

## The Transition from Faculty Teaching to Student Learning in American Higher Education

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Teaching, in higher education, has ceased to be about professors providing information and analysis based on their own academic training and scholarship. Instead, it has become, increasingly, focused on professors teaching by engaging students in discovering and doing scholarship themselves. In this way, teaching has gone from a focus on the professors lectures and classroom performance to a focus on the student and his or her learning to learn. The tensions and changes that result from this shift have affected not only the educational process but also the ways in which students are admitted to universities and the ways universities and colleges themselves are evaluated. It is playing out, in many ways, much as or more intensely in Catholic-Jesuit higher education where there are additional counter a veiling pressures: for teaching for traditional intellectual excellence and for students and universities to be turned toward social justice, cross-disciplinary exploration, and experiential education.

This is a dramatic shift in the traditions of American secular and Catholic higher education. It comes as a result of empirical research that has shown that individuals have different learning styles not simply different intellectual levels; that acting on and seeking information and understanding is far longer lasting than having information served by the professor to his or her students; and that students are more engaged if they work together and put their classroom learning into practice in internships and community service. In the process, the increasingly competitive academic world where schools compete for students and external funding and students compete for jobs has moved from simply teaching students in the classroom to measuring their satisfaction

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with their classes and teachers; getting them from the Ivory Tower classroom to the real world while they are in college; and increasing their use of technology in the classroom and in their own work.

Faculty evaluations have gone from simply being on their scholarship and their colleagues evaluations of what they taught to also being based on what students think of them and how adept they are at using the various technological and educational tools. Higher education is adding, to this mix, pressure on faculty and on the institution to assess itself and student learning based on far more than grades and scores in standardized testing. Indeed, the institution itself is increasingly seen as a classroom with extra-curricular activities, residence hall life, and the diversity of the student body being elements of student learning as well. In the process, admissions to American institutions of higher education has shifted from admitting the best and the brightest students possible to deliberately balancing the need for the campus population to reflect the world with the need to have students who are prepared to do the work required.

Almost all of America's institutions of higher learning have adopted some part of the student learning model beginning in their admissions processes and ending with their students final work. To date, though, the shift has been a tense one: for many established educators, the lecture and printed word remain the vehicle to deliver ideas and information. For them, at the ends or middle of their careers, to set aside their lectures and develop new ways of delivering information or facilitating student learning is discomforting at best. Indeed, teachers in American higher education, as in the rest of the world, are seldom actually trained to teach. They are trained in their subject matter, however narrow. So, they are not grounded in learning theory and pedagogical models. How they teach is much more a matter of what they learned from their mentors or as they innovated and did their classes. To deal with this and help faculty adjust to moving back from the lectures to direct and varied work with students, institutions of higher learning often establish teaching centers to challenge and help college professors learn new methods and how to assess their own successes and failures not in terms of what they did but in terms of what students did and took away.

Institutions of higher education were pressed away from the model of the professor as performer and fount of all knowledge not only by their own desire for a competitive advantage in funding and admissions, dependent as that is on reputation and rankings; but, also, by their accrediting organizations. These are established and run by universities in a given region to monitor and, essentially, license member schools. Virtually all of these regional accrediting organizations have added to their old criterion of evaluation (offerings, faculty credentials and student-faculty ratio, facilities, budget, student satisfaction) a focus on student learning and its assessment not just by individual faculty but by schools as a whole.

This shift, though, has been a tense one. Indeed, the new expectations are often in conflict with many of the traditions of higher education and of faculty responsibilities. Institutions have not moved apace to change structures and requirements to make the new modes of teaching and engaging possible. Often, indeed, faculty are expected to facilitate and develop student learning in the frameworks that were developed for the far more static and structured lecture and seminar format. Beyond this, the standards and process of ranking institutions of higher education, significant as they are for institutions ability to attract students, faculty, and external support (critical for private, religious and public institutions at a time when student costs need to be subsidized and governmental funding for education and research is being cut back), are equally contradictory. Even in the area of admissions, there is an ongoing tension over how students should be selected and evaluated. Underlying this is a redefinition of quality to include diversity as not only socially correct but also important element of a quality education and to recognize that students mature at different rates and that they have different learning styles or, at least, that the individual talents or characteristics found in more deliberately diverse student groups insure that the institution will have a broad impact and that students will be prepared to take on leadership roles in a diverse world.

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## Institutional Evaluation

Institutional evaluation or assessment in America happens basically at two levels: regional accreditation organizations and public rankings. The accreditation boards approval serves as a license for institutions: without going through this intensive self-review process and a review by a board of examiners that results in an overall positive score (even if there are specific criticisms to be addressed), schools can lose their right to grant degrees and have them recognized. Regional accreditation boards look at schools in terms of what they do for their students based both on their institutional goals and also the individual faculty members on the external board of examiners sense of the institution as a whole from its financial stability and resource base to the satisfaction of its students, faculty and administration with its program and work.

