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Learning at any time: Supporting student learning wherever it happens

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A new residential college and a faculty-in-residence program demonstrate how student affairs educators and academic faculty at one institution have collaborated to create transformational learning experiences for their students.

By Frank Shushok, Jr., Douglas V. Henry, Glenn Blalock, Rishi R. Sriram

LEARNING AT ANY TIME

SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING WHEREVER IT HAPPENS

MOST INDIVIDUALS who work in higher education seek the same outcome: student learning. Knowing that partnerships between faculty and student affairs educators offer the best hope for students' experiencing the kind of learning that higher education promises, individuals at our institution are taking small steps toward building and sustaining these partnerships. Three realities in American higher education have prompted us to explore these collaborations for the sake of student learning.

First, we realized that many faculty members in American higher education are not engaged in student learning environments beyond the classroom. As a result, much of students' college experience happens without direct faculty involvement. In many institutional contexts, faculty may have good reasons for their lack of involvement, especially at research universities in pre-tenure years, when other demands may be at their greatest. To be involved much in the

cocurriculum early in an academic career is often difficult, if not imprudent for faculty members. Given this fact, one important role of student affairs educators at our institution is to serve as educators outside the classroom, convening academically purposeful conversations, planning educational programs, and creating learning-rich environments. At the same time, knowing that faculty involvement in all aspects of student life enhances learning, our institution has begun to reorganize reward structures to foster faculty involvement in all student learning experiences.

The next fact that our institution faced is that the positive effects of faculty and student affairs collaborations have been solidly established through research; the classroom and the cocurriculum are complementary, mutually interdependent, and critically important to the growth, development, and learning of students. The classroom can infuse the out-of-classroom experience with academic content (the curriculum), which in turn can be practiced and understood at a deeper level through the cocurriculum. Robert Maynard Hutchins

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writes in *The Higher Learning in America*, “Thinking cannot proceed divorced from the facts and from experience” (pp. 89–90). While a few faculty and student affairs educators at our institution and elsewhere may believe that real learning happens primarily either in the classroom or through cocurricular involvement, this thinking is contrary to the preponderance of evidence that the best learning occurs when the curriculum and cocurriculum are intentionally united, as they are, for example, in the residential college recently developed on our campus and described in detail later in this article.

In *How College Affects Students*, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini carefully synthesize decades of research that encourages institutions to combine the expertise of student affairs educators (in adult development, learning styles, cognition, and human communication) with the subject matter specialties of the faculty. The goal is to point all resources in the same direction—student learning. In this way, faculty expertise informs student affairs practice, and student affairs practice informs faculty work with students. In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

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Clara M. Lovett, former president of the American Association for Higher Education, puts it this way: “All institutions that have figured out how to help their students succeed . . . have minimized, if not abolished altogether, the organizational hierarchies of status and power that keep the people best equipped to facilitate student learning separate and, sometimes, at odds” (p. B9).

The third reality we have acknowledged is that faculty and student affairs educators most effectively serve together as the champions and guardians of liberal education, the outcome of which John Henry Newman describes in *The Idea of a University* as a habit of mind characterized by “freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom” (p. 101). On occasion, some members of the faculty and some student affairs educators cross the boundary that separates this type of genuine education from political advocacy or even indoctrination and thereby undermine the aims of liberal learning. The failings of a few student affairs educators in this regard were most recently discussed by Elyse Ashburn and by the National Association of Scholars. At the same time, Stanley Fish, in his book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, has derided some members of the faculty for losing sight of their responsibilities as liberal educators, pointing out that “it is when academics either don’t know or have forgotten exactly what it is they are supposed to do that trouble begins” (p. 7). When the ideal of liberal education is endangered, it is the duty of all educators to cry foul and to work together to restore and maintain it.

In response to these realities, more than a year before our campus opened its first residential college, a team of faculty and student affairs educators began to meet monthly to shape the experience and education of the community’s four hundred future students. The residential college seeks to unite students through shared intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues. Now, in the second year of the college’s operation, this same faculty and student affairs group continues to meet

monthly, and the faculty master and the residence hall director (who both live in the residential college and work in adjoining offices) share its daily governance.

At Baylor University, we are also beginning to reward faculty for some of their biggest commitments to advancing learning outside of the classroom. Some colleges and schools on our campus recognize that serving as faculty in residence, for example, provides a significant contribution to the college, and so that service is noted in the tenure review process. We are also working toward providing course reductions for faculty in residence, an action that has begun to alter the way that service of the faculty is perceived.

REASONABLE QUESTIONS

ASERIES of reasonable questions have guided actions at our institution and can be asked as any campus community launches or continues discussions about facilitating student learning in and outside the classroom. Such questions as “What do we mean by learning?” and “How (and when and where) does it happen?” should be answered in a scholarly manner, followed by the question “Who should facilitate this learning?” Scholarly responses to these questions are not difficult to find. Consider this short list: *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (both edited by Richard Keeling); Robert Barr and John Tagg’s much-cited article in *Change*, “From Teaching to Learning”; John Tagg’s subsequent book-length study, *The Learning Paradigm College*; and John Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking’s *How People Learn*. For that matter, the nature, aims, and practice of learning in one form or another have been explored in foundational texts spanning two and a half millennia. Plato’s *Republic*, Augustine of Hippo’s *De Magistro*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, and John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* offer places to begin serious study. These few titles, individually or in various combinations, can help educators of all kinds learn about learning. Serious and sustained engagement with these works and the questions they explore will help educators recognize that a focus on learning leads to formulation of principles to guide effective practice. Educators will also discover throughout these texts that learning should be the responsibility of an entire institution.

