Curriculum: The Missing Element in Reform, by Terry O'Banion

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Editor's Note: This issue of Learning Abstracts *is based in part on* Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life*, by Terry O'Banion, to be published by the League for Innovation in the Community College in fall 2015.*

Data are beginning to come in on reform efforts related to the Completion Agenda, which has a goal of doubling, by the year 2020, the number of students who achieved a certificate or an associate's degree, or who transferred to a university. According to *Policy Meets Pathways* (Couturier, 2014), a report by Jobs for the Future, "A decade of interventions and improvements have fallen short" (para. 1). In spite of 10 years of interventions and student support initiatives, the nation's most disadvantaged adults and young people are not gaining traction towards degrees. In *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015)*,* key leaders at the Community College Research Center note that

…despite an expansive reform movement built on the dedicated participation of thousands of faculty, administrators, policymakers, state education officials, researchers, and others, there is little evidence that the nation is moving toward a widespread and significant improvement in the outcomes of community college students. (p. vii)

We are falling short, even though, in the history of the community college, (a) there has never been so much agreement or focus by all stakeholders on the importance of completion, which has become the overarching mission of the community college; (b) there has never been so much funding from foundations to implement programs and practices that support completion; (c) there has never been so much research on what works to achieve student success; and (d) there have never been so many institutes, policy centers, and special agencies created to recommend and guide policy, programs, and practices related to completion.

Stakeholders agree on many of the proposed solutions designed to transform their institutions into champions and producers of student success:

- Colleges should implement and bring to scale high impact practices.
- Colleges should create structured, guided pathways for all students.
- Colleges should reduce the number of or eliminate remedial courses and enroll students in college-ready courses with specialized support.
- Programs should be created in which students attend full time and without costs.
- Academic advising should be redesigned and required of all students.
- Evidence must be organized and used to make decisions.
- Students and faculty should be more engaged.
- Leaders must involve faculty to ensure that change and transformation will take place substantively and permanently.

So, with all the agreement, funding, and action, what is missing in this panoply of solutions? One answer is that we forgot to transform the curriculum, perhaps because we have come to believe that "it is easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum. We get no help from the residents." In any case, except for new math pathways and an acceleration of developmental courses, an overhaul of the curriculum—especially of what colleges call general education these days—has been largely ignored.

Why Is the Curriculum so Important?

The curriculum is the collective wisdom and expertise of the faculty about what is important for students to learn, And that places the curriculum front and center in any reform effort, All other reform efforts are piecemeal practices and programs dancing around the heart of the educational enterprise—the curriculum.

Historically, the curriculum was an organized body of knowledge required of all students. When Harvard was founded in 1636, the curriculum was a body of knowledge ensconced in the trivium and the quadrivium, seven courses created in medieval times and passed down for centuries. The development of new knowledge and new specializations expanded the curriculum to the point that many leaders and reformers referred to the curriculum as fractured. In the last century, there have been numerous attempts to define an integrated curriculum—a common body of knowledge that would benefit all students and society and that would better prepare students for specialization in a program of study. The creation of an integrated curriculum around the great books model and the creation of a general education common core in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s are vestiges of this last major effort to organize a common core of knowledge in American higher education.

Today, the curriculum is a food court, a cafeteria of courses, a smorgasbord of disconnected pieces of knowledge, an enticing buffet of tantalizing items to tickle the intellectual palate. (What is going on with these metaphors about knowledge and learning as something to be eaten, to be ingested?!)

The vivid metaphors do describe a current curriculum that is, if not fractured, at least unfocused and not integrated. The disintegration of the common curriculum idea may be a result of increasing specialization, of student demand for more vocational courses, or of the proliferation of courses to reflect the self-interests of faculty members.

Community colleges no longer talk about curriculum integrity, and with good reason. At Lorain County Community College in Ohio, students may choose from among 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three course general education requirement, from among 36 courses in the social sciences to meet a three course requirement, and from among 48 in math and science to meet a three course requirement.

