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Creating a Culture of Success: It Takes A Campus

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Introduction

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln started a meeting with his cabinet members prior to drafting the Emancipation Proclamation by reading from his favorite humorist. President Lincoln responded to cabinet members who disapproved of using humor at such a serious time by saying, "With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do" (Fehrenbacher, D. & Fehrenbacher, V., 1996, p. 417). This passage suggests President Lincoln understood what Yim reminded us of with her work in 2016: Stress has a negative impact upon the body and mind; stress can lead to depression, low motivation, and affect a person's quality of life (Yim, 2016). Laughter, on the other hand, has many positive effects both physically and mentally. These effects include stimulating circulation, decreasing stress hormones, increasing one's pain threshold, reducing anxiety and depression, and enhancing creativity and memory (Yim, 2016).

Today's community colleges face a challenging landscape — certainly not one as precarious as the one that President Lincoln faced in 1862 — but one nonetheless filled with the stress of continued reduced funding, pressure to increase student completion rates, calls for increased transparency from the public, and increased political pressures. The cumulative effect has been a faculty, staff, and administration increasingly stretched thin, trying to be everything to everybody. This environment requires a strong foundation, one with an effective campus culture at its core. In academia, we know that an effective campus culture is built around the strengths of the constituents who focus on collaboration, high standards, and constant improvement (Coates, 2017). When combined with trust and a willingness to grow from failure, an effective campus culture has five key elements: (1) encourages student engagement, (2) seeks faculty input, (3) encourages employee engagement, (4) pursues continuous improvement, and (5) grows from its failures (Figure 1).



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FIGURE 1
The elements necessary to build an effective campus culture.

Student Engagement is Key to an Effective Campus

An effective campus culture is one in which all those connected to that culture feel a sense of belonging. While this is important throughout the campus environment, it is crucial within the classroom setting itself: “Learning, persistence, and attainment in college are consistently associated with students being actively engaged with college faculty and staff, with our students, and with the subject matter they are studying” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013, p. 3). Considering the connection between a student’s active engagement and her/his likelihood of success, colleges must foster a culture that embraces student engagement, both within the classroom and within the college at large.

In its *A Matter of Degrees: Engaging Practices, Engaging Students* report, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE, 2013) finds a marked relationship between what it calls “high-impact” practices and student engagement. The practices detailed by the CCCSE include student success courses, supplemental instruction, and tutoring. While any one of these

practices would be worthwhile and useful on its own, the report’s findings “indicate a consistently positive relationship between intensity — experiencing a greater number of structured group learning experiences — and engagement” (CCCSE, 2013, p. 34).

While administrators can support a culture of engagement by supporting meaningful professional development, instructors can take a transformative approach to engage students within the classroom through learner-centered instruction. In *Leading the Learner-Centered Campus*, Harris and Cullen (2010) explain that in the time since this paradigm shift was suggested by Barr and Tagg in 1995, “faculties nationwide have made significant strides in reorienting their teaching toward the learner-centered model” (p. 33). The learner-centered paradigm deemphasizes the transmission of knowledge and instead focuses on the process of learning (Harris & Cullen, 2010). Practices that embrace the learner-centered approach include those which use students’ prior learning to construct new knowledge. The instructor of an introductory poetry course, for instance, can use readily understood and accessible song lyrics in an exercise that helps students realize they already have some of the skills necessary to interpret lines of poetry (Harris & Cullen, 2010).

A practice that can quickly develop the culture of engagement in the classroom is making the course syllabus itself learner-centered: “Educators increasingly agree that a learner-centered syllabus is associated with better rapport between students and teachers and increased student motivation, achievement, and empowerment” (Richmond, 2016, p. 1). By addressing issues often excluded from “traditional” syllabi — including direct guidance to student success resources outside the classroom, misconceptions about the course subject area, definitions of teacher and student roles within the course, and ways to avoid pitfalls of the course — the learner-centered syllabus shifts the balance of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student. In focusing on learning as a process, the learner-centered classroom, thus, becomes a space where the balance of power becomes more equalized between students and their instructor: “Sharing power and control can promote engagement and subsequently facilitate learning” (Harris & Cullen, 2010, p. 46).

Building and fostering a culture that embraces student engagement requires not only attention to professional development and learner-centered teaching but an attention to the set-up of the classroom learning environment itself. Cassum and Gul (2017) studied the teaching practices of 12 educators and discovered that physical room layout influenced teaching strategies with those teaching in traditional classroom configurations relying on didactic teaching strategies. Classrooms with fixed furniture and limited space, the study found, also limited instructors’ ability to manipulate the learning environment and enhance critical thinking (Cassum & Gul, 2017). Similarly, “congested” and traditionally configured classrooms may impede an instructor’s ability to move within the environment and influence the room dynamic: “Characteristics of successful student-teacher interactions include both verbal techniques that hold student interest and the teacher’s physical gestures or movement in the room the classroom” (Allen, n.d., p. 9). Simply put, “reconfiguring the classroom seating is necessary to enhance student participation and engagement” (Cassum & Gul, 2017, p. 108).

