

UNIVERSITIES AS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

One of the most important steps colleges and universities can take in becoming learning organizations is to reorganize their educational activities to encourage shared, connected learning experiences.

By Vincent Tinto

UNIVERSITIES are organizations like other organizations. But though it is obvious that universities are organizations in which both students and faculty learn, it is less obvious that universities are “learning organizations” that are *consciously structured* to promote their own learning and that of their students and faculty members.

Were universities consciously organized to promote their own learning, they would have long made organizational, program, and student assessment an integral part of their ongoing activities. Instead, those activities, though on the increase, are still uncommon. Indeed as it relates to their suborganizational parts, namely departments and programs, organizational assessment is rare. Though it is apparent that faculty and administrators learn about students, the organization of the university does not seem to invest in those activities that would enable it to collectively put that learning to use in any systematic, coherent fashion.

Were universities consciously organized to promote student learning, they would have long made effective teaching and shared learning experiences the norm, not the exception, of university practice. Instead, the reverse is still the case. University organization seems to mirror other concerns. It seems to promote individual, isolated, passive learning and forms of discourse that are very much limited to the narrow boundaries of separate disciplines. Yet we know that student learning is greatly enhanced when students participate in shared, collaborative learning experiences, when they are active rather than passive in the

learning process, and when their discourse is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary.

Were we serious about our desire to become effective learning organizations, we would explore other ways of organizing our work.

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TO THAT END, at least as it regards the learning of our students, let me suggest that we would do better by adopting modes of organization in curriculum, pedagogy, academic work, and assessment that promote rather than discourage educational community among our students and faculty. Among several possibilities, two spring immediately to mind—we should reorganize our curriculum into learning communities that enable student learning to span the disciplines, and we should reorganize our classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences within the classroom so that students learn together rather than apart.

In their most basic form, learning communities employ a kind of coregistration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In a few cases this may mean sharing the entire first-semester curriculum together so that all new students in that learning community are studying the same material. Sometimes it will link all freshmen by tying two courses together for all—most typically a course in writing with a course in selected literature, or biographies, or current social problems. In the larger universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, students in a learning com-

munity attend lectures with 200–300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section (Freshman Interest Group) led by a graduate student or upper division student. In a very different setting, Seattle Central Community College students in the Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time so that the community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme that links the courses—say, “Body and Mind,” in which required courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology are linked in pursuit of a singular piece of knowledge: how and why humans behave as they do. At New York’s LaGuardia Community College, learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business (the Enterprise Center) as well as for students requiring developmental academic assistance (the New Student House). In these cases, the character of the learning experience is very much a reflection of the quality of faculty collaboration and the degree to which the linked courses form an educationally coherent whole.

Nearly all the experiments have two things in common, though. One is *shared learning*. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately and in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. The other is *connected learning*. By organizing the shared courses around a theme or single large subject, learning communities seek to construct a coherent first-year educational experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses in, say, composition, calculus, modern history, Spanish, and geology.

By registering students for the same courses or having all new students study the same topic, schools set up an environment where entering students will naturally form their own self-supporting associations to give each other academic and social support. Students in such programs spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, unrelated stand-alone classes. The common study of a subject and coregistration brings them together fast as small communities of learners.

Not surprisingly the students in these new learning communities tend to report themselves more satisfied with their first-year experiences in college. And they are more likely to persist beyond the first year. For example, at Seattle Central Community College, learning community students have continued at a rate approximately 25 percentage points higher than those students in the traditional curriculum. Indeed, even in institutions where retention rates are high, such as the University of Washington, students in that institution’s Freshman Interest Groups persist more frequently than those taking

stand-alone courses. And it is all because of the simple strategic change of allowing students to share much of a more connected first-year curriculum together.

Learning communities yield important benefits. First, students become more actively involved in classroom learning, even after class. And as students spend more time learning, they learn more. Second, the new students spend more time learning together. This enhances the quality of their learning; by learning together everyone’s understanding and knowledge is enriched. Third, these students form social groups outside their classrooms, bonding in ways that increase their persistence in college. Fourth, learning communities enable students to bridge the large divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterizes student life. They tend to learn and make close friends at the same time.

As one student told us in our recent study of learning communities carried out under the auspices of the National Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment: “In the cluster we knew each other; we were friends. We discussed everything from all our classes. . . . We had a discussion about everything. If we needed help, or if we had questions, we could help each other.”

It is important to note that the very structure of learning communities, especially those for first-year students, encourages the student services staff to work more closely with the faculty by jointly constructing a first-semester curriculum specifically tailored for new students. At New York City’s LaGuardia Community College the first-year seminars are in fact staffed by both faculty and student affairs people. At Leeward Community College in Hawaii, advisors, counselors, and peer-student mentors meet weekly with new students to discuss both their classwork and the requirements for making it through college. With such approaches the two separate fiefdoms of faculty and student services staff can be brought closer together.

ACTUALLY, many learning communities, as described by Gablenick and her colleagues in their 1990 volume *Learning Communities*, do more than coregister students around a topic. They often change the manner in which students are educated. They have reorganized their classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students. Various referred to as cooperative learning, collaborative learning, or team learning, these forms of classroom reorganization require students to work together in some form of cooperating group and become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers.

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Some faculty members employ collaborative pedagogies, asking students to take an active role in the construction of knowledge rather than merely listen to lectures. Other teachers require the students to work interdependently by assigning work that cannot be completed without the responsible participation of each group member. In a few cases, faculty members assign carefully constructed group projects, inducing students to integrate the intellectual matter of several of their classes. In all cases, faculty have reorganized the educational activities of the classroom to promote active, interdependent forms of learning. These forms of reorganization stand on their own, of course, as pedagogies that can be, indeed have been, applied to any classroom regardless of its possible linkages to other classrooms. But in any form, their use proves to significantly enhance student involvement in learning and, in turn, their learning and subsequent persistence.

One last outcome, one that is especially important in our time of what Robert Bellah calls rampant “expressive individualism,” and of growing racial, gender, sexual, and ideological divisions on campus, is that of greater collaboration among students. Collaborative experiences provide lessons that no lectures or homilies can provide. They teach students that their learning and that of their peers are inexorably intertwined, and that, regardless of race, class, gender, or background, their academic interests are at bottom the same. Thus, the introduction of cooperative learning, whether in individual classes or in a learning community context, not only increases learning and retention but also helps develop educational citizenship, a quality that is in danger of eroding throughout the nation.

THESE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES in our practice are but two of numerous possibilities. In addition to the need to reorganize the work of student and academic affairs to promote a shared community of effort, we also need to pay attention to the organization of faculty work, which, in its current form, isolates faculty in stand-alone disciplinary fiefdoms that direct their energies inward rather than outward toward the building of broader intellectual communities on campus.

My point here is really quite simple. Were we serious in our commitment to making our universities into learning organizations that consciously promote student learning, we would not accept the current organization of our work. Indeed

were we to begin a conversation about university organization by asking about the best way of organizing our work to promote student learning, it is highly unlikely that we would end up accepting our current forms of university organization—forms that date back to the very origins of the university in medieval Europe. Instead we would look to models of educational community and to their ability to promote the learning we seek.

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