TOWARD LEARNING FROM ENGAGEMENT

BY PAUL A. ELSNER

The work of John Gardner and Mary Stuart Hunter at the University of South Carolina in framing the challenges of the First Year Experience for the college bound seems ever more important—actually bull's eye accurate as a social dilemma within higher education.

The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina has as its purpose the collection and dissemination of information about the first college year and other significant student transitions. Chartered in 1986, the center's primary goal is to assist educators in enhancing the learning, success, satisfaction, retention, and graduation of college students in transition. To that end, the center organizes and hosts a series of national and international conferences (dating to 1982), seminars, workshops, summer institutes and teleconferences; engages in research; and publishes a scholarly journal, newsletter, monograph series, audio visual resources, and other publications. Mary Stuart Hunter serves as the center's director.

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Gardner and Hunter often cite the disappearance of 40 percent of college freshman. This seems consistent with common knowledge around the higher education community that less than half complete the bachelor's degree in four years.

The Critical First Year

I had the opportunity to weigh-in on these dropout trends as a plenary speaker at Gardner and Hunter's West Coast conference on the First Year Experience. Preparing for this plenary session caused me to collate my thoughts about what obstacles and opportunities lay within successful first year experiences for students. Referred to as FYE, the thought of what drives dropout, retention, engagement, success or destruction of students took me this way and that way—a pretty daunting subject. Obviously, more complex for me who had not thought, practiced or applied analysis in this field. What could I say to a huge room of on-the-line professionals, most of whom have dedicated their lives to learner support, admissions work and student service involvement?

In reading the background papers that were sent to me, my thoughts meandered while searching for a theme topic. I had once attended a Harvard summer institute for college presidents that their business school partially sponsored. One professor, Marty Marshall, a distinguished marketing expert, led us through a case study of L.L. Bean, one of America's oldest and quite successful mail order retailers.

It seems that L.L. Bean got a jump-start in business by providing outdoors customers with a secure, highly durable outer shoe that hunters especially liked. This particular outer shoe was preferred over all other brands and enjoyed a particularly large buyer following.

Marshall would regale the class with the admonition that every successful marketing or business opportunity is always challenged by the simple question: "What is the problem?" He would shout this question at our class over and over while we frantically tried to decode the business success of L.L. Bean by identifying the problem.

Finally one student shot up a hand and shouted back to professor Marshall, "Wet feet." Marshall smiled. Then another student shouted, "Wet, cold feet!" I was not even close to answering the question until another student hit the nail on the head for professor Marshall. So, this lesson calls me to ask: "What is the problem?"

Engaging Versus Processing Students

I ended up underscoring the overarching theme that our students, especially first year students, are not engaged learners. As Stuart Hunter said in commenting on the address, "I am hearing that we process students, but we seldom engage them."

There are many candidates for the answer to what the problem might be. But lack of engagement seems to move up high on my list.

To me, it would go something like this: American higher education seems to foster and sustain a serious disconnect between its substantial momentums and its enviable place in the world with the very students it purports to serve. Many of us think that higher education has an obedient, even obsessed, student clientele that has little passionate attachment to its tasks. For the graduate student in a competitive research-I university, it might mean:

> I don't wholly believe in all of this, and I don't even question the integrity of what I am required to do, but I will stick it out, because that is the game they play here, and the stakes are too high for me to stand out by questioning too much. I just hope I get out of here intact personally—whatever that means—because I sure as heck am all but ruined financially and my self-concept isn't very high either! Why my misery? Why my pain? Could there be something else?

A community college student holding two jobs, attending school at night, piecing together a quality moment with spouse and children, doesn't know how to find an inner balance, much less a spiritual, kindred outlet. Stress, financial breakdowns, family disconnect all scream at him. He is the Edvard Munch character ready to break on the bridge. I could also characterize students in state colleges or expensive private independent universities, but I have explained enough.

When actress Helen Hunt portrays the mother of a seriously ill child in the film "As Good As It Gets," she is in absolute disarray because she cannot navigate the complex procedures of an HMO medical plan. We are reminded that the medical profession,

once a respected, cherished institution has become, in many instances, a despised one. Could higher education be following that same path?

While students can love their learning, find their passion in literature, the arts, and their studies, how many savor or self-reflect on what they are coming to know when they must deconstruct, jargonize, and analyze their subjects to the point of lifelessness and all absence of personal experience with their work?

A while back at Wellesley College, Parker Palmer addressed a national gathering of over 800 people who had come to participate in a conference billed as "Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality of Higher Education." Parker's words seem appropriate here:

> The dominant pedagogy in higher education today is objectivity and analysis. The problem with this pedagogy is that it is untruthful to the way that we come to learn. We have come to know this through our personal association with the subject. Unfortunately, we are guided away from the intuitive, subjective ways of knowing because such behavior may spill over on the subject to be learned, thus, fouling or contaminating it. (Palmer, 1998)

While our tenured administrators and faculty are impressive in the scale of their enterprises and commerce, many students feel less and less connected to us.

