

TEACHING EXCELLENCE: MISSION FOR THE 80'S

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There is some anxiety and considerable confusion about the mission of community colleges in the 1980's. The anxiety comes from questions raised -- usually by state funding agencies -- about the comprehensiveness of the community college. The confusion comes from a lack of clarity about what we mean by "mission." Given the fact that Webster gives ten separate definitions for the word "mission," our confusion is perhaps understandable. There are several dictionary definitions that seem apt for community colleges; among them are these:

"The sending out of persons to a foreign government to conduct negotiations." I suspect that definition appeals to many college presidents who have been asked to explain to the legislature just what it is that their college does and why it costs so much to do it. More embattled presidents may prefer the military definition of mission -- "a specific combat operation assigned to an individual or unit..."

For our purposes today, I am going to use the definition that seems to fit the history of community colleges in this country. Mission, in this sense, is understood to be, "the special task or purpose for which a person [organization] is apparently destined in life." When community colleges were given a destiny by the

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1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education, that destiny was spelled out in these words:

"Whatever form the community college takes, its purpose is educational service to the entire community, and this purpose requires of it a variety of functions and programs. It will provide college education for the youth of the community certainly, so as to remove geographic and economic barriers to educational opportunity and discover and develop individual talents at low cost and easy access. But in addition, the community college will serve as an active center of adult education. It will attempt to meet the total post-high school needs of its community." (President's Commission..., 1947, Vol. I, p. 67).

That is the mission that drove the community college expansion of the 1960's and 70's. Two concepts gave the great community college leaders of that era what has often been described as their "missionary zeal." First, they were providing access to higher education -- for the first time in history -- to all who wanted to attend college. Second, they were providing comprehensive educational services to their communities. Understandably, they became known informally as "Peoples' Colleges," and more formally as "Comprehensive Community Colleges."

Now let us return to the definition of "mission" that I selected earlier as being especially appropriate for community colleges -- "the special task or purpose for which [an organization] is apparently destined in life." Why aren't community colleges still destined for the double-barreled mission of access and the provision of comprehensive educational services to the community? Why is there so much anxiety and confusion about those missions today? There was no confusion twenty years ago when community colleges were springing up everywhere at the

rate of better than one new college each week, with apparent support and enthusiasm for their mission.

Let's look at the situation then and now. Twenty years ago existing colleges were overcrowded, and few were interested in serving new populations of students -- either adults or first generation college students. Today, colleges are in hot competition for so called "non-traditional students." Community colleges are, in part at least, responsible for that competition -- both because they increased the supply of college spaces available and because they demonstrated that non-traditional students had the interest in and potential for college-level study. In short, community colleges made access a legitimate, and even desirable, mission for higher education.

Today, most colleges -- four-year as well as community colleges -- are open door institutions. Only 16 percent of all American colleges can be considered "selective," and it is estimated that two-thirds of all freshmen attend open admission colleges (OERI, 1986). Thus, access has become a mission shared by the majority of colleges in the United States -- sometimes a self-serving rather than an altruistic mission, but a mission, nevertheless, that drives the policies and practices of the institution.

The second mission that was specifically given to the community colleges by the Truman Commission on Higher Education -- service to the local community -- was set forth in these words:

"Hence the President's Commission suggests the name 'community college' to be applied to the institution designed to serve chiefly local community education needs. It may have

various forms of organization and may have curricula of various lengths. Its dominant feature is its relations to the life of the community it serves." (President's Commission, Vol. III, p. 5, 1947.)

What has happened in the last forty years to that distinctive community-oriented mission? According to the Truman Commission, community colleges should "derive much of their support from the local community, supplemented by aid from State funds."

(President's Commission... Vol. I, p. 67, 1947). The past forty years has taken a heavy toll on local funding. For the past decade funding has been moving toward the state. That need not -- indeed should not -- diminish the unique mission of community colleges to serve their communities. While most colleges --four-year as well as community colleges -- are "local" colleges, in the sense that they serve a local constituency, community colleges have been charged with the distinctive responsibility of responding to the needs of the community. That is not quite the same thing as launching any program that will attract new students to the college -- which is a common strategy for most colleges in these times of fierce competition for students.

