# Colleges should end outdated policies that don't put students first (essay)

Submitted by George Boggs on September 12, 2013 - 3:00am

When institutions and organizations begin to identify with processes instead of intended outcomes, they become vulnerable. They lose sight of their real missions and, when faced with challenges or disruptive innovation, often struggle to survive.

Eastman Kodak, once the dominant brand in photography, identified too closely with the chemical processes it used and failed to recognize that its overarching mission was photography rather than film and film processing. Swiss watch manufacturers likewise identified too closely with the mechanical workings of their watches and lost market share to companies that understood that the real mission was the production of reliable and wearable instruments to tell time. If railroads had viewed their mission as transportation of people and goods rather than moving trains on tracks, we might have some different brand names on airplanes and vehicles today.

In retrospect, it seems that the decisions made by these industries defied common sense. Although the leaders were experienced and capable, they were blinded by tradition, and they confused established processes with the real mission of their enterprises.

Higher education today identifies closely with its processes. In open-access public institutions, we recruit, admit and enroll students; assess them for college readiness; place or advise those who are not adequately prepared into remedial classes; give others access to a bewildering variety of course options, often without adequate orientation and advising; provide instruction, often in a passive lecture format; offer services to those who seek and find their way to them; grade students on how well they can navigate our systems and how well they perform on assignments and tests; and issue degrees and certificates based upon the number of credits the students accumulate in required and elective courses.

We need to fund our institutions, so we concentrate on enrollment targets and make sure classroom seats are filled in accordance with regulations that specify when we count our students for revenue purposes.

At the same time that American higher education is so focused on and protective of its processes, it is also facing both significant challenges and potentially disruptive innovation. Challenges include responding to calls from federal and state policy makers for higher education to increase completion rates and to keep costs down, finding ways that are more effective to help students who are unprepared for college to become successful students, making college information more accessible and processes more transparent for prospective students and their parents, explaining new college rating systems and public score cards, coordinating across institutional boundaries to help an

increasingly mobile student population to transfer more seamlessly and successfully from one institution to another and to graduate, dealing with the threat to shift from peer-based institutional accreditation to a federal system of quality assurance, and responding to new funding systems that are based upon institutional performance.

Potentially disruptive innovations include the increasing use of social media such as YouTube and other open education resources (OER) for learning, the advent of massive online open courses (MOOCs), the quick access to information made possible by advances in technology, and the potential for a shift from the Carnegie unit to documented competencies as the primary way to measure student progression.

One of today's most significant challenges to higher education is the increased focus on student success. In response to calls and sometimes financial incentives from policy makers -- and with the assistance provided by major foundations -- colleges and universities are shifting their focus from student access and opportunity to student access and success. Higher education associations have committed themselves to helping institutions improve college completion rates. The terminology used is that we are shifting from an "access agenda" to a "success agenda" or a "completion agenda."

This identification with outcomes is positive, but it raises concerns about both loss of access to higher education for those students who are less likely to succeed, and the potential for decreased academic rigor. The real mission of higher education is student learning; degrees and certificates must be the institution's certification of identified student learning outcomes rather than just accumulated credits.

Faculty and academic administrators, perhaps working with appropriate representatives from business and industry, need to identify the learner competencies that should be developed by the curriculum. The curriculum should be designed or modified to ensure that those competencies are appropriately addressed. Students should be challenged to rise to the high expectations required to master the identified competencies and should be provided the support they need to become successful. Finally, learners should be assessed in order to ensure that a degree or certificate is a certification of acquired competencies.

What would we do differently if, rather than identifying with our processes, we identified with our overarching mission -- student learning? When viewed through the lens of student learning, many of the processes that we currently rely upon and the decisions we make (or fail to make) seem to defy common sense. The institution itself controls some of these policies and practices; others are policies (or the lack of policies) between and among educational institutions; and some are the result of state or federal legislation.

A prime example of a detrimental institutional process is late registration, the practice of allowing students to register after orientation activities -- and often after classes have begun. Can we really expect students to be successful if they enter a class after it is

under way? Research consistently shows that students who register late are at a significant disadvantage and, most often, fail or drop out.

Yet, many institutions continue this practice, perhaps in the belief that they are providing opportunity -- but it is opportunity that most often leads to discouragement and failure. Some institutional leaders may worry about the potential negative impact on budgets of not having seats filled. However, the enrollment consequences to eliminating late registration have almost always been temporary or negligible.

Sometimes institutional policies are developed in isolation and create unintended roadblocks for students. When I assumed the presidency of Palomar College, the college had a policy that students could not repeat a course in which they received a passing grade (C or above). But another policy prohibited students who had not received a grade of B or higher in the highest-level developmental writing class from progressing to freshman composition. Students who passed the developmental class with a grade of C were out of luck and had to transfer to another institution if they were to proceed with their education. The English faculty likely wanted only the best-performing students from developmental writing in their freshman composition classes, but this same objective could be accomplished by raising the standards for a C grade in the developmental writing class.

