

RE-IMAGINING

THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

By George L. Mehaffy

In February 2016, AASCU launched its Re-Imagining the First Year of College initiative, a new project aimed at ensuring success for all students, particularly those who have historically been underserved by higher education: low income, first generation, and students of color. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and USA Funds, AASCU has created a coalition of 44 member institutions that will work together for three calendar years (2016-2018) to develop comprehensive, institutional transformation that redesigns the first year of college and creates sustainable change for student success. What follows is an excerpt from a speech by George Mehaffy, AASCU's vice president for academic leadership and change, delivered at the AASCU Winter Academic Affairs meeting in 2014.

Two facts haunt me. A respected demographer, William Frey, has predicted that the percentage of young Americans with college degrees will start to decline in 2020, and not reach the rate of 2015 until 2050. Ed Trust recently reported that racial gaps in graduation rates will persist for the rest of this century. Those two sobering statistics, of course, reflect much larger demographic changes for higher education: increasing numbers of low income students, increasing numbers of students of color, increasing numbers of first generation students. Yet for this country to remain a vibrant economy and a robust democracy, many more of those students must not only have access to higher education; they have to successfully complete a college degree. Yet far too often we still offer a college experience, particularly in the first year, that looks like something out of the 1960s or 70s, ignoring demographic realities, exorbitantly high failure rates, and rising national concern.

The first year of college is broken. Students in the first year fail in large numbers, and given the changing student body, will continue to do so at the same or higher rates. Those that survive are in danger of dying of terminal boredom. Beset by a host of structural challenges and outmoded legacy practices, the first year of college has to be re-engineered. I believe that the time has come to start over again. No amount of tinkering at the edges will suffice to remake the first year an effective and engaging introduction to American higher education. No fabulous first year experience course can

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make up for the dismal aspects of other experiences in the first year of college. The lives of our students, the future of our country, and the fate of our institutions are bound up in the nature and quality of the first year.

So WHAT'S WRONG?

There are a set of generic issues plaguing higher education and, by extension, the first year of college, as well as a distinct set of first year-specific issues that create less than optimal conditions. Let me list a few of the challenges we face:

The first problem is the elephant in the room. One of higher education's critical tasks is to teach, yet virtually no one is taught to teach. What's remarkable is that this issue goes so unremarked. No other profession in the world prepares its workforce by deliberately ignoring the preparation of its workers for at least half of their job. It is truly an amazing thing to consider.

The reciprocal of that, of course, is the second problem. Faculty, trained in their discipline, and trained as researchers, honor research over teaching. So don't be surprised that the recent study at Northwestern University found that full-time adjuncts produced greater learning outcomes than tenure track and tenured faculty. People who are assigned and paid to teach will usually do a better job than faculty who have obligations for both teaching and scholarship, particularly

when we know which counts more for tenure, promotion and prestige. The tension between teaching and research, and the genuflection at the altar of research, impoverishes teaching and short-changes students.

A third problem is more subtle but equally pernicious. We prize above all the autonomy of individual faculty members. That's why we believe in the cottage industry model of course design. Everyone gets to design his or her course individually. That may make sense in some cases, but tell me if this makes sense: If every institution teaches PSY 101, and each institution has four sections of PSY 101 this coming fall, it means that we will collectively teach 16,000 sections of PSY 101 as if it has never been taught before. Is that a good use of precious faculty time? No. That's an enormous waste of time and energy by faculty all over the country, time that could be devoted to working with individuals and small groups of students, conducting research on learning outcomes, and much more. Further, this enormous commitment

of time and energy does not usually result in a more powerful course; it only produces at best a few truly stellar courses, a wide swath of average courses, and probably an embarrassingly large number of mediocre or downright bad courses. In other words, we are willing to tolerate wide disparities

in outcomes for students to preserve and protect faculty autonomy.

A fourth problem is design. The paradigm for our institutions is fundamentally flawed. Barr and Tagg, in a classic article in *Change Magazine* in 1995, argued that our institutions have been created as teaching institutions, instead of learning institutions. That paradigm conflates means and ends. We teach, and therefore our work is done. How would things change if we focused on learning, a student-centered approach, instead of teaching, a faculty-centric approach?

But the greatest flaw in the learning model we have created is that the faculty member is far too often at the center. The faculty member is the expert, the center of the experience, the deliverer of the content. The course is faculty-centric. Despite the ancient advice to be a guide on the side, not the sage on the stage, most of us cannot resist the bright lights.

And there's a companion problem. At the center of our institutions lies a core belief that our most fundamental responsibility is to teach. I would argue that has pernicious consequences. We assume that every learning experience grows out of a teaching experience. A second core belief is about where and when learning takes place.

