

**Leadership Abstract
Assignment C**

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Moving Towards a Learning College

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Since the inception of the community college system, the general mandate has remained unchanged: to prepare individuals to enter the workforce and thereby contribute to the economic progress of the country. In recent years, both students and employers have become more vocal in identifying the need for an educational experience of both quality and relevance to the workplace. The need for colleges to quickly adapt programs to meet work force needs and student goals has become critical in enhancing student employability and career success.

The Priority

In order to meet the identified needs of both employers and students, community colleges should place learning as a top priority. Terry O'Banion in his 1997 book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, states that placing learning first "in every policy, program, and practice ... means that learning becomes the driving force behind everything that happens at a community college". The term "learning college" is used in describing the comprehensive nature of a community college committed to placing learning first.

This abstract offers a perspective on placing learning first and describes a process for moving towards a "learning college". This movement is necessary to enhance the relevancy and quality of community college programs, while supporting a rapid response to labour market needs.

The learning college places the learner and learning first by creating an environment where students actively participate in the planning and the management of the learning experiences. The model is based on the assumption that the educational experiences are designed for the convenience of students. Students decide how they learn, where they learn and when they learn.

The Responsibility

When engaging students as full partners in the learning process, it is important to explore the responsibilities that the college and the students will assume. The college must provide clear information and guidelines for students to make decisions regarding dates, work loads, resources, and learning options. The students are responsible to review the information presented, collect further data as required, make choices and commit to the choices made.

Though both the college and the students have specific responsibilities, open communication and empowered participation are critical so that all stakeholders,

including faculty and students work together to make decisions about what educational experiences are appropriate. In addition, both students and faculty need to continuously monitor the learning and make adjustments as warranted to meet the learning needs of the students.

Building a learning college involves the creation of a new culture and framework of education. Some colleges are moving quickly in this direction, others are slowly initiating movement and some have yet to embrace the concept. The time and commitment required to revolutionize community college education can seem overwhelming; however it is possible for each college to successfully move forward at a manageable pace. The speed and manner at which each college moves forward is based on institutional needs and leadership.

The Movement Forward

For community college leaders contemplating movement towards a learning college, it is important to take advantage of an existing event or to create an event that prepares the way for change. O'Banion refers to the "trigger event", which he describes as "the event that leaders can use to focus thought and to rally troops to action".

Movement towards a learning college can be triggered by capitalizing on a naturally occurring college activity such as the introduction of a new program or an institutional crises, identifying current innovations that promote student learning, and/or creating a climate that encourages change. Though the event or activity may be incidental, it can serve as a catalyst for initiating change. Every community college has events that have the potential to trigger the development of a learning college. The key is for leaders to recognize the trigger and capitalize on it to enhance the change process.

Some colleges have taken steps to create a learning college, while others see the process of creating a learning college formidable. Though a community college may not be ready for sweeping institutional change, the college can begin to promote and support student learning on a smaller scale.

The Community College Process

One community college experiencing the benefits of placing learning first is Northern College. Northern College is comprised of 5 campuses located in Northeastern Ontario. Many programs, including a two-year diploma in Community Gerontology, are offered simultaneously to the various campuses via audio-video teleconferencing.

Second year students enrolled in the Community Gerontology program at the Kirkland Lake Campus provided faculty and administration with an opportunity to explore the benefits of placing student learning first. This group of students approached faculty and administration with concerns regarding their chances of gaining employment upon graduating with a Community Gerontology Diploma.

This was the first time for Northern College to offer the Community Gerontology program. Students at another campus decided to continue on with the original Community Gerontology program; however, the Kirkland Lake Campus students wanted additional learning options and decided to take charge and direct their learning. The students were persistent in presenting the data they had collected that supported enhancing the learning outcomes of the current Community Gerontology program. In addition, the students identified a variety of learning options that would enhance their employability by providing them with recommended theory and skills identified by local employers. Though the ultimate results were not predictable, the college acknowledged the student's concerns and allowed the students to direct the remainder of their educational experience.