It seems to me that serving the educational needs of the community is just as viable and important as a mission_{MA} as it was forty years ago when the Truman commission foresaw the need for the continuous education of the citizenry.

Does this little bit of historical analysis suggest that those who argue that community college leaders simply need to be more articulate and more persuasive in their defense of the community college mission are right -- that things haven't

changed that much and that we can once again rally the troops to energy and commitment behind the joint causes of access and service to the community?

Frankly, I don't think the problem lies in the articulation of mission -- that if only people understood community colleges they would love and support them. The times and the role of community colleges in the education of the nation have changed enough now that it is time for a new passion, new points of pride, new expertise, and new commitments for community colleges.

What should that new commitment be? I think it should meet a number of criteria. It must be consistent with the history and role of community colleges in higher education. It must be appropriate for the people of community colleges -- both students and faculty. It must be something that community colleges can do uniquely well. And it must fulfill a real need in today's world. That new mission, I submit, should be teaching excellence.

But, some of you will protest, we've always proclaimed our concerns about teaching, and teaching has never had to vie with research for attention in community colleges. True --in part, at least -- which means that community colleges have the best head start on actually implementing what virtually all the reform reports of the 1980's are asking for -- better learning and better teaching at the undergraduate level.

What I am proposing, however, is not more attention to proclaiming that teaching is important in community colleges, but more attention to developing the kind of solid expertise among the teaching faculty that will make community colleges known for their first-rate professional teachers.

I am suggesting that faculty in community colleges should undertake, as their intellectual and professional challenge, the scholarly study of teaching and learning and how to measure and evaluate the performance of students and teachers.

Let me spend a few minutes on why teaching excellence should be the energizing mission for community colleges in the 1980's, and then I'd like to turn to some concrete suggestions about how to get started on this mission.

Community colleges are, first and foremost, teaching institutions. No other type of institution has quite the challenge or quite the obligation for excellence in teaching that the community college has. Access and equal opportunity, which provided the rallying cry for the exuberant growth of the community colleges in the 1960 and '70s, are meaningless unless the populations newly admitted are gaining access to a first-rate education. Improving the quality of teaching and learning is the logical next step for colleges that led the way in opening the routes of access to college.

The student populations of community colleges constitute a special challenge to teachers on several counts. First, skillful and caring teaching is especially important to students who have not excelled academically in grade school and high school. Students who have good records of achievement in school will teach themselves in college; they have both the skills and the motivation to learn on their own and with the help of similarly motivated peers. In contrast, community college students are, for the most part, dependent on teachers -- to help them develop the skills for learning, to demonstrate the satisfactions of

learning, and to engender the self-confidence and risk-taking that learning anything new requires.

The second reason for the dependence of community college students on teachers is the commuting nature of the student body. The research of the past quarter of a century shows that much of the "value added" of a collegiate education comes from the total environment of the college -- the dorms, extra-curricular activities, and out-of-class relationships with students and teachers. Because virtually all community college students are commuters, rushing from job and family responsibilities to class without much time to trade ideas or reactions with fellow students, whatever education these students get from college will necessarily come from the classroom. As the college experience becomes increasingly part-time and most students live off campus, the classroom bears a heavy burden for the development of the skills, values, and appreciations that we associate with educated persons.

For many reasons, the classroom has become the central issue in American higher education in the 1980s. Access, the central issue of the 1960s and 70s, was basically a challenge to administrators, policy-makers, and managers. The task was to build colleges, create new programs and services for non-traditional students, and establish financial aid and non-discriminatory policies. College faculties, while generally supportive, were relatively uninvolved in the access revolution. Most struggled to cope; a few complained bitterly about administratively determined recruitment strategies that brought pathetically underprepared students into their classrooms

(Slutsky, 1978). It is not altogether surprising that today we face a faculty described in national studies as "demoralized" and "at risk". (See Change, September/October, 1985.)