Higher education institutions rely on their faculty and staff to accomplish their missions, so it is important for everyone to understand it in the same way. A faculty member I once met told me that he was proud of the high rate of failure in his classes. He believed that it demonstrated both the rigor of his classes and his excellence as a teacher. If we measured the excellence of medical doctors by the percentage of their patients who die, it would make as much sense. Everyone at the institution has a role in promoting student learning, and everyone needs to understand that the job is to inspire students and help them to be successful rather than sorting out those who have challenges.

"The mission of higher education is student learning, and all of or policies, procedures, and practices must be aligned with that mission if our institutions are to remain relevant."

It is important for faculty and staff to enjoy their work, to feel valued by trustees, administrators, peers, and students -- and for them to feel free to innovate and secure in their employment. As important as our people are to accomplishing our mission, their special interests are not the mission. Periodic discussions about revising general education requirements are often influenced by faculty biases about the importance of their disciplines or even by concerns about job security rather than what students need to learn as part of a degree or certificate program. Before these discussions begin, ground rules should be established so that the determinations are based upon desired skills and knowledge of graduates.

Too often, students leave high school unprepared for college, and they almost always face barriers when transferring from one higher education institution to another. The only solution to these problems is for educators to agree on expectations and learning outcome standards. However, institutional autonomy and sometimes prejudice act as barriers to faculty dialogue across institutional boundaries. It is rare for community college faculty and administrators to interact with their colleagues in high schools -- and interaction between university and community college faculty is just as rare.

Why should we be surprised when students leaving high school are often not ready to succeed in college or when the transition between community college and university is not as seamless as it should be for students? If we are serious about increasing the rates of success for students, educators will need to come together to begin important discussions about standards for curriculums and expectations for students.

Despite the best intentions of legislators, government policies often force the focus of institutions away from the mission of student learning. In California, legislation requires community colleges to spend at least 50 percent of their revenue on classroom faculty. Librarians, counselors, student advisers, and financial aid officers are “on the other side of the Fifty Percent Law.” The ratio of student advisers or counselors is most often greater than a thousand to one. Research clearly demonstrates that investments in student guidance pay off in increased student learning and success. Despite the fact that community college students are the most financially disadvantaged students in higher education, they are less likely to receive the financial aid they deserve. Yet, the Fifty Percent Law severely limits what local college faculty and academic administrators can do on their campuses to meet the needs of students in these areas. Clearly, this law is a barrier to increasing student learning and success. Perhaps state legislators and the faculty unions that lobby them do not trust local trustees and administrators to spend resources appropriately, but this law, in its current form, defies common sense if our mission is student learning.

At the federal level, systems of accountability that track only students who are first-time, full-time freshmen to an institution do not make sense in an era when college students are more mobile than ever and in an environment in which most community college students attend part-time. A few years ago, I met with a group of presidents of historically black universities and encouraged them to work with community colleges to increase the number of students who transfer to their institutions. The presidents told me that doing so could lower their measured student success rates because transfers are not first-time freshmen, and the presidents were not willing to take that risk. Fortunately, officials in the U.S. Department of Education are aware of this issue and are working to correct data systems.

There are many other examples of policies and procedures that seem senseless when viewed through the lens of student learning rather than cherished processes and tradition, just as it seems silly that Eastman Kodak did not recognize that its business was photography or that the Swiss watch manufacturers did not understand that their business was to manufacture accurate and affordable wristwatches.

American higher education today is increasingly criticized for increasing costs and low completion rates. Higher education costs have risen at an even faster rate than those of health care; student indebtedness has skyrocketed to nearly $1 trillion; and college completion rates in the United States have fallen to 16th in the world. In addition, new technologies and innovations may soon threaten established practices.

Challenging the status quo and confronting those with special interests that are not aligned with the mission of higher education can be risky for both elected officials and educational leaders. But given the challenges that we face today, “muddling through” brings even greater risks. Every decision that is made and every policy that is proposed must be data-informed, and policy makers and leaders need the courage to ask how the changes will affect student learning, student success, and college costs. Existing policies and practices should be examined with the same questions in mind. Faculty and staff need to be free of restraining practices so they can experiment with strategies to engage students and to help them to learn.

Colleges and universities are too important for educators to deny the challenges and demands of today and too important for policy makers to pass laws because of pressure from special interests or based on their recollection of what college used to be. Decisions cannot be based on past practices when the world is changing so rapidly. The mission of higher education is student learning, and all of our policies, procedures and practices must be aligned with that mission if our institutions are to remain relevant.

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