BUILDING A RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY AT BAYLOR

STORIES ABOUT at many institutions about transformational learning, about a student whose experience results in lasting personal changes. These are the kinds of change promised by institutional mission statements, hoped for by faculty and student affairs educators, and recognized as valuable by those inside and outside the campus community. While some might shape stories to favor a particular experience, individual, or subject as the catalyst for transformation, careful listening, reading, and reflection make clear that significant learning—the kind of transformation valued by most in the academy—is the result of a complex web of activities and experiences. Building that web at Baylor is the work of student affairs educators and faculty from all corners of the campus. Frankly, this high level of collaboration is recent, happening mostly in the last ten years. Thanks in part to conversations held as we created and adopted a strategic plan, a few friendships across divisional lines blossomed into sustained partnerships. These initial relationships had an amplifying effect, and now groups of faculty and student affairs educators are actively reshaping various areas of our campus in the name of improving student learning.

For example, as one way to develop intentional and sustained collaborations, our university initiated the Faculty-in-Residence (FIR) program. Now in its fifth year, with nine faculty members living in residence halls, this program is scheduled to continue until every residential community has a faculty member in residence. In the FIR program, faculty members and their families apply to move into specially designed residential spaces inside residence halls, agreeing to live alongside students and student affairs colleagues. Although the timeline to live in residence goes unspecified, these roles are not considered short-term commitments. Ideally, for the sake of continuity in community and program development, faculty plan to stay for five or more years. Faculty supplement and complement the work of student affairs staff by participating in the hall leadership team that includes the residence hall director, a resident chaplain, and the student leaders who live in the community. Faculty families shape their individual roles in consultation with student

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affairs, but all agree to maintain their only residence in the hall, to interact with students, and to initiate and oversee connections between the residential communities and other faculty on campus. This last responsibility is particularly important: the FIR program facilitates interactions among students, faculty, and student affairs educators in settings other than the classroom or formal meeting spaces. These interactions are meant to have more than social value. Students have the opportunity to meet and talk with faculty members whom they might never encounter in a classroom setting. Students learn to see faculty members as more than classroom figures who share knowledge and assign grades. They see firsthand the synergistic relationships between student affairs educators and faculty and are exposed to informed conversation, careful listening, and active reflection.

However, student residents are not the only ones who benefit from the FIR program. Faculty members learn, too. Those who visit with students in the residence halls have the opportunity to talk with and listen to students in nonclassroom settings, to engage in sustained conversation, to learn more about students as individuals, and to consider how a more holistic view enriches their understanding of students. Engaging students in cocurricular activities and settings is also a way to model the ideal of a community of learners in which students, faculty, and student affairs educators engage in serious inquiry, learning with and from one another. Though faculty interest in the residential experience was low in the early days, now it is not uncommon for a dozen faculty members to compete for a single FIR opening. They've heard program participants' stories of personal transformations, improved pedagogy, and rekindling of their calling as educators and desire the opportunity for such a transformational experience.

This successful program came about through sustained, focused attention to how, when, and where learning happens. For example, when administrators made the difficult decision to replace a historic residence hall built in 1921, a flurry of ideas emerged about a fitting replacement. The notion that ultimately

came to the fore involved the development of a new residential college. At the outset, educators in both academic affairs and student affairs offered arguments that took our institution in a new direction. Prior to this time, our university's leadership had long regarded its residential halls as dormitories in which students were more or less dormant, if not actually asleep. One of the school's late-twentieth-century presidents, in fact, often quipped that all faculty members should visit the dormitories at least once in their career, a joke turning on the supposition that one visit would amply assure them of the need never to return.

In 2004, however, we contemplated the construction of Brooks Residential College with a sense of stewardship over the full context of student learning. If students are subject to learning at any time, then why should we not build on classroom instruction by encouraging and enabling students and their teachers to learn beyond the four walls of a conventional classroom? At this point, key issues emerged. What aims did we hope to accomplish? How should we proceed? Who should join in the collaboration? No simple narrative could do justice to the process of answering those questions. The truth is that a series of serendipities and new friendships, combined with a sense of common purpose and a great deal of forbearance and good will, gave rise to a concrete plan for Baylor's first residential college.

The college expresses a commitment to meeting students' academic needs through its library, faculty offices, and seminar and study rooms; their social needs through its great hall, central quadrangle, and junior common room; and their spiritual needs through its chapel. The college's instructional and office spaces house ten faculty members in classics, comparative literature, English, French, philosophy, and theology, all of whom principally teach in the relatively new interdisciplinary Great Texts Program.