The Role of Faculty in Creating an Engaged and Effective Culture

While the culture of the campus is driven by many factors, faculty are foundational and must understand, buy in, and live the college culture. However, according to Kezar and Maxey (2015), the role of faculty on a campus can be ambiguous. While many faculty feel their role on campus is to create curriculum and teach material, Kezar and Maxey (2015) call for changing the way we think about the role of faculty as it relates to tenure, student success, and engagement: “We must be more deliberate and deliberative in how we design faculty models and roles to best meet the needs of higher education in the future” (p. 9).

Many high-impact practices can be enacted throughout the college setting, and leaders can explicitly support an engaged

campus culture by supporting professional development activities that empower faculty to develop practices that foster classroom engagement. Such practices include guided inquiry, group work, online discussion, and learner-centered instruction (Clement, 2014).

Flaherty (2016) reported that “the most important responsibility of individual faculty members is to enhance the student learning experience” (para. 3). Faculty are in the best position to recognize students who are at risk, ensure students are learning, and use best practices to ensure student success. A student who is “failing to establish a meaningful connection to campus in the first year [is] more likely to struggle as he or she progresses” (Flaherty, 2016, para. 5). Faculty should play the role in making those connections with students to create a culture of student success.

Valencia College, the 2011 Aspen Prize winner for Community College Excellence, re-built their campus culture to focus on student success. To plan, implement, and create buy-in for the campus’ culture change, Valencia College knew it needed to “create widespread belief on campus that status quo is not sufficient” (Aspen Institute, 2014, p. 7). Valencia followed a four-step plan: (1) establish a broad demand for change, (2) build the team, (3) determine and execute a plan for institutionalization, and (4) evaluate, reflect, and continuously improve (Aspen Institute, 2014). As Valencia established its team, campus leaders knew they needed faculty buy-in. In a team of 200, 20 of those team members were faculty members who were responsible for creating and implementing the plan, but, most importantly, to create buy-in from faculty and staff.

At California State University Monterey Bay, the entire campus community witnessed faculty and staff signing the vision statement portraying a united campus community (Colby, et al., 2004). Campuses can also develop this collaborative culture by encouraging faculty and students to connect with the local community and serve in different capacities. Collaborative activities are teachable moments, providing experiences of common, shared campus values.

Colby, et al. (2004) include several suggestions that faculty can follow to create an effective campus culture. One of the key ways to create an effective culture includes academic integrity and capitalizing on teachable moments. Faculty members are the key players in upholding academic integrity by holding students accountable for their work. Faculty must lead by example, uphold due dates, provide grading and feedback in a respectable timeframe, and identify cheating or other negative behaviors, enforcing punishments consistently (Weimer, 2015). Robinson and Glanzer (2017) stress that, “while a variety of factors play a role in a students’ decision to cheat, a significant part of the problem and solution relate to the various types of cultural environments created by university administrators, faculty, and students” (para. 4).

Building a Culture of Engagement so Employees Can Thrive

Community college employees as a whole — from the institution's leaders and faculty, to the office, operations, and facility staff members — all contribute and provide the institutional structure that keeps the education machine running smoothly and effectively. At times, though, some members may not feel they are respected, valued, or contributing members of the community.

College support staff and adjunct faculty are two groups of employees that often feel marginalized or undervalued. When examining the experience of community college support staff, Gonko (2014) found that community colleges often do not facilitate a sufficient "support-staff inclusive culture on campus" to appropriately leverage the potential for support staff to play a more "robust role in student success initiatives" (p. i). Another group that is often overlooked is adjunct faculty. In a survey focused on the experience of part-time and adjunct faculty, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012) found "a dismal picture, one that clearly demonstrates how little professional commitment and support part-time faculty members receive from their institutions for anything that costs money and is not related to preparing and delivering discrete course materials. The findings also reflect a lack of processes and resources to include part-time faculty members in the academic community of the college or university" (p. 13).