I do find it surprising, however, that the new demands for "academic excellence" are being widely -- and I contend mistakenly -- interpreted to apply more to the reputation of the faculty for scholarly productivity than to the effectiveness of the faculty in stimulating student learning. An appalling number of four-year colleges are pressing faculty hard for research and scholarly activity that will result in publication and visibility for the college.

A buyer's market for faculty in recent years has encouraged this response because it has made it possible for little-known institutions to recruit faculty luminaries, in whose light the institution hopes to bask. That reaction to the calls for academic reform is not, I submit, likely to re-invigorate the faculty -- 70% of whom claim that their first interest is in teaching (Carnegie Survey, Chronicle for Higher Education, Dec. 18, 1985). For the nation as a whole, it has the effect of making formerly good teaching institutions into quite mediocre research institutions. And it leaves teachers who really want to teach without a model of academic excellence.

The problem that is waiting to be addressed -- I hope by all teaching institutions but especially by community colleges -- is how to build a model of academic excellence based on the teaching excellence of the faculty. The model should include how to recruit outstanding teachers, how to reward excellence in teaching, how to develop in-house training for the development of

teaching expertise, and how to stimulate passion and pride in the profession of teaching. ^{for 2 or 3 lines} I have some suggestions about how to do those things, and I turn to those now.

I do not believe that we can achieve teaching excellence without scholarly inquiry into the nature of teaching and learning on the part of the teaching faculty. The models we have been using for "faculty development" have made little noticeable impact on the quality of college teaching for three reasons: First, they depend heavily on external expertise -- outside consultants, special offices for the improvement of teaching, and educational research. I think we need all of these services, but the ultimate responsibility for the improvement of teaching must rest with individual classroom teachers who are intellectually curious about how to improve their own performance.

Second, present models assume that there are certain common elements of good teaching that all teachers need to attend to in order to stimulate learning -- active student participation, prompt feedback on performance, and holding high expectations, for example. (Study Group..., 1984).

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that if all teachers managed to incorporate those basic laws of learning into their teaching, that teaching would be greatly improved, but researchers are beginning to discover that good teaching requires more than applying general principles. It requires an understanding of the structure and goals of the particular discipline. (McKeachie et al, 1986). Good math teachers teach differently from good history teachers. Thus, we need to bring disciplinary expertise to the study of teaching and learning.

Moreover, it is very difficult to derive generalized laws of learning that apply to students in general, teachers in general or classrooms in general. In any classroom, subject matter, teachers and students are distinctive. Classrooms have their own micro-cultures, and much of the professional skill of teachers comes from successful adaptation to the on-going micro-culture of a particular classroom.

Finally, present models for faculty development affect relatively few faculty members -- and those who do attend sessions and get involved in programs tend to be those who are already good teachers wanting to be better. If we are to make a major impact on the quality of teaching in higher education, all teachers -- or at least a significant mass -- need to be involved in experimentation, discovery, discussion, and ultimately the improvement of teaching in the institution.

I have proposed elsewhere (Cross, 1987) the development of college teachers as Classroom Researchers. Classroom Researchers are teachers who are involved in the formal study of teaching and learning as it is taking place in their classrooms. They have been trained to be careful observers of student learning, to collect feedback on what and how well students are learning, and to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching. The basic premise of Classroom Research is that the involvement of teachers in their own professional development is the surest route to reestablishing teaching as a profession. More specifically, classroom research is based on five basic assumptions.

1. The quality of student learning is directly -- although not exclusively -- related to the quality of classroom teaching.

Therefore, the first and most promising way to improve learning is to improve teaching.

Although I think that most people involved in the current education reform movement would agree that classroom teachers bear the primary responsibility for student learning, the classroom has been significantly ignored in the current drive for educational excellence. So far, the most common response to the demands for improved student learning has been "assessment." While the collection of information about student learning seems an appropriate place to start, much of the enthusiasm for assessment is generated at collegewide and statewide levels, primarily by administrators and legislators who are responding to public demands for accountability. The results have been large-scale institutional or system-level assessments, without adequate attention to establishing the necessary linkages between assessment and the improvement of instruction. The question that remains after statewide and institutional assessments have been completed is, How can we improve student learning? The answer to that question lies with the teaching faculty, and the purpose of Classroom Research is to involve classroom teachers from the very beginning in the formulation of goals and the collection of information about student learning.

