

A New Kind of American College

Concept Paper
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It is time--in this era of spiraling costs, declining public confidence in higher education, and escalating concern in the academy about loss of community--to develop a new kind of undergraduate college, a college which provides a superior education at a significantly lower cost. To accomplish this will require innovative restructuring of the entire educational process. Colleges must combine maximum challenge with maximum support so that each student becomes a learner who is equally at home learning independently or collaboratively, prepared to move confidently into the worlds of citizenship and work and to take responsibility for his or her own future.

Critical Elements of a New Kind of College

Small-scale learning communities for students

Students are gathered into advising, planning, support, and learning communities of 20 that are facilitated by a faculty member. Here students create and refine their individualized learning plans and work to enhance their capacities as independent learners. The group meets intensively at the beginning of each academic year and weekly throughout the year. *A student will progress through an entire college career with the same learning community.*

A teaching community for faculty

Faculty also are gathered into communities of 20 which meet regularly to monitor students' progress, make adjustments in program, consider community-linked research and community-linked learning strategies, and keep vital their own sense of shared purpose.

Each faculty member facilitates one of the student learning communities

The 20 faculty together take responsibility for the education of 400 students. The resulting 400/20 unit is the basic organizational unit for learning in the new college. An institution of 10,000 students would contain 25 learning communities.

Students' learning goals are central

Students and faculty collaborate to develop customized and concrete learning goals for each student. Learning plans will take the form of a series of projects of increasing challenge and complexity which the student will carry out over the course of the college experience. Each project is analyzed in terms of the knowledge, skills, and capacities it will call on and develop. Goals and concrete strategies will be regularly reviewed and up-dated. *These rich learning and self-development plans are the central force shaping the work of students and faculty in the college.*

The studio

Students learn primarily by carrying out projects grounded in a studio setting. Some of these projects will be individually designed and carried out; some will be designed and done collaboratively. Students come to the studio for knowledge and information, to work on their projects, and to receive from faculty the coaching to develop capacities and skills needed to carry out their projects. The studio setting will also allow for, and encourage, peer coaching. Skills students work on will include: writing, speaking, listening, organizing, planning, analysing, facilitating, implementing. Content areas to be woven into student projects will be the traditional liberal arts subjects of natural science, social science, humanities and the arts. The project approach makes learning real by placing content, and skills, in context. Doing several projects over a college career will provide room for deeper specialization, for students who desire this, than is often possible in a traditional college. Knowing one area really well will bleed over into other areas.

The lecture

Faculty make available to students lectures which are carefully crafted to provide students a broad overview of content areas and to convey the strategies, and the excitement, of exploration in these content areas. Lectures are not used to set out detailed information better conveyed by text or video.

Real-world performance documents learning

As students complete their projects, they will present them to a jury of faculty, advanced students, and members of the wider community for evaluation. *By the time of graduation, students' work will meet best-practice standards both in the world of scholarship and in the wider society's worlds of work.*

Student work is integrated with student learning

Students work both inside the college and outside in the wider community. The work they do is an integral part of their overall learning plans, with the result that the "studio" where students carry out projects will include the whole community. Inside the college, the work ranges from maintenance, clerical, library, and food services to peer advising and peer coaching. Outside the college, students work in jobs suited to their capacities and interests. This element of the new college emphasizes that the college experience can successfully combine earning with learning, to the benefit of both. Best practice from internships, apprenticeships, the work college model, and the cooperative education model of alternating work and study will be brought to bear in implementing this element of the college.

The college as citizen

The college will function as a citizen of its community, a partner in analyzing and addressing community problems and responsive to community needs. This community-student-faculty partnership is the best way to develop responsible citizens for a democratic society. All students throughout their time in the college work alongside faculty in the community, performing community service and assisting in participatory research projects. This element of the college benefits both the community and students' learning. Faculty and students together carry out complex and challenging projects aimed at solving the serious social and environmental problems we face as a society.

Technology supports learning

Software and networking technologies that support project management are crucial. In areas such as mathematics, science, and writing, software exists for assisting students in assessing their own growth in knowledge and skills, and the range and quality of software support for this kind of self-assessment is certain to grow significantly in the next few years. Ongoing use of this software will be integrated into the work of students and faculty. Every student and faculty member will have a lap top computer and access to the Internet. In carrying out projects that build their capacities as independent learners, students must have access to the state-of-the-art technologies of the modern workplace.

Commitment to diversity

Students and faculty will be recruited with scrupulous attention to diversity, not only of gender, race, and ethnicity, but of age, class, religion, sexual orientation, and political persuasion in order to mirror the emerging multicultural society of 21st Century America. The college is a bench-mark institution for diversity. It leads the wider society in demonstrating that persons from diverse backgrounds can work together, learn together, solve community problems together, and in this way prepare for a long-term future of building a more just and more humane society.

A New College Structure

This new college has no courses, departments, or majors. Courses are replaced by the studio. Within the studio, learning groups focused on skills and areas of knowledge will emerge. These groups will be neither free-standing and nor primarily an expression of faculty members' interests. They are responses to students' needs in carrying out their projects; they call on faculty interests and expertise to meet these needs. Rather than teachers pouring knowledge into students in the hope that they will find a use for it someday, the students reach out for the knowledge they need as they need it to carry out their projects. Departments are replaced by the 20-member faculty communities as the grass-roots locus of faculty cooperation. Courses having been abolished, majors hardly make sense. Subject matter concentration can and should appear naturally in the pattern of projects which make up a student's learning plan and will be reflected on a student's diploma.

A Structure for Lowering Costs

The new college customizes and documents learning in a framework which challenges and supports students to become independent learners. This framework opens the way to experimentation which, over time, can lead to a dramatic lowering of college costs. It is possible, for example, that as a faculty becomes proficient in using the strategies of learning communities, studios, and learning linked to

students' productive work, it will find it possible to shorten the time for a baccalaureate to three years, thus reducing the cost of the degree by roughly 25%. The following features of the new college hold out further promise for lowering costs:

- The 20/1 student faculty ratio made possible by the colleges' strategy of managed independent learning
- Faculty performing a wider variety of educational functions, i.e., coaching, conveying content and skills, advising, evaluating learning, and building student confidence and sense of community, so that fewer ancillary staff are needed
- Students' working on campus to help operate the college
- Maximum use of technology to hold support and middle management staff to a minimum

With experience and careful management, these features could lead to an additional one-third reduction of operating costs, an amount equivalent to the cost of another full year of attendance. Combining these two approaches to lowering costs--shortening the baccalaureate degree from four years to three and reducing operating costs by one-third--could produce savings of one-half; that is, a high quality undergraduate education at a cost roughly equal to that of two years of a traditional college. It is important, at this point, to emphasize the "could" in these statements. More detailed analysis, especially of the staffing costs of the studio component of this design, is needed to confirm that the cost savings which the new educational structure opens up can be made real.

Summary

The new college is characterized by a kind of powerful, individualized learning that enables students to grow constantly, to learn specific content and skills, and to take unusual responsibility for both their education and their lives. At about one-half the cost of a traditional college, the college will develop graduates who have the capacities, the caring, and the confidence to be independent learners, responsible citizens, and good stewards of the nation's future.