At Orange Coast College in California, students have even more choices. For students who want an associate in arts general education degree, the college catalog offers three degree options. In one option, students must earn 25 units distributed among five different areas. In area C, arts and humanities, students choose a minimum of three semester units to include one course from Group 1 and one course from Group 2. In Group 1 64 courses are listed, but students may also select any literature course from A141 through A285 and any course numbered A160 through A285H. In Group 2 there are 97 courses from which students are required to select one.

This proliferation of courses to meet curricular requirements may stem from the best of intentions; faculty want to provide more choices for students regarding their careers and their future educational plans. However, recent research, reported by Judith Scott-Clayton (2011) from the Community College Research Center, points out that too many choices confuse students and lead to poor decisions and poor planning. Too many choices also present a challenge for academic advisors who have to help students make meaning of all the choices and create a plan to navigate the many options of multiple programs and a plethora of courses.

A Return to the Integrated Curriculum
There is a growing movement in community colleges in reaction to the cafeteria model of distributed courses. Some leaders are beginning to speak again about a cohesive, an integrated, or an intentional curriculum once championed by the advocates of general education, harking back to McGrath's classic definition of general education as "a common core of learning for the common man." The emphasis on integration is reflected not just in courses, but in programs as well.

Queensborough Community College and Guttman Community College, both in New York, are often cited by researchers as productive models of curricular integration that lead to increased learning, retention, and completion. Queensborough requires all first-time, full-time students to choose one of five freshman academies in which to enroll. The academies are organized around business, STEM, health-related science, visual and performing arts, and liberal arts. At Guttman, all new students are required to enroll in a first-year experience program which features a required common core of four courses. The new curricular initiatives at both colleges are much more complex than described here and are cited to make the point about a move away from the cafeteria models so prevalent today and a move toward a more integrated curriculum.

As we learn more about the limitations of current reform efforts, colleges will hopefully turn to a reexamination of the curriculum as one of the essential elements in meeting the goals of the completion/student success agenda. Queensborough and Guttman are models to watch. Portland Community College and Central Piedmont Community College have established faculty committees to explore and update their general education programs. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of community colleges may have created such committees or will be considering such reviews in the near future. Disenchantment with the cafeteria model and the evidence-based research coming from the Community College Research Center and other institutes and agencies about the need for guided pathways and fewer choices is likely to prompt a robust return to the integrated curriculum as the missing element in current reform efforts.

Reformers Should Consider an Essential Education for All
For those college leaders considering curricular revision or reform, there is a new curricular paradigm on the horizon that should be examined. The new paradigm is an attempt to create a framework for an integrated curriculum while helping to resolve the historical divide between liberal education and workforce education.

For centuries, there has been a division between those who advocate for a liberal education and those who advocate for workforce education or career and technical education. That historical division can be seen in clear relief today in national organizational structures such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities that celebrated its 100th birthday this year as the leading advocate of liberal education and the eighty-nine year old Association for Career and Technical Education that is the leading advocate of workforce education. The division is quite visible in community colleges where there are separate divisions, separate faculty groups, separate facilities, separate degrees, separate curricula, and separate funding. These differences between liberal education and workforce education are often referred to in the literature of higher education as the classic confrontation, historical dilemma, widening disconnect, or perennial collegiate argument.

Advocates of both positions often lament these divisions and call for a more integrated approach. Integration, however, usually means housing faculty from both sides in a common facility or teaching a course from workforce education and one from liberal education in a team approach. Although these approaches to complementarity may be useful, and a step in the right direction, they do not lead to an integrated or cohesive curriculum.

In a new monograph—*Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life*—to be published by the League for Innovation in fall 2015, I call for a new approach to curriculum that will reflect the best of liberal education and the best of workforce education in what I call an Essential Education for all students. An Essential Education is defined as an integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and workforce education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life. It is a quality education essential to all students. An Essential Education is what some advocates have identified as a liberal career education or a practical liberal education.