2. The research most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by teachers on questions they themselves have formulated in response to problems or issues in their own teaching.

Teachers have been criticized for their failure to apply the findings of research to their teaching almost as often as

researchers have been taken to task for failing to ask the research questions that are meaningful and useful to practitioners. For most of this century, the gap between research and practice has posed a major problem to funders of research in education. "Development" and "dissemination" have been the presumed answers, but the fact is that those two stalwarts of converting research in the laboratory into practice in the field have not worked as well in education as in agricultural extension, which is the model upon which "R & D" in education is based. The goal of Classroom Research is to reduce the distance between researchers and practitioners to zero. It is one way of assuring that the questions investigated by the researcher are meaningful and useful to the practitioner.

This should not imply that educational research is therefore useless. Quite the contrary, I believe that as practitioners become involved in raising questions and conducting their own research on learning, they will be more interested in and more appreciative of the fundamental and generalized findings that are the special province of educational researchers.

3. To improve their teaching, teachers need to make their goals and objectives explicit, and they need to get specific comprehensible feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.

The two major products of the Classroom Research project that we are currently working on are the Teaching Goals Inventory (TGI) and a Handbook of Classroom Assessment Strategies. The Teaching Goals Inventory is a questionnaire that helps teachers clarify and establish priorities that are appropriate to their

subject matter and their students. The TGI is currently in experimental stages, but ultimately our hope is to help classroom teachers collect the type of feedback information about student learning that is most relevant to their teaching goals.

An early administration of the TGI at Miami-Dade Community College revealed that the goals that teachers have for individual courses can be grouped into six clusters. The cluster of goals that most teachers endorse, regardless of the subject they teach, is one that we have labeled Cognitive Development. It consists of items such as these: To help students develop analytic skills, synthesize materials, develop ability to think clearly, and other statements that have to do with helping students develop higher level cognitive skills.

A second cluster that was important to most teachers at Miami-Dade was one consisting of basic skills items -- developing reading, writing, and listening skills, and developing the motivation and self-discipline for lifelong learning.

Other clusters were interesting because they were valued by particular disciplines. Teachers of courses in the humanities were especially prone to attach value to goals such as these: To help students develop historical consciousness, appreciate the liberal arts, develop creative capacities, and tolerate intellectual ambiguity. Teachers of vocational subjects selected items such as these as goals for their course: To help students make good career decisions, to plan ahead, to be motivated toward accomplishment/achievement, and to work collaboratively with others. Teachers interested in helping students with personal development, indicated by items such as the development of sense

of personal responsibility, cultivation of psychological well-being, and development of self-esteem were most often teachers of basic skills courses.

The TGI showed us that classroom teachers are aiming for a wide variety of learning outcomes. We have dealt with the need for variety in classroom assessment measures by putting together a Handbook of Classroom Assessment Strategies. (Cross and Angelo, in press). "Classroom Assessment Strategies" is the term that we give to instruments and methods that inform teachers what students are learning in the classroom. They may be fairly traditional tests or student reactions to teaching strategies or materials, or they may be measures of higher level cognitive functioning. The Handbook, that will be available to classroom teachers sometime this winter, will contain descriptions of approximately 33 feedback devices along with instructions about how to use them.

Let me give a few examples from the Handbook to make more concrete the reality of college teachers as Classroom Researchers -- or in this more specific instance classroom assessors. I have selected these particular examples because they are easy to explain; you will need to read about more complex devices. Under the section in the Handbook dealing with feedback on "Academic Skills and Intellectual Development," we have described a device originally introduced by Anne Berthoff (1982) called the one-sentence summary of Who does What to Whom How When Where and Why?

