10. Getting Started

Richard Guarasci, Wagner College

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The Scope of Educational Reform

Significant educational reform necessarily requires planning, commitment, and resiliency. Introducing learning communities with community-based learning proves to be no exception. Numerous issues need to be addressed ranging from the pedagogical and the logistical to institutional imperatives and external accreditation boards.

All educational reform occurs in the microcosm of a particular campus context. While these efforts are aided significantly by a rich literature on educational change, particularly in the areas of learning communities and community based-learning, success is usually a function of broad campus participation, resilient leadership, and a clear understanding of the campus context. Some general issues are fairly generic to the reform process.

Motives for Educational Reform

Why adopt learning communities and community-based learning? What are the compelling reasons for change? Mostly overlooked by faculty members considering serious reform efforts, the campus motives for significant curricular reform provide a critical context for successful innovation. Practitioners need to identify the breadth and width of reform politics. What compels change? Are there institutional motives driven by financial, fiscal, admissions, or marketing concerns? Are they at the urging of new leadership? A new dean or president? An accreditation review? Funding sources or a new capital campaign? Or is the motive for change located within a larger faculty initiative driven by either a desire for meaningful innovation or by a deeper sense of disappointment with the current educational program? Identifying the primary motives for change allows proponents to best present arguments for learning communities with service-learning.

For instance, in the Wagner College case, the overriding motives were institutional transformation through the creation of a four-year comprehensive curriculum (Guarasci, chap. 4). The Wagner faculty were ready for a dramatic jolt to the pedagogic culture. They wanted an intellectual and learning signature. The motives were clear and the movement fast and deep.

In the case of New Century College at George Mason, the goal was the establishment of a special unit within the larger university. New Century needed to become an expression of George Mason's motto of "connecting the classroom to the world" (O'Connor, chap. 7). This type of situation requires careful integration of the special unit to the other powerful stakeholders at every level within the larger university. Different from Wagner, the conversation was as much across the various schools and departments as it was within the New Century College community. Acknowledging such particularities at the very beginning will necessarily shape the form of any curricular reforms.

At Chandler-Gilbert Community College (CGCC), the context was different.

"Service-learning had been a passion of ours for years. Our college has been committed to supporting service-learning in courses across the curriculum" (Hesse and Mason, chap. 2). The challenge at CGCC was to implement an already stated ambition. The audience focus was more likely the faculty, students, and the community. The program provided a real opportunity to link the college to its mission, particularly as it met the needs of homeless families in the Phoenix area living on a portion of the campus.

And, finally, the voices of community spokespersons and organizations are necessary and critical in helping to establish a rationale as well as a rough kind of "community audit" for community service and action research. Without them, it is hard to move to institutional support for community based learning.

The Stakeholders

Know your audience. Who are all the stakeholders one must include in building an advocacy coalition for learning communities and service-learning? One technique is a simple exercise. Make a "map" of all the local stakeholders involved and/or affected by design and implementation of learning communities and service-learning.

These "maps" usually include a delineation of the various faculty groupings, identities and affiliations such as departmental and program membership, senior-junior faculty dichotomies, ideological and disciplinary identities and, most important, faculty affinity and friendship groupings.

Move onto outlining the important committees and units within the academic governance structure. Who controls the curriculum? In addition to faculty governance, map out the administrative partners necessary for a successful program—deans, chairs, division heads. At smaller institutions, senior administrator offices can be critical, particularly the president, provost, and vice presidents. As you begin constructing the roster of faculty and administrative stakeholders, imagine them as "your classroom." These are the students that you will involve in an engaged learning process—the benefits and outcomes associated with learning communities and service-learning.

Two other stakeholder groups usually omitted by curriculum planners are student leaders and alumni. Obviously both groups represent the focal point of education. Appealing to them by focusing on their best undergraduate curricular and academic experiences, will help you identify for them how learning communities and service-learning will build on those values and relationships. Their voices may prove to be critical in influencing the opinions of the other stakeholders.

The University of Michigan's Community Scholars Program case offers us plenty of lessons in this regard (Schoem and Pasque, chap. 3). The stories of the two students, Lauren and April, provide critical and compelling data about the benefits and obstacles in the integrated model of service-based learning communities. The pedagogic power of honoring differences while building community *within* the classroom is poignantly evidenced in this moving case study. Such work establishes student voices within the planning process, as well as later, during review and assessment. The other stakeholders need to read and hear this type of evidence.

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"community audit" for community service and action research. Without them, it is hard to move to institutional support for community based learning.

