THE SEVENTH Learning College PRINCIPLE

A Framework for Transformational Change

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CHAPTER 8
Aligning Student Affairs in a Learning-Centered College
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"The real discovery consists not in finding new lands, 
but in seeing with new eyes."
—Marcel Proust

INTRODUCTION

A wise friend who was both a brilliant leader (a former governor of North Carolina) and a dairy farmer once said he loved farming except for one thing: “Dang cows won’t stay milked!” In much the same way, the work of student affairs is driven by a demand for continuous transactional services—recruiting, assessing, advising, orienting, registering—that seems to flow more than ebb and create such a focus on operational success that strategic issues are rarely dealt with at all. Often, student affairs divisions know they are consumed, to borrow a phrase, with “doing things right, rather than doing the right things.”

The learning college paradigm challenges this operational habit. When a college defines its work in terms of the results for learners, we are compelled to ask not only if our operating systems are working for our immediate goals (efficient and effective enrollment services, best use of financial aid, robust enrollment growth, every student properly placed) but also that success in these goals leads to success in the learning goals. These immediate goals determine much of our enrollment and therefore our revenue. Failure in these will surely spell failure for our mission. Success in these, however, does not necessarily mean success as a learning college.
One of the serious challenges to student affairs leaders in colleges committed to reengineering themselves to get better learning results, then, is how to continue to deliver the essential operational results while redesigning and redeploying major systems to get better learning results. This is somewhat akin to renovating the kitchen while preparing a state banquet for 5,000 guests.

LEARNING COLLEGE SYSTEMS

A learning-centered student affairs organization applies "learning" as its central design principle (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This means that the organization is designed so that all the systems combine to create the optimal conditions for student learning. Student affairs, like other components of the college, fulfills this role by asking at each point of systems design, "How does this improve or enhance learning?" and "How do we know?" (O'Banion, 1997)

Let's say again for emphasis, this is systems work. Other parts of the college may get away with working in silos, accommodating idiosyncratic approaches to work, even encouraging a sort of rugged individualism among faculty. In student affairs, however, the nature of the work requires systemic solutions.

Student affairs has an advantage, in that systems thinking, though typically operational in scope, has been a part of the culture for many years. One simply can't integrate services any other way. Seeing how changes in one part of the process may have consequences for others is a mature perspective in student affairs. The question, then, is how to take this systems perspective and translate it into strategic thinking and redesign to get better learning results with students, rather than merely tweaking the systems for better operational results.

This kind of work requires powerful, galvanizing, big ideas. Such ideas incorporate all the complexity of the systems and the simplicity and focus necessary to get results. These big ideas are vitally important. In his marvelous book, Good to Great (2001), Jim Collins calls them the "hedgehogs"
in companies that have transformed themselves into consistently great performers. These are the insights into the architecture of our work around which we can organize our efforts to improve. They are whole new ways of looking at the work. Over the past 10 years at Valencia Community College, these big ideas have been essential to the work that has transformed our student affairs model of work.

Following a bit of background on Valencia, we will summarize our big ideas and show how they are manifested in the systems.

VALENCIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Founded in 1969 in Orlando, Florida, Valencia Community College serves some 50,000 credit students per year (unduplicated head count), with about two thirds pursuing transfer programs and one third technical degrees and certificates. It is a multi-campus college (Valencia, 2004a). Valencia began earnest dialogue about the learning college paradigm in the early 1990s, using grants and working with partners such as the Kellogg Foundation and ACE. Thoughtful review of the Student Affairs Division revealed fragmentation of services across campuses and departments, some silos of departments and operations that needed integration, and a lack of tools and staff to meet student learner needs beyond optimizing enrollment. Members of the staff revealed dissatisfaction with the student success rates, a deep commitment to student success, and a willingness to reengineer their work to get better results.

Early in this process, the division was centralized from relatively independent campus departments of student services to a college-wide division. Campus deans of students, who had previously reported directly to campus provosts, instead began reporting directly to a college vice president for educational programs (student services). They remained a part of the campus leadership team but had a "dotted line" to the campus leaders and a "solid line" to the vice president. This improved the college's ability to introduce systemic reform to the division.
Also early on, the college was challenged with the question, “What is your underlying theory or model of student services?” This question revealed that the college had been focused on perfecting its operations and needed to revisit its mission and systems. The college began to look for a unifying conceptual framework, grounded in the literature and research of student development, human learning and motivation, and higher education. After much discussion, a model of student advising that blended the ideas expressed in the work of Frost (1991), O’Banion (1994), Gordon and Sears (1997), and Tinto (1993) was developed. The college learned that the model must be described from the student perspective and include the ideal progression of student learning and development.