To illustrate how this feedback device might be used, let me ask you to take a few minutes to write a one-sentence summary of

what you have learned today about Classroom Research. The format, once again, Who does What to Whom, How, When, Where, and Why? Your sentence should look something like this: (Who does what to whom?) Teachers assess student learning (How?) by getting feedback (When?) several times during the semester (Where?) in their own classrooms (Why?) in order to improve their teaching and students' learning.

This device, like most in the book, is a teaching strategy as well as a feedback device. In this case, the student is not only providing feedback on learning, but is learning and practicing an important cognitive skill.

Another simple assessment strategy that is quite different and that has had a high appeal to some of my Harvard colleagues (See Mosteller, 1987) is called "Minute Papers" and was first developed by a physicist at the University of California, (Wilson, 1986). In the last few minutes of the class period, this professor asks students to take out a piece of paper and write the answers to two questions: What is the most important thing you learned today? and What questions remain uppermost in your mind as we conclude this class session?

Minute Papers have proved useful since the implications for improving teaching are immediate and clear. Some teachers have prepared handouts answering questions that a number of students had at the end of class; or a teacher may decide to review difficult concepts at the beginning of the next class period, or a teacher may conclude that there is a better way to teach the concept, or that the level of the questions in student minds could be raised by presenting the concept differently.

My intention today is not to describe the infinite possibilities for assessment strategies, but to try to give you some concrete examples of how classroom teachers can use relatively simple feedback devices to improve their teaching.

4. Inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for college teachers, and Classroom Research can provide such challenge.

The editors of the September/October 1985 issue of Change magazine thought it timely to devote an entire issue to the discussion of the poor morale and lack of professional identity among college teachers in the 1980s. Proposed solutions are many, but one that worries me is the growing tendency to push faculty members toward greater identity with their academic discipline through the singular path of research and publication in the discipline. Why shouldn't faculty in teaching institutions achieve professional identity and intellectual challenge through doing research and continuing to learn that which enhances their ability to achieve high levels of competence in their chosen profession -- teaching? Classroom Research is an effort to develop knowledgeable, involved, highly competent teachers who achieve identity with their disciplinary colleagues across the nation through experimentation, discussion, and yes, publication on the art and science of teaching math or history or auto mechanics.

I believe that there should be informed conversation among the members of a department about teaching and the assessment of classroom learning. I think teachers can achieve recognition and intellectual challenge from exchanging knowledge and creative

classroom research designs with others in their disciplines in other colleges. I believe that teachers should be actively recruited on the basis of their performance as teachers and on their research on the teaching/learning process in their field of study.

5. There is nothing so esoteric, mysterious or fragile about Classroom Research that it cannot be entrusted to and done by anyone capable of and dedicated to college teaching.

The goals of classroom research differ from those of traditional educational research. Whereas educational researchers need to be highly trained in sampling theory, tests of significance, and the collection and management of frequently large pools of data, and/or in the increasingly specialized methods of qualitative research, the Classroom Researcher usually needs few of the specialized research methods that are required for generalizing findings. The purpose of the Classroom Researcher is not to define a "representative sample" nor to discover the "general laws" of learning, but to find out what a known group of students are learning as a result of a particular teacher's efforts. The question to be answered by Classroom Research is very specific --what are my students learning in my classroom this semester?

The more classroom teachers engage in Classroom Research, the more sophisticated and knowledgeable they will become in designing and conducting their own experiments. The TGI and the Handbook on Classroom Assessment Strategies are designed to get people started. The point of Classroom Research is to put useful information about teaching into the hands of teachers. That, I

contend is the most effective route to the improvement of instruction and the professionalization of teaching.

My message today is that the destiny of community colleges in the 1980's lies in teaching excellence. If community colleges wish to energize their faculties and to serve their students well, I can think of no more important mission than the development of the human resources of the community college. One way to do this is to encourage the scholarly and research study of teaching and learning in the teacher's discipline, and to insist on the application of knowledge to excellence in teaching performance -- both aimed toward the improvement of student learning.

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