

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

Dr. Ed Welch

A New Leadership for Student Learning Project
Teagle Foundation
Durham, North Carolina
October 11, 2008

Twelve years ago, the University of Charleston began a journey of faith – without a map. It has been an interesting ride. It began with the question: What do we need to change today to be a successful University in ten years? A consensus answer emerged: We needed to become an outcomes-based learning, student assessment-focused institution -- and everyone needed to embrace the transformation.

Initially, there was a midnight “A-ha experience” by a group of faculty leaders at their off-campus retreat. The Board refused to approve the dramatic change of direction until they conducted their own year-long study. There was \$400,000 spent on an electronic portfolio that didn’t work. There was an early secret ballot by the faculty in which no one voted against moving forward. A year later, there was a faculty vote that in one quick moment eliminated all of the general education requirements of the University. (That was astounding to someone who remembers multi-year debates on what qualifies as a language course or adding one semester hour for laboratory science.) There were long struggles to find common ground between those who wrote out pages of concepts and terms as their required outcomes and those who identified just a few exposures and experiences. A few faculty leaders became regional or national experts over night because no one else was doing what they were doing. And it is a change process that has not, and probably will not, end.

What has happened? We asked the question: What knowledge and skills should students gain from a liberal arts education? We answered the question by identifying six areas of required student performance -- i.e., citizenship, communication, creativity, critical thinking, ethical practice, and science. The specific, required outcomes for each of these learning areas are embedded in courses across the curriculum. Students typically demonstrate the outcomes by taking a course, usually in their major, which fulfills a specific outcome while also

meeting other curricular objectives. Students may also demonstrate the outcomes through credit for prior learning, portfolio building, or completing an independent learning plan. Competencies must be demonstrated multiple times and at varying levels of achievement. Each student has an electronic portfolio to retain his/her performances – e.g., speeches, papers, art, experiments, and demonstrations – for future reference.

To implement these changes, the University has developed a culture of assessment. There are rubrics developed by the entire faculty, rubrics and primary trait analyses created by individual faculty members, and committees that monitor each of the required areas of performance by specifying the outcomes, approving courses to offer the outcomes, and monitoring student performance and faculty grading to assure that the outcomes have been met. There are also external assessment instruments – the Collegiate Learning Assessment instrument (CLA), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), and the Defining Issues Test (DIT).

Thanks in part to these curricular innovations, the University no longer looks like a community college. Not 45%, but 95% of students are full-time. Not 40%, but 90% of students are in four-year programs. Not 18%, but 65% of undergraduate students live on campus. There's been a 15% increase in retention rates. ACT scores are higher. We have high scores on the CLA and NSSE exams. We've added graduate schools in pharmacy and business. Net revenue per student has gone up over 30% and we've had a 60% increase in fulltime students in just the last three years. The University is "on the move."

What did we learn about the theme of this session – leadership for learning improvement? I'm still playing with possible analogies for a new form of leadership. What I can do, based on our experience, is to identify some helpful characteristics of leadership for learning.

This is based on an "N" of "1." So, it does not pass the science test. To keep you from tuning me out completely, I'll call these hypotheses or recommendations instead of conclusions.

What leadership traits do I recommend for promoting learning improvement?

Be Mission-Driven. We replaced five mission statements with one. Most people on campus, including many students, can recite the statement and it really unites the campus around student learning. After we had a shared mission – a shared purpose -- it was easier to ask if we were fulfilling it. It was easier to seek evidence of our success.

Be Motivational. When we began, we used carrots and sticks. We had sufficient data and experience to show that if we continued doing what we were doing, we were headed toward institutional stagnation or failure. On the other hand, we listened to parents and students and heard that some of them wanted evidence that our offered learning experiences were a wise investment. We saw the opportunity to meet their interests.

Be Communicative. You can never over-communicate in a change situation such as this. We made certain the process and the communication was open. Once we knew we had to change, the challenge was to find the right direction. Outcomes-based learning student assessment was, according to our hypothesis, the best option. Those who were reluctant were invited to recommend a better option. No better options appeared, so we moved forward together.

Be Visionary. We came to understand that vision is simply seeing in the future the ever-moving intersection between institutional mission and the changing environment in which we serve. If we can see what's changing in our environment, in the interests of our students and families, in the demands of employers and governmental officials, then we can change how we function so we can continue to fulfill our mission.

Be Inclusive. We understood that there were no bad people or good people in our curricular change movement. There were, naturally, people with different interests and values. Those interests and values were addressed. At one point, the president said that we were creating a curriculum that was very different from that which existed previously. It was to be expected that some faculty would not want to participate in the new program. They were not to blame for not fitting into the new curriculum, because we were changing the institution. Those who felt they couldn't change were encouraged to say so, and the administration would work with them to chart a personal path in or out of the institution that made sense for all.

Be Process-Focused. We learned that our goal was not to change the behavior of a few faculty members. Our goal was to change how we function. We needed to change our processes, or otherwise we wouldn't change the institution. So, we created new positions, new committees, new graduation requirements, new support systems for faculty development, new procedures for monitoring what happens in faculty offices and classrooms, and new ways to reward desired behavior.

Be Collaborative. We developed a concentric and collaborative model of leadership. We began with a few experimenters and early adopters. Then we widened the circle to take in later adopters, those who were sitting on the sidelines, and then those who were hoping they would retire before they had to change. The Board of Trustees was a partner in the process. They studied our ideas for a year before taking a leading support role in pushing for increased learning accountability. The Higher Learning Commission, our accrediting body, was pro-active in supporting our change.

Be Resource-Minded. The faculty's only condition in moving forward was that external funding was required before they would go forward. Fortunately, the President had lined up, but not announced, a major foundation grant before the faculty made their request. It was a great moment. Getting and carefully allocating funds to reward and facilitate faculty movement is very important.

Be Affirming. We learned that external affirmation played a significant role in the faculty's willingness to undertake the heavy workload and to venture into such new territory. This external affirmation included the support of two or three foundations, conversations with national higher education leaders, presentations to regional and national conferences, and queries from colleagues across the country.

Be Challenge-Confronting. Leaders must seek out and confront challenges. We still have challenges ahead of us. Among those challenges are these: Can we keep it fresh year after year and continually integrate all new faculty members into the program? Can we keep the outcomes and assessment standards high, and not let them be watered down by procedural lethargy or by student pressures? And can we move from the internal publication of results to the comfortable sharing of collective learning outcomes with external audiences?

Finally, **Be Student-Centered**. We learned that most students **really do get it**. They can step up to meet expectations. They understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. As some recent graduates have reported:

UC provides the best possible preparation for future jobs. Students are ready for work and to play their part as active citizens. UC really lives up to its mission.

My experience with rubrics in measuring outcomes is particularly applicable for my teaching position. I'm way ahead of my fellow teachers.

Faculty members at UC really know what students need to learn and they gear their teaching toward that learning.

I was more prepared for law school than other students – particularly in the areas of deductive and analytical reasoning, problem solving, and in creating and presenting reports and arguments.

Students are sometimes more savvy than we think. There are indeed students who want to learn, who want to prepare for graduate school, who want to be ready to make a real contribution to their employers on Day One.

Our ride at the University of Charleston continues. Change for better learning is happening – and succeeding. If we follow our vision, we will never cease to change so we can continue to fulfill our mission.