This model is important for several reasons. It demystifies the college experience for students so they can learn how to optimize their own learning. It provides an organizational theme around which faculty and staff can contribute to student success. Finally, it provides a core model for designing interventions and evaluating their success, troubleshooting solutions, and interpreting the assessments of impact on students. The model supplies the language of reform and the basis for evaluation.

Having established a theory of student engagement and a model of student service, the college began to redesign its services. In this process, five “big ideas” have emerged as design principles. Each is briefly described below.

**CONDITIONS OF LEARNING**

Historically, effective student services systems have been designed to “deliver the right student to the right class at the right time, ready to learn.” This is the best of the operational definitions we have found for a traditional approach to student services, and it still has much validity. To this requirement, however, we have to add a responsibility. Learning colleges seek to improve student learning by creating the optimal conditions for each student’s learning, and this is not just a concern for academic affairs. Defining the conditions of learning—the alterable variables in the learning
equation—and seeking to optimize them at every opportunity is the focus of system redesign in student affairs. The most important of these variables are time, engagement, assessment, challenge, and heart (we use the acronym T.E.A.C.H. to provide a simple reference point for all staff) (Astin, 1993; Gardiner, 1993; McKeachie, 2002; Tinto, 1997). These are easily recognized as variables in the classroom. They also have important implications for student affairs. In a nutshell, then, the whole college seeks to make systemic changes that lead to improvements in

1. Time on task, both in and out of the classroom
2. Engagement of students with their academic work, one another, their professors, and the college staff
3. Accurate and timely individualized assessment of learning results, first for the learner, then for the teacher, and finally for the institution
4. Challenge, or expectations for performance that communicate to the students our confidence in their capacity to learn all we have to teach and clearly assign the responsibility (while providing the tools) to students for the lion's share of the learning enterprise
5. Heart, or the belief that all students can learn under the right conditions in every discipline, curriculum, and course.

With these touchstones for design, one can ask many powerful questions, such as: How does our orientation program prepare students to invest the time to succeed? Have we created a campus culture and climate that is engaging for all students, or are some feeling less welcomed? Does our system of assessment and placement assure accurate placement of every student? Is it viewed as a positive preparatory step or a punitive, remedial one? Does our assessment system provide the learner and the teacher with helpful insights into the learning strengths and preferences of each learner? Does our staff exhibit a passion for the learning of our students, or have we so exhausted them that students have become to them a problem to be solved rather than people with potential to be developed?
CONNECTION AND DIRECTION

Learning is not a passive activity. It engages the learner and requires that the college create an engaging climate. The literature of student persistence and success is quite clear on the importance of making an early connection (Tinto, 1997; Stahl, Simpson, & Hayes, 1992). These connections are important in every dimension: student to curriculum, student to staff, student to student, and student to faculty. In our large and often impersonal bureaucracies, many students float through without connection and are at high risk of attrition. Our evidence suggests that no time is more vital for this connection than the very first experiences of college. Certainly, academic success is highly correlated to persistence. So is a positive experience in the first interactions on campus with, typically, student affairs staff. These interactions must simplify the bewilderment many students experience upon entering college, clarify what their next step will be, and give them the tools to succeed there, at the front door of the college. Front-line staff members play a critical role here; we call them “directors of first impressions.” By this, we don’t just mean the students’ impressions of the college but also their impressions of themselves. These impressions should assure the students that no matter how overwhelming this may all seem, they are perfectly capable of succeeding here.

It isn’t enough, though, that students make a connection to the college. As early as possible, they must also develop a clear sense of direction. Students bring three important “directional” questions to student affairs:

1. What do I do next? Here we give the kind of advice that we are best at, sorting out the complexities of our processes, our regulations, our deadlines, our software, our bureaucracy. The information is valuable but not particularly empowering.