Establishing a culture in which all employees trust and value one another and can feel safe to reach across divides of employee classification, academic discipline, or identity difference is essential in an effective work environment. Research on employee engagement shows that leadership can do much to determine employee culture. Leaders have a particularly strong effect in influencing work climate when they dedicate themselves to

supporting employees' ability to flourish or thrive in their work (Schaufeli, 2015). Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009) found that "when people in work organizations are thriving, they feel progress and momentum in their work" (p. 169). In researching effective practices for integrating employee groups, with a particular focus on part-time faculty, Mandrell (2015) found "Five themes emerged from the data, which focused on communication, professional development, inclusion, mentoring, and a lack of recognition, compensation, and respect" (p. i).

Growth and change cannot come when people are silenced through fear of reprisal, but only when they are engaged in dialogue. Colleges should commit to the process of developing a shared language and cultural agility among stakeholders, and leadership must exercise these values through observable behavior to lead by example. Four target areas to lead to better integration were determined by Mandrell's research (2015): "increased communication among departments, more adequate professional development, offering a new instructor orientation, and providing mentoring" (p. i). However, required participation in mentoring and dialogue groups or extended professional development can also backfire. If leaders simply add these activities to existing job demands rather than taking measures to ensure balanced workloads, the additional obligations may increase employee stress and lead to emotional exhaustion, which, rather than improving employee relationships, have "the potential to cause strain" (Niessen et al., 2017, p. 48). Employees' ability to thrive was only present when their emotional exhaustion levels were very low (Niessen et al., 2017). Schaufeli's (2015) research into the relationship between leadership, job demands, job resources, and employee engagement suggests the most effective leaders decrease job demands while increasing employee engagement, thereby decreasing the likelihood that employees will experience burnout.



A Culture of Continuous Improvement

The rapid pace of social, political, and technological change in our society is unprecedented and helping to drive our economy (Friedman, 2016). According to the Higher Learning Commission (2017), “Innovation is an aspect of improvement and essential in a time of rapid change” (n.p.). An institutional culture of continuous improvement is required to ensure that our higher education institutions stay ahead of these curves, maintaining a rate of learning and improvement that outpaces the rate of this change (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2014).

An “improvement culture” relates to the systems, processes, environment, and leadership of an institution and is, fundamentally, about harnessing knowledge and acting upon it (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2014). Without continuous improvement at the heart of its internal culture, higher education institutions stagnate (HLC, 2017). A culture of continuous improvement will create change, refine the roles and responsibilities of faculty and staff, inform the selection and management of projects and strategic plans, and implement a training system that regenerates individuals, departments, and the institution as a whole.

Continuous improvement requires that it become part of institutional culture and cannot be exclusively a C-Suite phenomenon; it must occur where the knowledge, work, and decentralized decision making exist (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2014). If it is pervasive and foundational, this approach can provide the campus community with another plane on which to exchange positive ideas and energy. This culture can make institutions and individuals more effective, efficient, and responsive, leading to better decisions and improved outcomes. In community colleges, the goal of a continuous improvement process should be to create a journey from compliance to excellence.

The commitment to creating a culture of systemic institutional improvement requires creating a culture where mistakes, failures, and ideas can all be discussed without fear; where robust knowledge management systems exist; where feedback is routinely collected and used; where 365-degree evaluations improve roles and performance; where expertise is cultivated; where failure is valued and learned from; where best practices are borrowed and implemented; and where institutional vision is tied to the institution’s systems-level actions (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2014).

An important aspect of these continuous improvement processes creation is behavior modeling (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Maudsley, 2001). Practicing continuous improvement, as a learning organization, allows institutions and practitioners to model the growth mindset and lifelong learner behaviors that many believe are critical for community colleges to instill in students (Dweck, 2006).

A Culture that Grows from Its Failures

Effective campus culture is more than just a glossy brochure snapshot. It would be difficult to find a post-secondary institution that doesn’t promote its thriving campus culture as essential to its educational environment. These institutions employ massive financial and legal resources recruiting faculty, staff, and students from different backgrounds on the premise that diversity benefits all. Effective campuses recognize, though, that it is not enough to dump the correct mix of diversities onto a campus, expecting magic to happen — realizing the benefits of an effective culture requires a willingness to accept failure.

Failing is part of life. It is something that everyone encounters multiple times, personally and professionally. In our culture, however, it is ingrained in us from a young age to avoid failure at all costs, and that failure stems from an inadequacy or lack of ability. The emotions often associated with failure — shame, embarrassment, and disgrace — help to compound the belief that failure is not an acceptable option. Failure is typically defined as the “lack of success”; however, failure really has little to do with success. The world is full of very successful individuals who failed repeatedly in their lives; we hear about the significant failures of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk. Unfortunately, the fear of failure can be so paralyzing that it keeps many people from ever trying in the first place. It all comes down to how one views success and how individuals react to failure.