In an essay calling for ending the divide between liberal arts and practical education, the president of Northeastern University, Joseph Aoun (2015), calls for an essential education that he terms the New Literacy:

What the worn-out juxtaposition of the liberal arts versus the applied disciplines overlooks is that aspects of each are essential for living a full life, both professionally and personally….Both domains have relevance, utility and beauty, and both contain critical components of a new skill set—a new literacy—that students need if they're to flourish in modern life and the global economy. (para. 14)

Joseph Aoun echoes the same position Calvin M. Woodward took in 1879 when he established the first school-based job training program in the nation, the St. Louis Manual Training School of Washington University. When the first class of 50 boys began their studies on September 6, 1880, they were greeted by an inscription from Woodward over the entrance:

Hail to the skillful cunning hand!
Hail to the cultured mind!
Contending for the World's command,
Here let them be combined. (Barlow, 1976, p. 46)

We do not need a curriculum for the "skillful cunning hand" and another curriculum for the "cultured mind." We need an integrated, cohesive, intentional curriculum that combines the best of both—a curriculum for an Essential Education that all students take as their first college experience.

And there are plenty of clues to the nature of that curriculum. Advocates of liberal education and of workforce education have been moving closer and closer to a curriculum that unifies the two sides. Most advocates from both sides will agree that all students need skills and knowledge in problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and collaboration, and communications—cross cutting skills necessary for making a good living and living a good life. The next step is a brief leap to creating a core curriculum of these four key skills:

- Problem Solving 101

- Critical Thinking 101

- Teamwork and Collaboration 101

- Communications 101

Four three-hour credit courses as stand-alone courses or combined in a twelve-credit Learning Community is one model of an integrated curriculum. Some colleges will add core courses in diversity, global awareness, and information technology.

These key skill/knowledge areas have already been identified by some community colleges, but instead of creating specific courses they create learning outcomes for critical thinking or for problem solving and attempt to embed these lists of outcomes in all college courses or in a selected but long list of courses. In this way, college leaders believe they are addressing key skills for students, and while their documentation of intent may satisfy accreditation standards, there is no guarantee and little evidence that these elaborate and complex systems work.

Here is a view from a faculty member about assessing learning outcomes when they have been embedded across the curriculum:

Having served as our campus' Student Learning Outcomes coordinator from 2007 to 2014, I've developed a fair amount of skepticism as to the benefits of outcomes assessment. Considering the tremendous resources (money, time, mental anguish, etc.) that we devote to the process, I find myself frequently asking the question, "To what end?"....I have yet to see any compelling data that shows that students, programs, institutions, etc. really do "improve" in any meaningful way as a direct result of outcomes-based assessment....I do not believe for one moment that any college or university would continue to assess outcomes were the process no longer mandated by the accrediting agencies. We ought to be honest with ourselves on this point: We assess because we are compelled to do so, not because it improves student learning. (Koutroulis, 2014)

Perhaps it is not the assessment that is the problem; it may be that we are trying to assess something that did not work in the first place. We have become cynical and exasperated by making important that which is not important at all.

Consider the challenge of embedding a list of learning outcomes throughout the curriculum: How are students to meet all the learning outcomes if they are distributed across hundreds of courses or even a few dozen? How do we know that the outcomes are distributed equally among courses; what if two or three of the outcomes make up half or more of the learning activities embedded in a handful of key courses? How do students aggregate an integrated core of learning if they specialize early in vocational or other courses that may not be subject to the inclusion of learning outcomes? How does the college track part-time students to ensure they have met all the learning outcome requirements? Can we be sure that the learning outcomes, even though documented in the syllabus, are deeply embedded in the course and not just add-ons to meet requirements? Can we be sure that faculty understand how to teach for the outcomes in their courses—and are doing so? How does the college evaluate the faculty on how well they implement the outcomes? How does the college evaluate the extent the student has achieved an integrated core of learning based on the outcomes? If the learning outcomes are so important and include the core learning outcomes every student should achieve, then why don't colleges just create a required course for each of the outcomes to better ensure that students achieve the outcomes?

Core courses, of course, do not always work either, but they are more manageable for everyone, and they are easier to explain to students. If faculty from liberal education and from workforce education can agree on the common elements of core courses and construct content and teaching strategies that apply to the courses, we stand a better chance of creating an integrated curriculum that will help our students make a good living and live a good life.

Resources
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