2. What do I do here? This involves decisions about program, course sequence, prerequisites, and major that constitute for most students a rough academic plan. Some colleges do an admirable job with this work. Most haven’t a clue. The typical community college requires students to file a plan to graduate the semester they graduate. It is called an “application for a degree.” Yet having a plan early
in one's career has a demonstrably positive impact on one's chances of success (Tinto, 1993). A learning college will make it possible for all students to have a meaningful plan to graduate on file as early as possible in their academic career, perhaps by the 15th credit hour.

3. What do (or will) I do? This is a matter of serious career and life discernment. Many colleges offer services in this area, but they are rarely accessed by more than a small percentage of the students. Yet having clarity on this matter is the foundation for good answers to the first two questions.

Connection and direction have proven to be very powerful ideas at Valencia. When students meet three criteria of connection and direction, their likelihood of graduating is extremely high: If they complete any required remediation, attempt at least 15 hours of college credit work, and declare a major, their graduation rates approach 90%. Still, at Valencia the most powerful predictor of successful completion of a program is academic performance in the first semester.

**START RIGHT**

One of the richest sources of data on student performance is transcripts. Transcript analysis offers us a view of the college as the students experience us, not as we experience them. One helpful approach to these data is to assess the accumulated credit hours of all enrolled students. If there were no attrition and no failure, one would expect an almost equal number of students with 15 hours as with 30, or even 60 hours. Indeed, this is the pattern one finds at Ivy League colleges. In a typical community college, however, one finds that nearly 80% of the students have accumulated 15 or fewer semester hours. This is the nature of the educational challenge faced by the American community college. We continue to enroll large numbers of students in order to produce relatively few graduates. The fact is, if students survive the early experiences of a community college, they tend to succeed at a rather high level. However, very few survive these early
experiences. Despite many years of effort, most community colleges still churn large numbers of students in and out of the front door.

This means that systemic improvements and investments at the 30th or 40th hour of the curriculum will have only minor impact on graduation, placement, and transfer. Even modest improvements early in the process could produce far-reaching effects. Valencia and other colleges on the learning paradigm journey, therefore, are concentrating much of their effort on the first experiences of the college. We call this principle “start right.”

**COLLABORATION**

We recently went through an inclusive process to hire a chief student affairs officer. Throughout the process, the most frequently asked question was, “How will you collaborate with academic affairs in your work?” The recently hired chief academic officer admitted she was never asked in her extensive interviews how she would collaborate with student affairs.

This scenario might be taken to mean that old biases about the relative roles of academic and student affairs persist. It might also mean that student affairs has dealt itself into the learning college journey powerfully enough to be considered a player with which to be reckoned. We believe the latter is the case. Redesigning the model of student services has created such pervasive change that it can’t be ignored in the classrooms and faculty lounges. Since its purpose is to alter the conditions of learning, the faculty now has a very real stake in the work. The student learning experience is continuous and does not divide itself along the college organizational boundaries. This movement creates the necessity for student affairs to partner more effectively with academic administrators, the faculty, administrative services, technology support, institutional research, and institutional advancement.
STUDENT AFFAIRS CURRICULUM

The traditional college curriculum, so famously fragmented by distributed requirements and disciplinary atomization, needs to be more carefully constructed so students experience it as an academic program and not just a collection of courses. An alternate view considers the content of student affairs as a curriculum and the processes as a pedagogy (Harvey-Smith, 2003). This creates the possibility of meta-cognitive outcomes, or core curricular outcomes that are touched by every learning experience. At Valencia, these have been defined by the faculty to be: Think, Value, Communicate, and Act. In every discipline, faculty teams are working to define how these outcomes are learned and assessed. But these outcomes ought to be designed into the student affairs “curriculum” as well. Since the learning college seeks to make active, and eventually independent, partners in learning out of the students, our processes should also have clearly articulated outcomes. What is it we want students to learn as they progress through the systems of student affairs? Surely we would say competence in planning, scheduling, making critically informed choices about one’s future, understanding one’s own learning styles and strengths, and employing this knowledge for one’s learning. The point is that in a learning college, student affairs will define these outcomes and assess them.