What if the notion of failure could be flipped on end? Many successful world leaders credit failure as the turning point in their lives. In their book, *Geeks and Geezers*, Bennis and Thomas (2002) note that success most often emerges as a result of a person’s ability to adapt to a crisis or challenge, what they call a crucible moment. Bennis and Thomas go on to point out that during these crucible moments “there is always a real chance of failure” (p. 8). If failure is not a debilitating barrier to success, then how can institutions build a culture that embraces failure and views it as providing positive, pivotal, and instrumental potential for growth and development?

First, failures take place across many planes of higher education: students can fail courses, faculty can fail to deliver meaningful instruction, and administrators can fail to build a culture of trust and innovation. To move a campus culture to accept failure — and potentially embrace it, an institution must understand the role of effective failures.

Failure is not something most college students are accustomed to feeling. They have gone their entire academic lives scarcely being challenged to think independently and creatively. This transition to critical thinking can be very challenging to many as they enter into college academia. In turn, this lack of preparedness leads many students to experience true failure for the first time. Because failing is a new experience for many of them, they are unable



“Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his success.”

to cope and overcome the mental debilitation of failure. The term “growth mindset” has been discussed in academia at length in recent years. It is used as a model to address the attitude behind failure and to help teach students that intelligence can be improved if they begin learning from their mistakes. Sparks (2014) discusses the “fail productively” strategy as a way to allow students to systematically learn from their mistakes (p. 1). With this model, students who want to improve a grade must submit an “error analysis” of what went wrong, an explanation of how they determined the correct answer, and a strategy for how they will remember the content in the future (Sparks, 2014, p. 3).

Educator John Dewey (1933) once said, “Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his success” (p. 138). Effective educators know, when a lesson fails, to immediately rethink, revise, and reinvent in order to improve. Through experience and past practice, an educator’s methods are crafted and fine-tuned to produce meaningful instruction for students. Yet, how often are students allowed this same opportunity for growth and improvement? Educators must develop a culture within the classroom that encourages failure as the ultimate learning experience.

Yet even if our classrooms allow students to fail, can institutions of higher education practice what they preach? If students are expected to embrace failure as part of their growth, then how do colleges eradicate an underlying culture that fears failure? Colleges as a whole must make intentional efforts to remove the negative stigma of failing and replace it with focused reflection on what has been learned through the process. However, this can only be accomplished if we reframe failures as a part of the path toward discovery and invention, not as episodes worthy of shame and disgrace.

Much of the culture of a college campus comes from the top. When faculty and staff fear the repercussions of failing, they are less likely to try innovative approaches and methods for improvements. This can lead to stale and outdated practices becoming long-standing traditions. Effective leaders must find ways to embrace the risk of failing and generate innovation by questioning the status quo and viewing potential problems and setbacks as opportunities. Ng (2017) believes leaders can model intellectual stimulation by encouraging innovative ways of thinking and doing things that break away from existing routines, norms, and the status quo. One such way of embracing the risk of failing

is to encourage feedback, sharing what has been learned, and listening to new ideas from all members of the organization (Shadraconis, 2013). In addition, college leaders must refrain from criticizing supporters for failed attempts at trying to solve the issues at hand. No other act can singularly halt innovation and creativity as criticism and a fear of failure.

While these examples provide individual strategies for improving views on failure, to build a culture that embraces failure, it must be viewed more holistically. Higher education institutions must embrace failure as a means to substantial growth and progress, remembering that while crucible moments may end in short-term failures, they ultimately can lead to great accomplishments. The culture must not only value and embrace learning from failure, it must also protect its stakeholders from viewing failure as the end of opportunity.

Conclusion

Higher education’s institutional culture will continue to evolve. Change is inevitable. These aphorisms may not comfort those who lead, but they should lead community colleges to look for ways to develop institutional cultures that encourage and support engagement, trust, and improvement. Effective institutions know that changes in institutional culture cannot be achieved through top-down directives. While someone with authority can mandate acquiescence to a request for change, they can’t dictate optimism, hope, conviction, or imagination.

The evidence for effective campus environments is clear: engaging students increases success (CCCSE, 2013); using appropriate humor in the classroom can reduce student anxiety, humanize the classroom, and increase learning (Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, and Michel, 2015); and a workplace that encourages playfulness and fun will have few problems maintaining current employees, recruiting new ones, increasing job satisfaction, and building trust. To establish and maintain an engaged, effective campus culture, the students must be engaged, the faculty’s input must be sought, a climate of engagement and trust must be established, a climate of continuous improvement must be implemented, and the college must grow from its failures. While the 21st century community college landscape may be challenging, it will be no match for a college with an established, engaged, and effective campus culture.



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