

Chapter 9

Designing Learning Environments That Integrate With Students' Academic Learning in a Community College Setting

Anne M. Hornak

Central Michigan University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on how student learning needs to be intentionally designed to consider both what happens in and out of the classroom. The chapter focuses on student learning within a community college context, where co-curricular engagement looks much different than at a four-year school, specifically on how community colleges engage in design thinking principles related to curricular and co-curricular learning around equity and inclusion issues. Additionally, it is important to note that while some community colleges have residential opportunities for students, approximately 28% in the U.S., most are considered commuter campuses. Creating co-curricular opportunities on a commuter campus can be more challenging, however not impossible, and often adds value to the community college experience.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges hold a unique position in the landscape of higher education. At the core of their identity is the commitment to open access admissions, and they are designed to increase the opportunity for a diverse student body (Cohen, et al., 2014). Open admission policies are designed to remove academic, financial, and geographic barriers to entry (Ma & Baum, 2016). Focusing on equity and inclusion at community colleges is important because of the diverse student body in attendance and the importance of creating seamless ways to engage with complex and challenging social conditions in which students are encountering in their lives. Additionally, change does not happen unless everyone at the institution

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is involved. Creating opportunities to engage across differences is not specifically focused within the classroom, nor is it exclusively the responsibility of student affairs educators. The work needs to be designed and implemented across all of the academic and student affairs divisions.

BACKGROUND

This chapter is of great importance as we engage in the difficult conversations addressing racism, classism, structural marginalization, systemic oppression as a result of COVID 19. Framing the chapter around design thinking ideals and within the community college context will offer sustainable ideas for engaging in some of society's most ill-structured problems (King & Kitchener, 2004) with no easy solutions. The chapter will provide examples of how the design thinking process can be used for engaging in equity and inclusion work and how they can be put into practice. This chapter aims not to tell community colleges how they should implement the design thinking process, as each school's uniqueness should be honored. I will share ideas of how the ideation phase may work.

Design thinking is focused on bringing about change through innovative, active, and versatile approaches (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Community colleges have often been more flexible and agile in responding to their learners' changing educational and community needs. This positioning creates favorable conditions to experiment with design thinking principles and approaches at community colleges. Finally, the chapter will offer educators practical examples and ideas for addressing one of the most vexing problems facing educators today, creating conditions for learning, both in the classroom and out, that are ethical, inclusive, and just for all.

It is essential to talk about who is responsible for doing this work and creating inclusive curricular and co-curricular spaces. This work belongs to everyone who is affiliated with the college. The most critical element in doing this work is building capacity for everyone to engage. This means everyone engaging in identifying challenges, gathering information, working on naming potential solutions, prototyping them, and testing (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). How marginalization and oppression impact students happen within communities, but more importantly, is deeply personal, which is critical to recognizing why design thinking is an effective approach for problem-solving. Additionally, design thinking embodies the "core elements and skills of play, empathy, reflection, creation, and experimentation to collaborate, create, and build upon findings. In design thinking, failure is not a threat, but an avenue to further learning" (Black, et al., 2019, p. 63).

Taking these core elements and skills into account, I will explore ideas that community colleges can adopt to engage in design thinking principles while addressing equity and inclusion issues. The biggest challenge that I will explore is how to do this work at a community college. Design thinking historically has worked because small groups of individuals work on a complex problem and have the resources to experiment with multiple solutions. Higher education, namely community colleges, rarely have the luxury of limitless resources as many are cash-strapped. Additionally, community colleges operate on the tenets of shared governance. Multiple constituencies offer input and are part of teams that explore problems and generate solutions based on their college role, which means change can be slow and get bogged down easily in bureaucratic processes. Design thinking works because it is most effective when it begins with grassroots efforts. The ideas that I will explore in this chapter will be based on grassroots change, starting at the department or unit level and expanding.

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