

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Learning Outside the Box: Making Connections between Co-Curricular Activities and the Curriculum

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How many hours a week do students spend under the direct influence of an instructor? Say the average course load is 12-15 credit hours; be generous and add five hours for library time, study group sessions, visits to instructors' offices; give credit to the more industrious students and throw in another five hours of study time. So even in the best of cases, students spend 22-25 hours - approximately 20 percent of their waking hours - each week on curriculum-related activities. College programs that focus only on curricular activities are apparently ignoring 80 percent of a student's time.

The university experience is incomplete if students only take classes, no matter how hard they work at them. Any college or university graduate can attest to the value of experiences beyond the classroom that contributed to development of self-awareness, general knowledge, values, and attitudes.

The co-curricular component of a complete education - which takes place in the 80 percent of a student's time spent outside the classroom - is every bit as important to the process as is the formal curricular component. Yet, most institutions and their faculties focus a disproportion of their energies on the smaller piece of a much larger

whole.

Co-Curricular Experiences and General Education

Everything a student does at an institution, both inside and outside the classroom supports (or opposes) the process of learning.

Programs with the strongest impacts on academic and personal development and persistence result from purposeful, programmatic efforts to integrate students' intellectual and social lives. Participants in the Project on Strong Foundations for General Education (1994) proposed 12 principles to help institutions sustain the gains made in general education in the past ten years. Among them are: to teach social responsibility, to attend carefully to student experience, and to reach beyond the classroom to the broad range of student co-curricular experiences.

An essential obligation of a general education program is to provide opportunities for growth in these areas: personal, intellectual, and career development; health and wellness; cultural understanding; arts appreciation; values and ethics; and social responsibility. It is, however, asking a great deal of an institution to provide all of that within the confines of the formal curriculum.

What if we could tap into the unintentional learning that occurs outside the classroom and make students' co-curricular experiences intentionally meaningful in the larger context of their whole education?

Benefits of Co-Curricular and Curricular Linkage

Students have much to gain from the integration of co-curricular activities into the curriculum. In out-of-class experiences, students tend to take greater responsibility for their own learning; they learn from one another as well as their instructors. In addition, co-curricular activities promote personal growth, physical and mental health, academic achievement, social and cultural awareness, and help students formulate short- and long-range goals.

Successful co-curricular programs encourage the development of friendships, a sense of belonging, enhanced intellectual awareness, improved academic performance, an appreciation of different perspectives, and close interaction with faculty and staff members

who really care about students.

Studies indicate that success in the first year of college depends on how effectively students connect to the institution - both academically and socially. Bringing together curricular and co-curricular activities may make a significant difference in student retention.

Barriers to Co-Curricular Learning

Banta and Kuh (1998) suggest that the best way to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience is to bring together the two groups that spend the most time with students - faculty and student affairs personnel. Yet, the traditional division between academic affairs and student affairs does little to prepare students for post-college life, where the quality of job performance, family life, and community activities are interdependent.

A necessary first step to blur the boundaries between classroom and out-of-class experiences is a stronger partnership between student affairs and academic affairs. To do so means overcoming some institutional barriers (Zeller, Hinni, & Eison, 1989):

- Many faculty members believe their primary role is to create knowledge and all other roles are secondary; therefore, activities that divert student energy from "class work" are counter-productive.
- Faculty members identify strongly with departments, not with the larger campus community.
- The value of faculty time is critical and faculty members prefer to spend their time on activities that are rewarded.
- Student affairs professionals and faculty members occupy separate domains; the faculty deals with the intellectual domain, student affairs with the affective and social. Consequently, one don't know much about what the other does, sometimes leading to mistrust or misunderstanding.

Encouraging Co-Curricular Learning

Zeller et al. (1989) identify four trends that support interdivisional links and may make it easier to reduce the barriers identified in the previous section. They cite renewed interest in:

- promoting educational goals outside the classroom,
- enhancing teaching and learning inside the classroom,
- restoring the role of general education,
- and emphasizing active involvement throughout undergraduate education.

To encourage co-curricular learning and integrate it into academic programs, faculty and student affairs professionals can collaborate on instructional programs that encourage students to capitalize on the learning that occurs in their out-of-class time. Such a collaboration can occur at either the individual or administrative level.

Course Design. Individual faculty members can work with student affairs staff to design courses with co-curricular components that allow them to "take the academic discourse of the classroom into the community" (Project on Strong Foundations, 1994, p.70).

An example from the Strong Foundations report shows how a single course can make students' co-curricular experiences more intentional. In a University of Hartford general education course on epidemics and AIDS, students participate in a health campaign both on and off campus. Guest speakers come to the residence halls; students teach and work off campus to raise AIDS awareness; music students in the course perform concerts in an AIDS hospice; art students have auctioned their work to benefit the hospice.

On a simpler level, math students could go to a local art gallery, study an artist's body of work, then evaluate and write about the artist's use of geometric shapes and mathematical constructs. Food science students could research foods of other cultures by attending dinners sponsored by various cultural groups on campus.

Service Learning. Instructors who add service learning components to their courses allow students to use academic skills and knowledge to meet community needs. Service learning also provides structured time for students to think, talk, and write about their experiences; fosters an ethic of caring for others; and encourages them to value diversity (Meyer, 1998).

Faculty who want to integrate service learning can work with student affairs personnel to identify agencies or businesses willing to form a

service learning alliance.

Students in an English course who are learning to write for varied audiences can work with community agencies to develop grant proposals, brochures, and newsletters. Business students might develop strategic business plans for non-profit organizations. Habitat for Humanity could rely on construction management students to help build a home.

Internships. Internship programs in which students spend a semester or more practicing what their teachers have preached have been formalized for a number of years in such areas as engineering, journalism, and education. But faculties and student affairs offices may collaborate to discover additional internship opportunities for students in other fields, as well.

Learning Communities. A more institutionalized vehicle for integrating the co-curricular with the curricular is the learning community. Learning communities may be defined in a number of ways, but at the heart of the learning community experience is the opportunity for students to find an education outside the walls of the classroom in their interactions with friends and their day to day encounters with others.

Last Thoughts

Making learning that happens outside the classroom more intentional doesn't really require great changes in the way we teach. It requires only a change in the way we think about teaching and learning and about who is responsible for it. An active partnership between the faculty and the student affairs office to help students use the resources available in their lives outside the classroom is the first step toward a more enriching and encompassing education.

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