The truth, of course, is that students learn all the time, and in all sorts of places, within and beyond classrooms, within and beyond institutions, with or without teachers. Humans are hard wired for learning. All of our students are learning machines. Yet far too often, we repress rather than invigorate that instinct to learn. We bore rather than excite. And



AASCU Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change George Mehaffy.

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far too often, we do it not because we're stupid or mean-spirited, but because it's just easier to keep doing what we've always done than imagine a different kind of experience.

In its most extreme form, the faculty-centric focus expresses itself in the assumption that no learning experience can occur without a teacher. Therefore, we have built a complex organization around courses, always led by teachers, which produce credits, which when aggregated represent a curriculum, which culminates in a degree. And at its core, this belief system assumes that our job is to teach. That assumption makes teachers and teaching the center of the organization. We become focused on teachers, and our institutions become faculty-centric. But in fact our job is not to teach. What we need to do as faculty members, in this age of incredible information and analytic power at the fingertips of our students, is create environments in which students learn, sometimes alone, sometimes with other students in the classroom, sometimes with others around the world, and yes, sometimes even with us...but with us truly as guides, not lecturers.

So that's the general context, the environment in which we think about the first year of college. But there are also several first year-specific problems as well. Here are two:

We spend the least amount of money on the first two years of college, and then seem to be startled that those are the years of the greatest loss of our students. A study of four university systems found that the average weighted cost of instruction for the first two years was one, upper division costs were one and a half times as much, master's level three times as much, and doctoral education four times as expensive. What's wrong with that picture?

The second problem with the first year is the curriculum. It's largely irrelevant to the lives of students. Crafted by faculty members to reflect faculty



Photo courtesy of University of West Florida.

and discipline-specific interests, the typical first year curriculum is a series of introductory classes in potential majors, often resembling the Platte River, a mile wide, an inch deep, and about as interesting. Laced through the first year curriculum are also the courses to fulfill general education requirements. The design of the general education portion of the curriculum is often the focus of protracted philosophical arguments and battles among faculty members, with a substantial amount of departmental self-interest thrown in, yet for students, most of the time general education is two from column A and three from column B. I call the first year curriculum the broccoli curriculum. It looks nice, and may be good for you, but nobody wants to eat it. Students are required to take courses about unfamiliar topics, disconnected from their lives and experiences, but are reassured that it will be good for them later on.

CREATING A NEW FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

So how do we go about creating a new design for the first year of college? As our students become more diverse, and as tuition becomes the most important single source of revenue, and as states implement more and more performance-based funding, pressure to revise the first

year will grow. So advocates for a revised first year of college have some built-in support for their interest in revision. But what would a completely redesigned first year look like? I think a redesigned first year will have four critical redesigned elements: institutional intentionality, faculty, curriculum and students.

Institutional Intentionality.

First, we need to be much more purposeful and intentional about how we construct the first year. We need the entire institution to become focused, to harness the collective energy and boundless capacity of the university to work together for a common goal. We call that institutional intentionality. An example of institutional intentionality comes in a study that AASCU conducted about graduation rates. We were interested in the wide variation in graduation rates among our 420 member institutions. So we conducted a study in which we disaggregated the 420 institutions into 12 clusters of similar institutions, and then sent accreditation-like teams to each of the 12 top-performing institutions in each of the 12 clusters. We looked for programs, structures or other elements that might explain the high graduation rates. The dominant conclusion of that study was that two things mattered most in achieving high graduation rates:

leadership at many levels, and a campus culture where faculty and staff believed that their role was to help students become successful.

Institutional intentionality also involves funding. We have to put resources in the first year that are commensurate with our rhetoric about caring for students. We cannot spend the least amount of resources in the first two years. An institution cannot marginalize the first two years to more richly fund upper division and graduate programs, and expect greater student success in the early years.

We also have to build data systems that provide granular feedback on student progress and success, with early warning systems, and appropriate intervention strategies, to help students remain on track. And we must have the most rigorous data analytics to track what is happening and intercede in timely ways.

Finally, institutional intentionality means that we share our intentions with students. We need to help students understand where they are, where they are going, and why. For too many institutions, the plan seems to be to provide a variety of offerings, delivered by a variety of programs, departments and offices, yet make no effort to help students connect the dots. We must be explicit with students, in as many ways as we can, about the purpose

of our structures and programs.

Curriculum. The second key change in transformation of an institution is a change in the curriculum. We need to reduce choice, which is often paralyzing instead of liberating. We need to build clear pathways through four years. We need to build degree maps so students can see and understand their route to a degree.

The most substantial problem with the current curriculum is that it lacks both relevance and coherence for the students that experience it. If you look at studies of student success, most notably the work of people like George Kuh, the key to student success seems to be deeply connected to engagement. Engagement, in simple terms, is the idea of people being interested in what they're doing, involved in what they're doing, passionate about what they're doing. Engagement connects the curriculum to a student's core concerns, their life experiences, and their most deeply held values.

