

Chapter 25

The Growth of Learning Colleges Including a Case Study from 2008 Revisited in 2015

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ABSTRACT

In 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education identified “widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system” (Fiske, 2008). Thirty years later, in 2011, Harvard School of Education’s Pathways to Prosperity Project states “In an era in which education has never been more important to economic success, the U.S. has fallen behind many other nations in educational attainment and achievement.” Learning-centered learning is not a new concept, with roots dating back to the progressive movement of early 1900’s, gaining prominence in post-modern education with Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. A major focus of applied learning theory in post-modern education is preparing learners for a profession, a basis for achieving economic independence. This chapter identifies higher education institutions in the United States, Australia, and Great Britain highlighting methodologies, best practices, challenges. Two community college case studies are reviewed, identifying successes and opportunities of current learning practices.

INTRODUCTION

To what extent are higher education administrations and educators preparing students to lead successful lives as adults? Upon graduation, are students prepared for economically sustainable careers? Learner-centered learning, a central component of applied learning theory has always been an important concept for the author because of a professional career working with youth in

crisis and with youth in economically challenged families and neighborhoods. A human being who is economically secure, who is able with a modicum of confidence, to provide the basics of food, clothing, shelter and some comfort for themselves, is one who most likely will be a contributor to society rather than a drain on a nation’s resources through unemployment, state aid, or incarceration, etc. Higher education institutions, because of their mission and the median age of their customer base,

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are major contributors to helping young adults make a successful transition from the classroom to the working world.

In 1916, John Dewey wrote about the connection between experience and education, and how this process is related to the continued existence of society. According to Dewey, mere activity does not constitute experience. This author would add neither does mere education constitute learning. Change as a result of experience and education is meaningless transition “unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it” (Dewey, 1916, page unknown). As stated in another of Dewey’s books, *Education and Experience*, “there is an intimate and necessary connection between the processes of actual experience and education” (p. 7). It is this constant stream between experience and reflection, which is the basis of much of post-modern applied learning theory.

...if students learn how to apply the content, see how it connects with other knowledge, understand the human implications of what they have learned, and come to care about their subject and about learning how to keep on learning, it seems likelier that they will both retain what they have learned and continue to enlarge their knowledge after the course is over. (Dee Fink, 2003, p.57)

Learning-centered curricula will describe multiple dimensions of applied learning, guided by the needs of the students to explore what is being learned and then construct for themselves their own understanding. The learning college systems along with the teachers and students of learning-centered curriculum will require a skill set which can direct goal-based programs, activities, and achievements. In the applied learning model, the school administrators, school support staff, and teachers become learners as well as facilitators of learning. This model differs from the traditional method of education where administration and faculty are separate and distinct entities. From the

establishment, in the 1700’s, of a higher education system in the United States, teachers have focused mainly on lecturing and leading class discussions, while administrators and support staff remained aloof from the teacher-student relationship. Applied learning methodologies, on the other hand, require administrators, support staff, and teachers to become learners along-side the student. Although the discourse involving applied learning has inspired significant movement in North America, professional practice still lags behind. According to Dee Fink, two significant observations point to the fact that change is necessary:

The first is all the evidence, using multiple criteria, that we are not currently doing a good job in higher education. The second source of concern is the new kinds of learning that are being identified as important in the 21st century. The problem is that most professors are so focused on communicating the content... they do not even see these additional, possible kinds of learning. (2011)

Dee Fink puts some of the onus for this problem on graduate teaching programs that focus almost exclusively on the “challenge and complexity of good research” (p. xi). Yet Information literacy, problem solving abilities, and integrative learning are examples of skills highlighted in a survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that are valued by businesses and employers in today’s work environment. In other words, providing authentic contexts and applied learning activities connecting theory to a learner’s daily life, will create a stronger bond for the student between knowledge gained and the skills one employs as a member of a work-force. Currently however, school administrators and teachers are ill prepared and ill equipped to promote applied learning techniques or learning-to-learn principles in the classroom.

Through the discovery of the ways that applied learning can be significant and relaying that discovered information to students, teachers

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