A part of this big idea at Valencia is the notion of “Big A to the Big S.” Shown in Figure 1, it is intended to convey to the student (the “S”) and the college (all faculty and staff denoted as “A”—“Advisers”) that we expect the student to play a modest role as a partner in managing his learning early in his career; as he progresses, he is expected to become increasingly self-sufficient and the college’s role should diminish. As the student approaches graduation and transfer, he should be competent to manage the challenges of the next stage of his learning journey and also to have learned the process so he can repeat it as needed throughout his life. The student services curriculum should be designed to accomplish this transition.
SUMMARY OF THE BIG IDEAS

These five "big ideas"—creating the conditions for learning, assuring that our students experience connection and direction, assuring that our students start right, collaborating to build systems that work at the scale of the whole college, and being intentional about the curriculum of student affairs—have provided the intellectual leverage to develop and sustain long-term reform in student affairs based on the learning college paradigm. It is important to emphasize long term. The changes in the delivery model of student affairs at Valencia have been under way for nearly a decade, and the work still isn’t complete. The extended time required for this kind of reform is one reason the big ideas are essential. When the project of the day bogs down or when staff members begin to ask themselves why they are stretching themselves for the next leg of the work, the big ideas lift them up out of the “weeds” of implementation and return them to the view from 10,000 feet. From this vantage point, they can both mark progress toward larger goals and map the course ahead.

THE SYSTEMS TRILOGY

Our big ideas have led Valencia to create three systems to provide operational performance and create a learning-centered student affairs environment for students. These three systems are LifeMap, Atlas, and the Learning-Centered Student Services Delivery Model. They are described below roughly in the order in which they were developed.
LifeMap

LifeMap is Valencia’s developmental advising model. It is a system of responsibility shared by students, faculty, and staff that promotes social and academic integration, education and career planning, and the acquisition of study and life skills. Developmental advising assists students in the exploration, clarification, communication, and implementation of realistic choices, based upon awareness of their learning styles, abilities, interests, and values.

LifeMap recognizes that students typically enter college with vague notions of their goals and minimal understanding of how to negotiate a college environment. With the goal of student self-sufficiency, LifeMap interventions provide more support to students in the beginning of their college experience and then move them toward becoming more self-directed.

LifeMap is predominately about student goal-setting and planning. It includes creating a norm that says a student should have life, career, and educational goals; setting up a system to establish and document those goals; helping to plan and implement goals; developing assessment processes to re-evaluate goals; and documenting the achievement of goals. LifeMap describes for students “what they should do when” to achieve their career and educational goals through a five-stage model. Each stage includes an outcome, performance indicators, and guiding principles that tie to the literature on best practices. A time frame is specified in terms of academic progression.

The five stages are:
- Postsecondary Transition (middle and high school to college decision)
- Introduction to College (0-15 credit hours)
- Progression to Degree (16-44 credit hours)
- Graduation Transition (45-60 credit hours)

The details on each stage can be found at http://valenciacc.edu/lifemap/stages.
Once the model was developed, it became clear that change in student success would not occur until the LifeMap model was implemented through a system that supported it. The implementation process has included:

**Gap Analysis.** With the LifeMap model as the ideal, we mapped the programs and services already in place to the LifeMap stages, refocused interventions where needed, and developed new interventions. With LifeMap as the foundation of the curriculum in student affairs, we have considered the learning outcomes, instructional strategies, and assessment methods for our programs. This has included integrating LifeMap into our new student orientation program, student success course, student services workshops, and individual advising sessions.

**Faculty and Staff Development.** Faculty and deans have come to understand LifeMap as a means to tap into student motivation through understanding student goals and their connection to classroom learning experiences. Faculty development programs have provided opportunity to learn about and design instructional strategies that integrate LifeMap. Indeed, this is one of the competencies for new faculty who participate in the Teaching and Learning Academy. As the foundation for student affairs, LifeMap is integrated into all staff development programs, department meetings, and staff performance evaluations. Collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs has been a key to this work as we develop a system that reinforces for students the importance of goal setting and planning.

**Marketing.** The brand name of “LifeMap” with the tag line “Life’s a trip. You’ll need directions.” was developed to
explain developmental advising to students and motivate them to participate. Large banners on campus; posters in the hallways; collateral materials such as t-shirts, mouse pads, and other printed items; the redesign of college publications such as the student handbook; and the creation of new publications all contribute to integrating LifeMap into the culture of the college. The main call to action of the marketing campaign has been to urge students to have a plan (direction) and to point them to campus resources (connection).

