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1

Transforming the Environment for Learning: A Crisis of Quality

Lion F. Gardiner
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This chapter addresses academic leaders and summarizes research findings on the conditions needed to produce learning and student development in higher education at the level required by society, and our relative success in doing this. It attempts to make clear the urgency for change that exists in the way in which we conduct our educational affairs. It describes the causes of less-than-optimal learning, outlines 10 key elements for effectively managing learning in complex institutions, presents eight steps required to lead a successful transformation in an institution or unit, and provides resources with detailed information and guidance.

FOCUSING ON LEARNING: OUR CORE MISSION

Among other missions a college or university may have, as a *school* its learning mission is paramount. Schools exist to develop people; producing learning is their *raison d'être*. For at least two decades businesspeople, political leaders, and experts in human development have been asking us to produce graduates who are skilled in higher-order cognition, such as critical thinking and complex problem solving; behave in a principled ethical fashion; can accept and work harmoniously and productively with people unlike themselves; have the ability to adapt to diverse and changing situations; and take responsibility, work hard, and show initiative (e.g., Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990; Van Horn, 1995).

Modern colleges and universities are complex organizations. Producing these essential outcomes is not a simple matter. This discussion will focus on four key organizational components that contribute powerfully to learning and student development: curriculum, instruction, campus climate, and academic

advising. The contribution each can and should make to learning and development and the research evidence concerning its current capacity to do this well in most institutions are examined. (A more extensive review of this research, together with citations to specific sources, appears in *Redesigning Higher Education: Producing Dramatic Gains in Student Learning* [Gardiner, 1996]; see Resources below.)

CURRICULUM

Curricula should provide students with balanced learning plans composed of diverse experiences such as courses, projects, student organizations, employment, and travel that will effect their learning and development in an orderly fashion appropriate to each person's developmental stage, prerequisite knowledge and skills, and future needs. A student's general education curriculum, together with a disciplinary major field curriculum, are ordinarily intended to contribute heavily to his or her development. If learning is the goal, these curricula must provide a carefully planned developmental map of relevant learning experiences appropriate to each person's needs.

Students are dependent on their curricular plans to guide them through the college experience. A set of specific intended learning outcomes—what graduates should know and be able to do—for each curriculum is a *sine qua non* of good practice. These statements of intended outcomes direct curricular design and implementation, assessment of each student's learning, and evaluation of curricular effectiveness. An examination of curricula, however, reveals that most lack, and thus cannot be not aligned with, intended outcomes. In addition, well over 90% of general education curricula and most major field curricula use a distribution format that provides only minimal guidance to students. These curricula require students merely to choose from lists of approved courses and accumulate a requisite number of credit hours to be authorized to graduate. The standard is fulfillment of a specified number of hours of seat time rather than demonstrating specific, important knowledge, skills, and values—the intended learning outcomes. This situation is consistent with the conclusions of an Association of American Colleges report that “there is a notable absence of structure and coherence in college and university curricula” (Zemsky, 1989, p. 7) and other reports from the Association of American Colleges (1985) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002).

Research has established, at least for general education curricula, that most of these resemble each other closely. In addition, they may have relatively little impact on the outcomes achieved by students regardless of the specific