Turning the market forces in our favor may be more dazzling. Higher education seeks to transform itself to these new market forces, but with each ratchet-up of this transformation, more student anomie or obedient inertia builds to massive disconnect. The energy may be impressive, but often there is no moral compass present, and many fewer value checks about what being market-oriented is for. Yet as educators, we must assist our students in navigating a fast-changing new economy, where its rules are being written as we speak. Our students face the daunting responsibility of fitting their education into ever-transformative workplaces and career settings.

Well, this may sound pretty melodramatic, but when Robert Ballah wrote *Habits of the Heart*, he gave us a portrayal of a core study of adults who could not find their galvanizing purpose in life, even after successful professional careers. Our students could look like Ballah's core student case studies in extremis, if we were to revisit them in 20 years. This does not have to be so.

So we are talking about the absence of engagement. For first year college students, merely processing them does not keep them committed to college. If 40 percent of community college students disappear as freshmen, we must examine the reasons for dropout, yet be realistic about other pressures as well as legitimate reasons for exiting and perhaps re-entering education at many life points.

At the Sedona Conferences, which address technology issues, particularly the role of media, one of the consistent subscripts is the general observation that there are about 800 million teenagers in the world who have been born into and lived with the highest audio and video standard the world has ever known. Yet most of the young are not engaged learners in our traditional schools. MTV, rap, hip hop, rock, and the artists and mega concert stars that deliver this media resonate to the teens' powerful themes of love, heroism, romance, angst and conflict. These are youths' stories, and they are the embodiment of idealized love and connection. But often, the themes are the distractions of their parents brought on by the pressures of less meaningful preoccupations, including their pressured and stressful careers.

It seems that community colleges in particular must assist the learner in navigating a life path as well as a career path in a tumultuous and a not easily predictable economy. We generally accept that a student will enter and exit education several times in life.

But even as modern learners attend college, they are intermittently working, changing jobs, raising families, and managing unbelievable pressures of community, quickly switching roles from worker to learner and ever shifting parent responsibilities.

The thesis that emerges here is that not only is our modern student likely a lifelong learner, but as a student, must face the enigmas of learning and living as well.

Shifting the Learner Paradigm

The Maricopa Community Colleges set forth important distinctions between traditional learning models and "new" or desired learning models. These foundational discussions resulted from earlier efforts of the Pew Charitable Trust's efforts to help several U. S. colleges and universities to restructure and transform the learning and teaching process. Maricopa concentrated on seeking and achieving a new learning paradigm. Maricopa faculty conceived the following contrasts. Such contrasts show the difference between engagement of learners versus processing of learners.

> The traditional learning paradigm is most concerned with individual courses, the content of the courses and individual grades. Quantity, not quality, is important. For example, the number of students in class, the number of hours faculty teach, the number of books in the library, are the important measures of learning. Learning involves memorizing the content of courses with a great amount of energy, focused on getting good grades, not learning. Learning involves the teacher's giving knowledge or information to the passive, receiving student. Learning is competitive. The bell curve is required for grades. Who can get the best grade? and what will be on the exam? are some of the most frequently asked student questions. The assessment method is currently the traditional course-content testing system conducted at specific times during the year (e.g., midterms and finals) which is not an accurate measure of competencies, strengths or skills. It is often merely a measure of hours or days in the classroom.
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> In the desired learning paradigm, learning is both a product and a process. Learning occurs throughout the institution, not just in classrooms. Learning comes not just from textbooks or lectures. The curriculum can be flexible, relevant and responsive to students. Experimentation is rewarded. Data is collected on the needs of students on a regular basis. All students can learn. Each learner's needs are met. Students and teachers learn from each other and from everyone within the institution and the larger community. Learning is connected from class to class and experience to experience. The larger community is directly involved in the learning process. Everyone is learning how to learn and facilititating learning. Faculty, staff and the larger community are models of lifelong learning. The institution is a model learning organization. The results of learning are measurable and achievement-focused. Student performance is outcome-based. The student's performance evaluation leads to continuous improvement. There are appropriate, authentic, flexible patterns of evidence for evaluating student learning. The purpose of measurement is not to find defects; it is to encourage improvement. (Maricopa, 1995)

Learners Learn. Learners Lead

Traditional teachers are seen to be more controlling, more preoccupied with units of content and information, more concerned that specific predetermined content be covered.