**Student Information System.** LifeMap required a Web-based system that provided online tools for students to develop career and educational plans and to communicate easily with faculty and staff. Over time, we developed our online portal, Atlas.

**Atlas**

Atlas is a Web-based portal system that integrates numerous applications. Atlas connects students, faculty, and staff and encourages students to set direction for their learning, career, and educational goals early in their Valencia experience and to document their goal achievement.

Atlas was designed by an implementation team that included faculty, academic administration, admissions, financial aid, business office, advising, institutional research, continuing education, and information technology. An Academic Issues Task Force of faculty and academic deans recommended ways in which Atlas could support our learning-centered focus. The Faculty Association made recommendations on the implementation of features that served faculty. The Atlas Improvement Team continues as a representative group that guides ongoing development of Atlas.

Features that support connection and engagement are e-mail to all students, faculty, and staff; a home page for every course at Valencia that includes e-mail lists of the class, online syllabus, and other relevant links; a
chat room; a message board; and Atlas groups that any person in the community can join or establish. The group categories were designed to support our learning goals. They include LifeMap: Students (groups created for each LifeMap stage), Career Interests, Majors, and Learning-Centered College. Each group has an e-mail list, links to information relevant to the group, a chat room, and a message board.

Atlas also includes a My LifeMap tab that contains four online planning tools as well as information about LifeMap, its stages, and the programs that support it. Students can use this information to assess their progress and connect with college resources. The tools—My Career Planner, My Education Plan, My Portfolio, and My Job Prospects—help students to do online career assessments and self-assessments; collect information on careers, majors, and transfer colleges of interest; evaluate gathered information via a summary; develop a list of career and educational goals based on this evaluation; develop plans for reaching these goals with deadlines; implement those plans; and track goal achievement. Faculty and advisers can review these plans with students and provide feedback. Students can review and edit their plans.

Atlas provides dynamic, time-relevant information and links to college services that guide students. An additional Atlas curriculum tool for student affairs is a messages feature, which sends “just in time” information to students. Messages either post on the Atlas home page or are e-mailed. Atlas also provides each student with information such as academic record, grades, degree audit, financial aid status, and student accounts. When registering, students can consult their My Education Plan to see the courses in which they should enroll, search for those classes and complete registration, make payments, and order books through Atlas.

To support our “start right” focus, we introduce Atlas to all new students in the orientation program, focusing on the My LifeMap tools and the academic services features. Online tutorials walk students through, and each campus has an Atlas Access lab with staff to assist students in learning the full functioning of the system. In the Student Success class in which all new students are encouraged to enroll, the curriculum includes time in the
Atlas Access lab to learn to use My Career Planner and My Education Plan. Students who complete the course (currently about one-third of all entering students) create an education plan.

**Learning-Centered Student Services Delivery Model**

Student affairs is responsible for the processes of application, financial aid award and disbursement, assessment and placement, new student orientation, and advising and works closely with the business office on student accounts and fee payment. We know that these administrative processes are often frustrating to students and often create a negative early experience. In studying the literature on process engineering (Hammer & Champy, 1993; Hammer & Stanton, 1995; Beede & Burnett, 1999), we concluded that a major problem in the traditional delivery model is that students get information about what is really an end-to-end process (initial interest to seat in classes) in disjointed segments due to the traditional silos in which student services is delivered.

As a result, we redesigned our delivery model (see Figure 2) so that students learn the entire process in one physical location with the assistance of cross-trained staff members who focus on the learning process as opposed to just giving segmented answers. In fact, during the implementation of this model, we admonished staff not to answer students' first question, as it is often not the real question that students have. A conversation might go:

Student: “Can you tell me how I can get a transcript?”

Student Services Specialist: “Yes, but tell me what you want to accomplish so I can help you learn the entire process.”