The public rankings are done by a variety of publications and organizations. They tend to influence both funding and student applications. In what is a vicious circle, the ability to be highly competitive in admissions and the level of funding impact future public rankings. These rankings, on the other hand, are reflections of the competitiveness of admissions and the level of funding as well as other quantifiable measures. These include the ratio of students applying to students accepted; the scores and high school rankings of accepted students; the ability of a school to retain its students and have them graduate in four years; alumni giving (a sign not only of fiscal health but also of post graduate appreciation of the educational experience); financial resources; faculty compensation and quality as well as the faculty-student ratio; and finally the evaluation of other college presidents<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, there is a tension between what schools do to press for maximum student learning and diversity and what they need to do to maintain the quantitative measures that determine their ranking on national public scores. For instance, admitting students not just with the highest scores but with other characteristics that add to the diverse fabric of the student body may lower admission's scores.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> US News and World Report College Rankings

## Student Learning and Faculty Responsibilities: Key Tensions

What are the expectations of institutions of high education for the process of education in the classroom? Where do the tensions lie? The natural tensions are evident in the contrast between what is demanded of educators and educational institutions and what the usual models were for educators and higher education even a few years ago as well as in the contrast between increased pressure for assessment focused on excellence and the need for individualizing education and facilitating independent discovery. The two inventories that have come to be touchstones for setting out the new principles for doing and evaluating education in college and universities offer models for what is being sought.

The first, the Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, was produced under the auspices of the American Association for Higher Education and the Education Commission of the States and done by a set of experts in pedagogy. Its principles are 1) close student-faculty contact with the faculty member not only available but active in seeking out students with problems and extending the conversation outside of the classroom; 2) cooperation among students in discussing material and preparing projects as well as the engagement of students in presenting and teaching each other; 3) the encouragement of active learning so that students are engaged in doing as well as taking material in by carrying out research projects, doing simulations, presenting their work, and challenging the ideas in the class work; 4) prompt feedback through in class exercises and prompt, detailed grading; 5) training students to commit and manage their time for academic work; 6) high expectations with clear measures set out of what excellence entails; and 7) course work and teaching methods that draw on the diversity of students backgrounds<sup>2</sup>.

The second, the National Survey of Student Engagement, deals on a more institutional level with similar issues. This survey is done at hundreds of colleges whose own scores are bench-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Seven Principles Resource Center, Winona State University, Faculty Inventory: Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, 1992.

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marked against their cohort in various kinds of four year and graduate colleges and universities. Students are surveyed in their freshman and senior year. The issues that are raised and measured are: 1) the level of academic challenge emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance; 2) active and collaborative learning where students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and asked to think about what they are learning in different settings; 3) student-faculty interaction inside and outside the classroom so that teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, lifelong learning; 4) enriching educational experiences including diversity experiences, technology, community service, and senior classes; and 5) supportive campus environment<sup>3</sup>.

In the traditional method, teachers gave information, answered students questions, and then tested students to see whether they took in the material and could present it back. When students did research on their own, it was in training to become academics. The inputs and outputs were clear. The professor was the all knowing one who had done the work and had the information to present. If students had anything to say it was in the process of evaluating the professor and his work. They were asked about how he or she showed he knew the material. All of this happened in the structured time blocks of regular class meetings of an hour or an hour and a half; assignments planned and presented for the semester; and formal examinations at the end of the semester.

The curriculum as a whole was a negotiated balance between specialization and general education. Students were required to take a certain number of courses across their major field and then to take courses in prescribed areas. The intent was to make sure that they were competent in or exposed to the different ways of academic thinking: natural and physical sciences; mathematics; humanities; social sciences; and the arts. In most schools as well, students were expected to show some competence in a foreign language and also know Western cultural traditions and, in more recent times, have some exposure to minority issues and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> National Survey of Student Engagement (November, 2003).

the non-Western world. There were, though, seldom universally required courses in majors or in the general education curriculum. When they existed, these most often differed dramatically depending on the instructor. Students essentially created their own programs within this format.

In the new student learning format, this learning process spills outside the classroom. In institutional programs, this is reflected in the addition of requirements or opportunities for students to use what they are learning in real world settings as they learn. They are also, in a number of programs, particularly in religious schools, expected to consider the ethics and impact of their areas of interest in the world. Students are expected to take on independent projects and to do group projects. Their lives outside the classroom are supposed to be enriched by and supplement what happens in the classroom. And, faculty are expected to work not simply as founts of knowledge but as facilitators for student learning, active leaders and aids for student learning, and models of intellectual and community life and discussion creating, in the process, a safe space for students to express ideas and attack the canons of the various disciplines.

One of the first tensions to appear in this shift was a product of the different kinds of students within any one class and the different backgrounds not only of students coming into an institution of higher learning but also established as students move through their educations. When teachers lectured, in the traditional format, students took notes and then were tested, the differences that existed among students had little real impact on the learning process: at worst, a professor would have to reduce his expectations if students were ill prepared. But, most often professors lectured to their mean and expected students to seek help and keep up.