The desired learning format is more flexible. It takes in the student's developmental needs. Moreover, it allows for reflection, more teacher-student interaction. Faculty become more comfortable with learning facilitation as well as their content expert role which, if properly timed and orchestrated, allows for deepening of knowledge for learners.

Students and faculty share in learning. They both confront problems about role, coping with life's enigmas as part of the learning process. The Pew dialogs bring out the contrasts in these learning processes:

> The *traditional learning paradigm* is a production-line model that treats all students as if they were the same. It is a model that is faculty-centered in the classroom. It is often more responsive to the needs of faculty and administrators rather than students. The student

must fit into the institution created and maintained for the convenience of faculty and administrators that "we know better" what students need. It is a homogeneous atmosphere with little diversity. Faculty, administrators and students function as independent actors. Each actor is a single individual operating in a singular environment without regard for the larger environment of family, work or different learning styles.

The *desired learning paradigm* is characterized by a responsibility shared by the student and the institution through its faculty and staff and the larger community. That responsibility is lifelong learning. Collaboration occurs in and out of the classroom and competition is reduced. Students, faculty, staff and the larger community are partners in the teaching and learning processes. There are incentives and rewards for experimenting with teaching and learning processes. Diversity is considered strength. The institution reflects the reality of the world's cultures and mirrors society in its increasingly complex nature. Everyone is truly open to sharing with each other, learning from each other, and understanding each other. (Maricopa, 1995)

The Enigmatic Aspects of Learning

Community colleges have moved into a favored, much respected position among many higher education and postsecondary providers. The new market economies and the fast-breaking nature of society's demands, especially in workforce training, require an agility and responsiveness that community college are judged to possess.

We are valued for our roll-up-our-sleeves pragmatism and activism. But this type of learning alone does not equip our learners for the full challenges that they often must face.

The earlier descriptions of an Edvard Munch portrait of the man on the bridge could be the modern person stressed this way and pulled that way. The metaphoric "person on the bridge" may need undergirdings for life and learning.

While it is generally understood and accepted that many external forces shape our courses and programs, truly committed learning colleges must take greater responsibility for our learners' value formation. Life's daunting challenges often supercede here. It is not a learner's exquisite management technique or a learner's mastery of

technical skills that endear him or her to fellow workers or superiors. Increasingly, the soft skills learned give workers the advantage in the workplace, and many employees lose out without them.

We should be concerned how a nurse or health worker forms their ethical constructs as well as how they will do on state licensure examinations. Young people, in particular, must find in their learning experience the ability to confront the enigmas of life as well as the vocations and professions for which they train.

When a student reads Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, can the demise of the play's main character, Willie Loman, be explained by?

1. Death of his sales route?
2. Death of self-definition?
3. Death of connection?
4. Death of spirit?

Our learning should not pass over the central questions of living and surviving in a competitive, often unforgiving, world. Larger more expansive learning theories should be based on some of the verities and lessons history, literature, philosophy may tell us. That may take us to the follies and fallacies of leadership in *King Lear*, or the differences between the obsession and passion in *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab. But all are life dilemmas and enigmas laid before us that learners can consider, weigh, ponder, even debate. Such challenges for our learners constitute true engagement. Without it, we have only processed our learners. The former engagement doesn't guarantee a better world. But merely processing students may be leading us to a woeful one.

The types of learning communities we must construct should develop the large potentials of our students. This larger vision can include service learning, civic participation and volunteer experiences. Learners should be able to take volunteering at a crisis nursery center as segue to larger societal questions. Why are children neglected, abandoned, even abused? What is children's policy in my state? Who determines children's policy? What interventions might work to alleviate the problem of children in crisis?

What was Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, trying to tell us about witch hunting? How did Miller relate the incendiary word "witch" to the McCarthy Un-American Activities Hearings in the Congress? How does our legal and prosecutorial system work in times of war as compared to times of peace? Such central questions draw our learners toward the enigmatic issues of a powerful democratic republic such as ours.

The type of learning community we can envision presupposes such engagement. The late John W. Gardner, founder of Common Cause and the Miriam and Peter Haas Centennial Professor of Public Service, made a statement for the Leadership Studies Program of the Independent Sector that seems especially relevant:

> Without the continuity of the shared values that community provides, freedom cannot survive. Freedom is not a natural condition. Habeas corpus, trial by jury, a free press and all the other practices that ensure our freedom are social constructions … A community has the power to motivate its members to exceptional performance. It can set standards of expectations for the individual and provide the climate in which great things happen. It can pull extraordinary performance out of its members. The achievements of Greece in the 5th century B.C. were not the performances of isolated persons but of individuals acting in a golden moment of shared excellence. The community can tap levels of emotion and motivation that often remain dormant. (Gardner, 1991)

Our colleges can, indeed must, move toward learning from engagement. New 21st century eras that we must confront require it.

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