The conversation that follows may include discussion of degree and graduation requirements, possible administrative holds on the student's academic records, transfer planning, and referral to placement services.
Our model was developed with the idea that 80% of student questions can be answered via Atlas. We support learning to use Atlas through para-professional staff available in the Atlas Access labs on campus, students' access to personal information through Atlas and the My LifeMap planning tools, and student engagement with professional staff in the Answer Center. Student services specialists in the Answer Center are cross-trained to help students learn the processes of admissions (application and residency), financial aid (application deadlines and materials, award and disbursement, and deadlines), transcripts (high school, college, advanced placement, College-Level Examination Program) and graduation (application, requirements, commencement, deadlines). Specialists also make referrals to other student services staff if necessary. So they can focus on working with each student individually, the specialists do not have the responsibility of answering incoming telephone calls. Instead, telephone calls and e-mails are
handled by the Enrollment Services Call Center, whose staff is also cross-trained to answer end-to-end process questions.

In the area now called Student Services, students meet with specialists in financial aid, counseling, advising, or specialized programs (e.g., honors, international students, dual enrollment). Managers in student services also have responsibility for programs such as new student orientation. These staff members are colocated so that students can go to one place for a number of specialized services. Still, some specialized services require their own location, such as services to students with disabilities, assessments, and the career services centers.

Another important piece of the redesign model was to separate the staff whose primary job is working directly with students and the staff whose primary job is processing and verifying information. For example, in traditional delivery models, the admissions staff members who enter large stacks of applications are also expected to assist students at the counter. Under these conditions, it is only human to feel that students are an interruption to one's work of "getting those applications done." We have created District Offices for admissions, financial aid, and graduation in which staff are responsible for the back office processing of student information, transcripts, applications, federal eligibility data, and so on, and are not expected to interrupt their work to answer telephones or serve students.

Physical space on the campuses has been redesigned to fit the new model with an improvement in efficiency and closer working relationships that benefit students. For example, the counselors and financial aid specialists are now in the same office suite; this has resulted in sharing of information and better understanding of how each other's processes affect students. New signage invites students to the Answer Center and other areas in a much more visible way. "Information Stations" in the lobby of each student services building also provide directional information, written materials, forms, and personal assistance by students trained as paraprofessionals.
Summary

The trilogy of LifeMap, Atlas, and Learning-Centered Student Services Delivery Model work together with the college's learning outcomes (Think, Value, Communicate, and Act [TVCA]) to form the content and the methodology for student affairs. LifeMap and TVCA form the content of "what" we are seeking to achieve with students, and Atlas and the Learning-Centered Student Services Delivery Model are the "how" we work with students to achieve those learning outcomes.

The assessment of the model has focused on traditional measures of student success—persistence, course completion, graduation. Results have improved in all measures, but, of course, Valencia's learning-centered college journey has included many more strategies than have been described here. With that as a caveat, some of the results we have seen are:

- Fall term to spring term persistence rate for first-time-in-college students was 79% in 2003-04, up from 65% in 1995-96 (Valencia, 2004a).

- The term-to-term persistence rate of new students who enroll in required developmental courses and take the Student Success course is 89%, compared with 56% for students who drop their developmental courses and do not take Student Success (Valencia, 2004a).

- Average number of credit hours completed increased to 8.7 in fall 2003 from 7.9 in fall 1994 (Valencia, 2004a).

- Valencia ranks No. 2 in the United States in the number of associate degrees awarded and No. 4 in associate degrees awarded to Hispanic students. In both cases, we are nowhere near the largest of colleges in terms of enrollment. The number of graduates is growing at more than twice the rate of enrollment growth (Community College Week, June 21, 2004).

- Over 12,000 students have saved a plan in My Education Plan, over 5,600 students have saved a career assessment in My Career Planner, and over 3,400 students have saved an entry in My Portfolio (Valencia, 2004b). While these are process rather than outcome measures, they are evidence of students' acceptance of LifeMap and its focus on planning.
CONCLUSION

Creating alignment in any large organization is a tremendous leadership challenge. Doing so in a division like student affairs with such unremitting operational demands is especially difficult. The journey toward a more learning-centered college is nearly a decade old at Valencia Community College, yet we are still in the formative stages of this transformation. Still, student affairs is in a leadership role in this transformation largely because the change is driven by five “big ideas.”

The real work of transformation is in translating these ideas into systems of work. Though it is still early in their full implementation, the college is already beginning to see results that suggest more engagement, retention, and completion.

REFERENCES