In the new student learning based paradigm, students work together, the measurement of good teaching is what students learn, and the faculty member essentially facilitates student discovery and processing of information. This makes diversity both a valuable asset for discussions and student experiences in learning but also a complication. After all, now students are the generators of learning not only for themselves but also for each other. Since group work is considered one of the ways students

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learn best, the new student learning paradigm encourages this. At the same time, one of the areas faculty facilitate is the learning of how to work as a member of group. This is complicated by the need to assess individual students even as they generate group projects. In the process, faculty members are expected not to deliver a product but to adapt to and generate learning from students based on the individuals needs and learning styles.

The second major tension has emerged over what students should learn and how one assesses that learning. As students are expected to learn from their experiences, work through material and issues on their own and with each other, discover and question, and be personally engaged rather than just receptacles, professors have had to give up their control over the substance of what students learn. Taking in information facts, theories, and canonical models becomes less important. It becomes more important that students know how to get to the answer, how to back up their own arguments, and how to work with material in discussions, group work, and individual research or action. For many faculties giving up control over their subject matter and opening themselves more to student opinion and reaction has been difficult, even as they claim to have rethought their work.

The other and often more complicated aspect to this is the tension in creating the larger platform for freeing students to learn and master the material on their own so that they discover how things work rather than just accepting the theory. Here, institutions are caught in what may be a time warp. Their old requirements of the academic calendar, course requirements, grading, and daily schedules are almost always the purview of the faculty. Even as they shift their teaching and in class assessment, it is hard to develop and achieve a consensus on these programmatic shifts. As a result, faculty who do focus on student learning periodically find themselves hampered by the institutional structures themselves. That limits how assessment can be done. After all, not all student exploration and learning can be done easily within the old frameworks of 50 or 75 minute classes regularly two or three times a week for a semester or quarter. In this area, there are a handful of schools that have a long history of sending students to work for periods that alternate with their formal class work. Others are increasing the importance of experiential education. Some schools are trying new scheduling or providing support to encourage different forms of assessment and reporting of students work or new forms of teaching.

Similarly, the goals of promoting active learning, risky as it can be; encouraging student excellence; and finding ways to accurately assess what students have learned do not fit well together. To deal with the shift from transferring knowledge to encouraging the development of knowledge by individual students, faculty must come up with more ways of assessing than just giving a test, particularly a short answer or multiple choice-true false test. The current model is for tests to be largely replaced by ongoing assessment based on writing, class presentations, and other activities for which students receive, ahead of time, a rubric by which they will be evaluated. This means that, even as they go on their own to learn, they are clear about the expectations and what elements of their work will be considered and how they will be evaluated. At the same time, assessment is intended to be multi-dimensional enough to take into account different student learning styles: so, for instance, students are graded not just on timed projects but also on their oral, group, and written work. In the process, the intention is for faculty to force, with assessment, students to do or learn certain skills and models but also for the assessment to allow students and their professors to see from whence they came. In this way, individuals can assess their learning not only in terms of a preset standard but also can see what they, as individuals, have achieved.

## In Conclusion: The Catholic-Jesuit Conundrum

The shift to student learning and the changes and tensions that went along with it are critical to the newly emerging profile of American higher education a profile that often sets it apart from its European counterparts. Most four year and graduate Catholic institutions have gone through or are going through this same shift. For Jesuit institutions, given General Kolvenbach's and the leadership of Jesuit schools commitment to training leaders and advocating or encouraging their students to consider issues of social justice, the issues and the potential shifts seem to be even more dramatic. This is true even though there is a tradition in

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Jesuit schools that predates these new models of student learning that focused on dealing with the person as a whole and encouraging students to both develop a value system and personal experiences that prepare them to take leadership roles<sup>4</sup>.

After all, these schools must compete for students and faculty in what is a secular marketplace where no student body or faculty will be all or primarily Catholic. Nor, is there a claim that they should be if students are to be trained to work in a diverse world and faculty are to be drawn for their excellence. On the other hand, clearly definitions of social justice are somewhat pre-determined by the stand of the Church or of the Jesuit order. This adds the tension of providing an overarching value system at the same time that students and faculty are expected to be trained to work in a multi-cultural world and to learn to work with and relish diversity.

Beyond this, there is what some see as an inherent tension between the Jesuit emphasis on intellectual rigor and training students and encouraging faculty to advocate for social justice and learn through their experiences. This, like the tensions over student centered learning and faculty assessment of students learning, has meant a dualism which demands much of students in what they learn but also pushes to take that learning outside the classroom and act on it.

The goal then of Jesuit education, often more explicitly than in many public and private universities, is first to create graduates who can lead as professionals and citizens because they now how to learn, have mastered different approaches for understanding and approaching the world, and learned to work together and individually. But, the Jesuit goal goes beyond simply having graduates and students who can act and lead. It also involves, explicitly or implicitly, a definition of what that leadership is to be for, of leadership to social justice. It is, then, in this context that Jesuit education in the United States is taking the overall high education reforms and acting on them to give them a special meaning.

→ KEYWORDS — MODEL OF STUDENTS TEACHING, EVOLUTION OF EDU-CATION PROCESS, PROGRAM OF EDUCATION

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jesuit Secondary Education Association, *Go Forth and Teach: The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (Washington, D.C., 1987).