The "mapping exercise" is quite similar to the student exercise employed in "The Local Knowledge" program at The Evergreen State College outlined by Lin Nelson. Students asked "how can I presume to participate in community research, when I don't even know—or pay little attention to—my community . . ." (Nelson, chap. 5). Clearly, we need to ask our faculty colleagues to employ the same type of research when planning any significant educational program. Change requires knowing the stakeholders and listening to their voices.

Educational reform essentially is a teaching and learning experience and as such it requires vision, substance, dialogue, revision, and action.

Proposing Curricular Reform

How to initiate the process? The answer is, in part, answered by your mapping exercise. The catalysts for movement are identified, and the initial arenas follow in kind. Faculty-centered initiatives usually flow from ad hoc or institutionalized committee proposals, licensing either curricular study or direct proposals. In more open professional environments, curricular dialogues may emerge from faculty meetings or committees of the whole. In most cases proposals follow committee reports or in some cases, from circulated "white" papers from a faculty group or senior academic administrator.

As in any teaching or writing situation, focus on the intended audience. To whom are you speaking? The full faculty? The administration? The campus? The community? All of them in sequence? Design a strategic plan for how to initiate dialogue with the necessary partners and in what order. Educational reform essentially is a teaching and learning experience and as such it requires vision, substance, dialogue, revision, and action. There is one basic theorem for curriculum reform: the pedagogy of the active and collaborative classroom, "the democratic classroom," is also the pedagogy of the educational change process.

Listen to the faculty voices at Chandler-Gilbert Community College. "From the perspective of teachers, the chance to plan a curriculum that integrated our subjects together, to create a communal classroom environment, and then to teach in it, revitalized our enthusiasm and love for teaching. Inspired and amazed by what we saw our students accomplish . . . our own creativity in the classroom seemed to increase exponentially" (Hesse and Mason, chap. 2). At CGCC, the democratic classroom resulted and then came to depend upon a collaborative faculty and a democratic civic culture. In short, the lesson is that the learning outcomes of service-based learning communities likely migrate into the academic workplace.

Critical to success, curricular reform requires openness to good ideas and the inclusion of many voices. Your commitment to an intelligent proposal, supported by compelling evidence, will draw support by exciting the educational imagination.

Curricular Architecture

As this volume aptly illustrates, the variety of successful programs demonstrates that proposals may be erected on an assortment interesting curricular scaffolds appropriate to the local context. Learning communities lend themselves to

both disciplinary and multidisciplinary arrangements. Different from interdisciplinary core programs, learning communities require little or no extraction of faculty members from departmental offerings. Service-learning components may be incorporated into departmental, major, or distributional courses or they may be ensconced within separate seminar components within the learning community. You will need institutional support for student transportation to and from community sites, and job-related activities with community partners. An office and support staff for community-based learning will be important in relieving individual faculty members from organizing the logistics of service-learning.

Faculty members, administrators, community members, and students need to be fully involved in an open environment built around dialogue and success.

Some basic principles are, however, essential. Any type of community-based learning necessitates a substantive dialogue about ethical practices and learning expectations. "There are no quick solutions for approaching and trying to minimize the divides of academia/community . . ." (Nelson, chap. 5). For quite some time, academic researchers viewed the community from a utilitarian lens—as a source of research data. This "extraction" model will not sustain a service-based learning community mode. It is antithetical to its ethical principles. As with all case studies, the "Local Knowledge" program at Evergreen provides us with an adequate database for illustrating this very critical precept.

Secondly, reflective practice is a requisite pedagogical component for students and faculty participants within service-based learning communities. Deep learning demands that experience and ideas are joined into a reflective dialogue within the classroom, as well as through a variety of writing events (Eaton and Patton, chap. 9). Without honoring the connection of ideas and field experience, critical engagement is shortchanged. Reflective practice, by definition, forms the pedagogy of critical engagement in service-based learning communities, and without it, our work may quickly devolve into superficiality masked by an artifice of curricular faddism.

Finally, to borrow from architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, "form follows function" when designing curriculum. Our volume is full with varieties of curricular architecture. Which works is predicated on locale and materials. Where you are, what you have in resources and what your campus culture demands, will largely shape the range of choices available.

Support and Professional Development

Faculty work lives are complicated and universities fundamentally are conservative in nature. To move institutions, four elements are requisite—good ideas, material support for faculty effort, a significant program for faculty development, and tireless leadership that builds leadership at all levels.

Examples of material support include stipends, course release, fewer committee and related campus responsibilities, load adjustments, research funds and travel support, and increased sabbatical support.

