. It's accelerating, and will continue to do so. However the political tides may shift or the economy fare. The existing and expanding apparatus is a strong foundation on which to build. But it is not yet the full system it would take to make sure that learning happens for every student.

A New Learning Initiative

The contours of an expanded learning initiative are reasonably easy to describe; implementation is the bigger challenge. The key elements would include, at the institutional level, the creation of highly intentional learning (as opposed to teaching) cultures, with explicit cycles of improvement throughout the organization, starting with disciplines and departments, and moving up from there. Well-analyzed data on results would be widely discussed by everyone—faculty, students, staff and trustees—with an eye, always, toward how to improve. Over time, and without much fanfare, the new system would influence hiring decisions, criteria for promotion, and other rewards. Resources would be shifted gradually to endeavors that were demonstrably advancing student learning. The assessment and decision-making would be interdisciplinary, of necessity, collaborative, and faculty-driven; it would become an integral part of an excellent and ambitious learning and teaching community. This new system would *not* be available for use by the state or federal governments as a punitive club to force accountability, or to other stakeholder groups.

One can foresee many impediments to putting such a regime in place. But the top liberal arts colleges should be particularly well positioned to create a robust, evidence-based culture of learning, given their emphasis on teaching, their relatively small size and ample resources, the quality and commitment of their faculties and students, and the strengths of their leaders and governing boards. Even so, it is no simple task to mobilize these decentralized institutions in pursuit of a unified vision of an innovation that makes demands on the whole faculty.

New Technologies and Techniques

But would it be possible to reframe the problem of learning outcomes in a way that might galvanize new sources of energy and support within the faculty? Not by invoking words from a threatening and alien world: fighting words like accountability, productivity, return on investment, cost-benefit analysis, and value-added metrics. Could we recast the argument and, in effect, say to the faculty: "Let's not allow ourselves to be deflected from what we do best by calls for accountability. It's not that we should ignore those calls, but dealing with outside pressures is the job of the administration. Instead, we want the faculty to spend your time where you have the most at stake and where you are the experts. We want you to learn all you can about who our students are now, about how they learn now, about what they need to know now if they are to be successful in a world that is changing faster than we can even imagine, much less anticipate."

We know that rapid advances in information technology and the brain sciences are opening entirely new ways of

thinking about student learning: there have been absolutely stunning advances in the neurosciences, and a growing body of work on their implications for learning and teaching. We see the children of the digital age arriving on our campuses and wonder if we're ready for them.

We see advances in information technology creating new opportunities not only for new kinds of teaching and learning but also for harnessing the wisdom of groups to foster new kinds of collaborations, be they sophisticated virtual organizations for scientific work, or encounters in the more homespun world of blogs, wikis and chat rooms whose users, with a playful bent, are creating new public squares, inventing as they go.

And, quite separately from technology, we see experiments with new kinds of dialogue, new techniques for building trust, and for creating conditions that facilitate powerful learning across differences. Some of these might lend themselves to catalyzing deeper conversations about student learning.

Certainly there are possibilities along these new frontiers that some faculty find intriguing, when approached in the right way, with appropriate incentives and rewards. Such an approach begins from the premise that content matters, that technology and technique are only means to an end, and that critical thinking, the love of ideas, and the power of argument are the ultimate goals.

Grounds for Optimism

I take encouragement that faculty can lead a new learning initiative in part from experiences I had while at Wellesley. As one example, I watched a group of faculty from several liberal arts colleges take up together the issue of how to close the academic achievement gap, an issue initially brought to the fore by Bill Bowen and Derek Bok in *The Shape of the River*, and an issue about which the faculty care deeply. The racial achievement gap was an institutional failure that many faculty members feel a keen personal responsibility to address.

These pioneers found allies in their own institutions, formed a collaborative learning group, and secured some modest funding to begin a process that they invented as they went along. They assembled data, consulted experts, and found local champions in their own institutions. They exposed their work to peer review. They sought out promising strategies in other institutions, and listened to their students' stories of special challenges they were facing. They encouraged and supported student leaders to take on the problem. The faculty pooled their knowledge, shared data, and assembled resources. They designed meetings that encouraged honest conversation on a sensitive topic and approached it with open minds.

The one element that failed to come together fully in this effort while I was tracking it was systematic research—testing

pilot initiatives and developing intervention studies. As a consequence, the gold standard was never entirely clear. To be effective, the learning initiative I have in mind would need to build this in from the start. And it would have to be rooted in a deep belief that students could be better served, indeed have a right to be better served, by institutions that recruit them in the name of diversity.

But the sincere and groundbreaking work these faculty leaders have been doing has been rooted in the insight of a poet named Wendell Berry:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

I am convinced that many faculty—especially some of the newer ones—would be drawn to an intellectually rich collaboration focused on learning about learning, one that originates in Berry's baffled mind that knows it lacks answers. In my final year at Wellesley, I consulted with dozens of faculty members during lunches and dinners we convened to discuss the draft report from a planning group that had met through the previous year, the 2015 Commission. The report covered many questions, but the topic faculty—especially junior faculty—most often wanted to pursue was the idea that they might mount a collective effort, with support from the administration, to learn more about how their students learn. In the end, the 2015 Commission's first recommendation was that student learning should be the college's top priority, a recommendation that might sound benign, or even banal, until you start tracing its implications.

Experiences with faculty at other colleges give me further reason for optimism. At Amherst College, for example, on whose board I've sat for the last decade, I watched the entire faculty, led by the president, invest an extraordinary amount of time and intellectual firepower in an extended and deep dive into thorny questions of how well they are meeting their students' learning needs, and how they could do better. And I've had a front row seat as Wellesley's neighbor, Olin College of Engineering, emerged from nowhere, literally, and organized itself around the theme of student learning for the twenty-first century. I know there are many other positive examples.

Conclusion

Clearly we are not going to eliminate competition between institutions of higher learning—even if we wanted to, and we probably don't. Competition is a healthy dynamic in many ways. But one of the interesting ideas this meeting has

underscored is that we could change the terms of the competition. We could spend less money on amenities that simply drive up costs and more on investments that enhance student learning. Such an effort would start at home, and would start small. Faculty would build up their knowledge about student learning, from their own classrooms, their own disciplines, their departments and divisions. They would consult their students and pool insights and resources with like-minded colleagues at other institutions that value teaching. They would develop collaborative and robust research to find out what works, as the developers of the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and others have been doing.

Over time, they could deploy new learning technologies and create new multidisciplinary structures. The process could become a conduit for translation of some of the best thinking across worlds that have largely been separated: cross-fertilization among the worlds of excellent and conscientious teaching, cognitive and learning sciences, and cyber learning.

Collective action would be essential to making this happen. In times of scarcity, it is natural to want to draw inward, but collaboration offers one of few possibilities for transforming scarcity into abundance. Collective action could make a real difference in improving student learning—not only

in colleges and universities but, eventually, in high schools as well. The goal of this collaborative effort would be to advance, test, refine, and apply the new and evolving theories of learning based on new understandings of the workings of the human mind, using the latest technologies. In time, that might mean radically rethinking and redesigning classrooms from pre-kindergarten on up. It would not be quick or easy, and there would be casualties, but this new learning initiative would be generative and transformative. And the beneficiaries would be the students.



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