Students in the first year of college, perhaps more than any other students, suffer from what I call the pervasive myths that shape our practices. Many of those myths find their way into the curriculum. For years we were told that college algebra was absolutely essential for students' lives. In fact, it was only essential for graduation,

for our constructed concept of a proper college degree, and perhaps for the well-being of the mathematics department. Now it turns out that college algebra is not always

necessary. The Carnegie Foundation is

demonstrating that quantitative reasoning and statistical understanding may be as good or better, depending on one's major. I am haunted by the question: How many students did we lose, and how many lives were irreparably damaged, by our misguided insistence that algebra was the only path to a college degree?

The same mythology has shaped our remedial courses. We believed that there is a proper sequence to coursework. If you didn't have that prerequisite knowledge, you have to take a remedial course first. But the success rate in remedial courses was terrible. So what did we do? We required students to take a second and even a third remedial course in the same subject. The dropout rate of students increased with every remedial course they took. Now, it turns out, a remedial course does not necessarily have to be taken before a regular college course. In fact, the greatest success in remedial education seems to come when a remedial course is paired with a regular college course. Those are but two examples of the myths that have shaped our first-year curriculum, and harmed our students.

There are a number of creative and imaginative approaches to the first year of college that are being experimented with on many campuses. The problem with most of those efforts is bringing them to scale. Far too often, the innovation is for a special subset, such as Honors students, or an experiment in one college or program.

Faculty and Staff. The third key element in transformation of the first year is changing roles for faculty and staff. I envision tenure-track faculty whose commitment to and support for the first year is explicit, who are rewarded for that commitment with tenure and promotion, and who have prestige and status for that special role, as well as appropriate pay. I imagine a world where faculty conduct research on students learning outcomes,



Team leaders for Re-Imagining the First Year of College met in Austin in February to begin the process of organizing and collaborating around the goals of the initiative.

WE NEED TO BE MUCH MORE INTENTIONAL ABOUT HOW WE CONSTRUCT THE FIRST YEAR. THE ENTIRE INSTITUTION MUST FOCUS TO HARNESS THE COLLECTIVE ENERGY AND BOUNDLESS CAPACITY OF THE UNIVERSITY TO WORK TOGETHER FOR A COMMON GOAL.

student progress and student well-being, and a place where that research is as valued as any research being conducted at the university. We need new titles, new structural arrangements, and new ways to recognize the invaluable faculty work that focuses on the first year.

One thing is for certain. Faculty roles will change. Courses will no longer routinely be built by individual faculty members. Much more of the design will come from groups of faculty and others, including instructional designers, cognitive scientists and others. Courses will increasingly be built elsewhere, and used locally. Faculty will spend much less time delivering content, and much more time working with students in activities that add real value to students' lives. Faculty will spend less time teaching, and more time creating environments in which students learn.

Students. Finally, in the institution committed to student success in the first year, we would have students doing things differently as well. We would organize students into cohorts, around themes,

For more information about Re-Imagining the First Year, including a list of participating institutions, visit www.aascu.org/RFY.

using competition. In the institution committed to student success in the first year, we would insist on high-quality advising, indeed intrusive advising, as well as just-in-time help. And as noted earlier, we'd reduce the number of pathways and choices. I'd also change the concept of the classroom. We talk about our AASCU institutions as "stewards of place." In that new formulation, the classroom is not only a room on campus; the classroom is also the community and region.

Beyond helping students understand the core outcomes we are seeking for them, we can also help students with their awareness by providing portfolios and other tools that help students see and track progress. There is recent evidence that portfolios actually help students become engaged in their own education; portfolios also appear to contribute to greater retention and student success.

I'd be much more thoughtful about majors. We'd study recent research that focuses attention on purpose. Why are students at college? What do they expect to accomplish? We'd also study the world of work. What does it mean to have a career? What does the world of careers look like at the beginning of the 21st century?

For far too many students, the first year of college is still a pretty dismal experience. But it doesn't have to be. We have the capacity, the imagination, and the creativity to build immersive,

engaging programs. We have technology tools that can connect our students to worlds beyond their imagination. But our legacy systems and past practices constrain us, limiting our vision of higher education and the first year of college.

To transform the first year, we cannot do it piecemeal. We cannot hope that one intervention somewhere will challenge a pervasive and pernicious set of institutional rigidities. We can't put in place one new strategy, one new program, or one new approach, and hope that will solve the entire problem. It won't. We must attack the failed system



Photo courtesy of Dalton State College (Ga.).

in a systemic way, seeking radical, transformational reform, and rejecting minor adjustments, small pilots, or even stellar but siloed initiatives that only reach a handful of students. It's time to be bold. It's time re-imagine the first year of college. **P**

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