The residential college's leader, its live-in faculty master, is jointly appointed by the vice president for student life and the provost and is charged with sustaining a sense of community that fosters academic excellence,

intensive faculty-student interaction, and a tradition-rich student experience. The first year of the college witnessed the involvement of ninety-seven members of the university's faculty representing thirty-eight academic departments, including ten senior fellows appointed from the faculty by the master. The residence hall director, resident chaplain, and undergraduate student leaders, important members of the college leadership team, also share in decision making about how best to shape the residential college experience.

Under this model, faculty encounters with student residents still vary in quality and frequency, and work is still needed to facilitate more effective formal and informal teaching and learning. Nonetheless, student affairs educators with well-researched and academically ambitious plans have found among the faculty thoughtful champions for residential communities where learning is a priority. As a result, more students of high ability are living on our campus than ever before. Our Great Texts faculty members are benefiting from proximity to a thriving community of students whose commitment to learning is strong. Participating faculty report that they have a new understanding of student learning and development and have gained a new appreciation for student affairs educators. At the same time, this vibrant and aesthetically pleasing residential college is attracting the favorable attention of prospective students and their parents.

Those of us involved in the Baylor residential college project are surprised by how much we have learned in such a short period. Following is a summary of these lessons.

Education should always engage the whole person. Put another way, education is informative and formative and carries with it responsibility for the development of the students under our care. Whether or not we explicitly direct our energies toward the formation of students (not only intellectually but emotionally, morally, politically, socially, and spiritually), they will explore and embrace ways of being in the world on the basis of the experiences we offer them. We found that what students learn is never a matter of ideas disconnected from life, nor is it ever only a matter of what happens to them in what is traditionally con-

sidered schooling. They are formed by ideas reflected in the patterns, practices, and traditions of and beyond our institution. We learned that a little care in regard to out-of-class learning amplifies the learning that takes place within the classroom.

Everyone at our institution has an indispensable role in the intellectual, moral, political, social, and spiritual formation of students. Faculty have a major role to play in being attentive and engaged as educational leaders and role models for our students and, through shared institutional governance, in offering direction and oversight of the aims and means of a student's education. At the same time, student affairs educators share similar responsibilities: they must seek to embody an advanced level of learned, professional preparation equal to the task of advancing the mission of our institution. We learned that initially, when faculty and student affairs educators are brought to the same table, there is a difference in language and perspective. Because student learning remained our common goal, we found that those differences allowed us to teach each other about how to best educate students.

Good educators regularly ask such questions as "What should we teach?" "How should we teach it?" "And to what ends do we teach it?" Those who ask these questions at Baylor do not assume uniform or univocal answers; indeed, we believe they are not likely to generate simple or pat answers, given the plurality of competing educational purposes vying for primacy. In the venerable tradition of genuine education, we must commit ourselves to teaching excellence (be it in physics, composition, citizenship, economics, music, or ethics), ask whether we are succeeding, examine the authority or competence that grounds our efforts, and self-critically embrace some vision of the human good that animates all of our efforts. These are reasonable questions that should be asked of anyone who claims to educate. They have been raised most fruitfully at our institution when faculty, staff, and administrators share a responsibility to address them reasonably and in a spirit of goodwill. Because the perspectives of those outside one's area of expertise can usefully challenge assumptions and long-standing practices, it is imperative that colleagues from many areas of responsibility have a seat at the table. We have learned

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that this table and the interactions around and across it may be different at our institution from tables and interactions elsewhere.

There are no simple and universally agreed-on purposes for higher education. We have learned that a variety of competing, sometimes mutually exclusive purposes operate within institutions, including ours. While some purposes are disregarded as improper ends for higher education (for example, indoctrination or self-aggrandizement based on culture or class), many other purposes have legitimate, though contested claims (for example, advancement of knowledge, credentialing of professionals, development of the aptitudes and skills of good citizenship, or development of self-critical understanding of the nature and possibilities of human existence). Fortunately, our institution, like others, is a place where questions about purposes can be discussed and where conversation among educators can achieve a common sense of purpose that can be pursued with passion and commitment.

Whatever the stated aspirations and ideals of our institution, the realities will inevitably fall short. After sorting through varied visions for fulfilling the aims of liberal learning and professional education, and after identifying the practices best suited to our own institution, we allowed for the inevitable starts and halts, jumps and stops that accompany any genuinely complex endeavor. Brooks Residential College did not develop without its fair share of debates, disagreements, and mistakes. Rather than seeing the worst instances as emblematic of the whole or looking only at our failures and shortfalls, we worked to develop a comprehensive and honest collective view of our institution, taken in the totality of its stated goals, ongoing practices, and experiences.

SHARING OUR STORIES

PERHAPS what is needed, at Baylor and elsewhere, is a systematic effort to collect and share these types of attempts to re-imagine an educational culture that focuses on student learning, an institutional culture in which student affairs educators and faculty are working collaboratively to achieve higher education's goals. Although these accounts will not always report success, it is through reflecting carefully and critically on such efforts and modeling inquiry conducted in the light of the best that our shared

expertise can offer that all educators will learn how to most effectively enhance student learning. For good or ill, writing about and living this shared story has become a strength of our institution.

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