A staff member familiar with the Community Gerontology program facilitated meetings for students and staff. The meetings were structured to enable students to become the problem solver, planner and manager of their education. This motivated the students to take responsibility for their learning. The students requested an additional certificate or diploma that would be recognized by the health care community, other than the double diplomas currently offered at Northern College. A variety of options were considered including recreation, activation, practical nurse, and personal support worker.

Together, the students and facilitator analyzed the various options. Students became full partners in the learning process and assumed primary responsibility for selecting their learning option with all students selecting the Personal Support Worker option. This option provided the student with several transfer credits; however, it did entail an additional 360 hours of theory and practical experience. Other choices made by the students included scheduling of hours, number of hours per week, and completion date. Students also made choices regarding the role of the teacher and the work place experience the teacher would bring to the students. Students continued to make learning choices throughout the remainder of the Personal Support Worker option.

Students and teachers recognized the importance of open communication and utilized this medium to ensure theoretical content and practical experiences were relevant to the skills required in the work place. For example, students were given a transfer credit for a communication module, but students made a choice to take additional time to review communication theory and practice communication skills they felt would enhance their performance in the workplace.

Though this initiative is too early to evaluate for long-term outcomes the early responses have been positive. Of the students who started the learning option, 90% completed both the Community Gerontology Diploma and the Personal Support Worker Certificate. As one student stated, "though the option I chose involved a greater investment in time, I am now reaping the benefits of employment not to mention the hands on experience of advocating for and planning change." Local employers have supported the initiative and are hiring graduates.

Major change is often initiated by a handful of people. In the case of Northern College, it was only after reading articles on learning colleges and discussing the concept that it

became evident that a crisis had provided a critical trigger to promote movement towards a learning college. From this small group of 4 staff members, a coalition emerged. This coalition began promoting the strategies and benefits of placing student learning first, to other sectors of the community college.

The Benefits

Both the college and the students were able to reap benefits from this experience. The benefits for students included completing both a Community Gerontology Diploma and a Personal Support Worker Certificate; enhancing their potential to gain employment; and participating as change agents by taking responsibility for exploring the skills required by employers and taking responsibility for their learning experiences. The benefits for the Kirkland Lake Campus of Northern College included enhanced student satisfaction, enhanced retention rate, enhanced revenue, enhanced employer satisfaction, and enhanced placement rates. An important benefit for Northern College, was the first hand experience of placing student learning first and an opportunity to move towards a learning college.

The Lessons

The experience at Northern College provides several lessons for community colleges.

Listening to students is paramount. Students have a vested interest in ensuring the college program they have enrolled in is meeting their individual learning needs and preparing them to enter a related career. The cost of purchasing a college education is ever increasing and students want an opportunity to participate in the planning and development of their learning experiences. While program development depends upon the assistance of program advisory committees to keep curricula relevant and to maintain contact with the field it is also important to listen to the concerns and suggestions of students. Equipped with encouragement and support from faculty, students will actively engage in exploring and selecting relevant learning experiences that best meet their individual learning needs and best prepare them for the work place.

Students can be the critical trigger that assist community college staff in recognizing the benefits of making student learning a priority. However, it is important that a college leader, such as the president or vice-president, also recognize the new initiative as a trigger event and encourage the continuing development of learning opportunities that focus on student learning. Without the commitment of senior management, a community college can not become a learning college.

A focus on student learning results in a customized educational experience that is relevant and responsive to the needs of both students and employers. Each college and/or campus should have the opportunity and ability to individualize itself and to respond in its own way to its community, rather than merely duplicate the offerings of neighboring institutions. Though the standardization of program learning outcomes is required, it is critical that colleges provide learning options to meet the individualized learning needs of

students and expectations of employers. Responding to the learning needs of students also serves as a catalyst for responding rapidly to the labour market needs by supporting rapid academic decision making at the program level.

The Conclusion

Within each unique community college environment, it is possible to acknowledge the benefits of placing student learning as the priority. Community college leaders must promote and support the efforts of all learners and staff who have embraced the concept. Furthermore, college leaders must initiate organizational and institutional changes that support movement towards a learning college. In moving towards a learning college, some community colleges will take revolutionary steps and some community colleges will take evolutionary steps. However, all community colleges must make a commitment to take the initial step towards creating a learning college in order to meet the needs of students and employers in the 21st century!

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