Professional development will prove to be the engine for program innovation and leadership development. Building upon best practices allows participating faculty to teach one another new pedagogical departures that place learning at the center of the educational experience. The conjunction with field experience

redirects the intellectual flow of knowledge. Learning "in community and from the community" is a powerful learning paradigm. To fully realize its potential, faculty and staff must spend quality time understanding this work by exploring the dynamics of student learning while addressing community needs. Further, incorporating community voices into professional development dialogues fuels new ideas about the sources of knowledge within disciplines and the process of learning by students.

But of course, all of this takes many evenings. Let's be clear, change is labor intensive, and when successful, quite rewarding. At Chandler-Gilbert, their experience was typical. "By the end of the year's activities . . . we had not fully realized how much time would be consumed in building a new curriculum . . ." From my experience, this is where leadership spells the difference between success and failure. Faculty members, administrators, community members, and students need to be fully involved in an open environment built around dialogue and success. In a very real way, this work is the faculty's service-based learning community, and they too, must engage in reflection around ideas and experience, if growth, resiliency and determination are to be sustained. It is the responsibility of program leaders to nurture this process, both programmatically and personally. This is the challenge of leadership. There is no substitute for leadership taking on the responsibility for building and caring to the needs of the participants, collectively and individually. This work will conclude material, emotional, and political support.

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The Role of Senior Administration

Leadership lays at the heart of successful educational initiatives. The leadership role of senior administration proves to be critical in many, if not most cases. Having participated in serious curricular change as faculty member and later as a dean and provost and many times as an outside consultant, my personal experience has benefited from distinct vantage points.

As a faculty member, especially an untenured one, I was prepared to fully participate in a genuine effort to improve undergraduate education. What I expected—even assumed—was that my dean and provost would be totally committed to the goals of the reform program. When administrators served as neutral umpires among diverse faculty opinions, I knew that the commitment was shallow. I would be on my own.

My best work as a dean and provost occurred when I developed strong personal relationships with faculty members. Clearly my role was to initiate the process by outlining an appropriate educational vision of undergraduate learning unique to the specific campus. My role was to propose a curricular direction, carefully listening to faculty, and moving us into dialogue. Almost always I began with gathering a core of faculty in conversation—at a retreat, in a meeting, at a dinner—about their all time best students. They describe them as engaged, joyful about learning, disciplined and eager for new challenges. This exercise quickly forges a common sense of the ends of reform, which allows for a more trusting conversation about curricular means.

As a dean and provost, my commitment was to stay involved in the dialogue,

and find more than adequate resources to support planning, implementation, assessment and revision. As a senior administrator, this required that I secured grants, revised budgets, reprogrammed funds, involved faculty critics in the reform dialogue, and helped to advance a consensus within the faculty. It meant that I built critical support among other senior administrators; found students and allies; cultivated external stakeholders—alumni, parents, legislators, trustees, and regents. The core of my work always was to nurture the faculty and administrators committed to the reform effort, and this meant that I played the role of engaged, generous, and caring guide to the entire process. The senior academic officer must assume the responsibility for the success of the reform effort.

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We have all been witness to the pathologies of educational reform where the power to negate is so powerful within the various subcultures and groupings of the faculty. While resources can smooth over many perceived differences with some faculty members, personal relationships prove to be critical in a successful reform program. This leads to the advent of a leadership core within the faculty. Building trust and building an open and dialogical process requires integrity, resiliency, and good humor by senior leadership. Without them, the process becomes even more problematic. In the end, the point of holding a senior post is to use it for the common good—to advance undergraduate learning. This is the challenge for educational leaders: provide a sound educational vision and an open change process, and bring together diverse campus members into common purpose.

Implementation and Assessment

Getting started is more than contemplating the initial steps. It requires a comprehensive vision for a formidable change process. And vision depends on reflection and revision. Reliable and sustainable forms of learning outcomes assessment offer faculty and staff participants insight to how and what students are learning. Without assessment, reflection and growth becomes more difficult. And without each, revision is haphazard or simply political accommodations to external forces or program critics.

When setting up an implementation plan, an assessment program is critical. Faculty friendly protocols will ensure sustainability and support for learning assessment that provide qualitative, quantitative, and summative data. At Collin County Community College, they intelligently implemented an assessment program at "the inception of the learning communities program, both primary qualitative data and secondary quantitative data . . . used to measure the overall effectiveness of collaboration (Hodge and Lewis, chap. 6). Numerous sources of assessment information are available to assist in designing a helpful program.

In getting started, the National Learning Communities Project (http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu) as well as other sources highlighted in the bibliography, offer important resources for beginning any serious dialogue around learning communities and service-learning. To begin the process, download, circulate the materials, and call a meeting!