

Learning Organizations

Higher Education Institutions
Can Work Smarter Too

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What did you learn today? It's a fairly ubiquitous question built on the assumption that we human beings can and should constantly acquire new skills and knowledge. Given a moment, each of us can respond to this question appropriately, often recognizing that what we learned today had little to do with what we set out intentionally to learn, and much to do with haphazard discovery.

Why are we driven to learn? We live in a society that reveres smart people more than not-so-smart ones. Individuals who are bright and curious have significant advantages over others, and institutions of higher education seek to help people grow smarter. Through curricular programs, course syllabi and exams, and certification and degree qualifications, we have built a tremendously successful mechanism for equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to be productive in the career field of their choice.

Isn't it ironic, though, that these same institutions of higher learning fail to apply these activities toward learning more about themselves and their environment and toward improving their organization's intellectual capacity?

Over the past decade, we have seen a number of colleges face real danger. Some like Bradford in Massachusetts, Castle in New Hampshire and Trinity in Vermont recently lost their struggle to survive, and others are

sure to follow. In response to the challenges of today's higher education environment, a variety of scholars and practitioners have rightly called for institutions to develop strategic goals and appropriate assessment activities. I would add that colleges and universities also need to develop organizational learning goals and related measurement instruments.

Colleges and universities can and must grow smarter. In the same sense that we apply ourselves to instilling intellectual curiosity among students, we must encourage and reward learning at the organizational level. We can do this by implementing an organizational learning plan (or syllabi) and appropriate assessment instruments (or exams), appointing a member of the organization to be responsible for guiding and assessing learning, and rewarding members of the organization for demonstrating and sharing what they have learned.

Learning plan

Organizations need a learning plan to encourage and guide learning, with the understanding that learning is likely to occur regardless of any planned course of action. The most effective form of learning plans are aligned with the institution's strategic plan. The strategic plan lays out what you seek to accomplish; the learning plan describes what you hope to learn in the process of achieving that goal.

For example, if a college's goal is to improve student retention, the members of that institution must seek to learn how various dimensions of the college affect current students and their retention, from the course-registration process, to life in the residence halls, to perceived quality of teaching, to athletic facilities. The same approach can be applied to a variety of other strategic goals, from developing and implementing new programs to improving the institution's external relations and fundraising efforts. Generally speaking, all departments within an educational organization must consider the following question: What do we need to learn in order to do what we do better?

An organization's learning plan must incorporate a dimension of purposeful assessment. Learning must be assessed and measured in a manner similar to our traditional course exams. The products of these learning assessment efforts should be made available throughout the organization in order to enhance the institution's overall knowledge base.

More importantly, a college must seek to instill a culture of intellectual curiosity throughout the organization, such that learning is consistently encouraged and rewarded. This may involve a high tolerance of risk, which allows for an organization's members to experiment and innovate. Regardless of the success or failure of experimentation, an organization must document what was learned in the process of such activities, and reward those who produced that new knowledge.

Organizational learning plans can increasingly be found throughout private industry. Further, the principles of organizational learning have been a component of many graduate business programs during the past decade. A university's own business school can often provide valuable and thoughtful details on the concepts of organizational learning.

Learning guide

Educational institutions need to designate someone to be officially responsible for guiding and assessing organizational learning. This person

should be widely recognized as an effective teacher and be able to draw on years of classroom teaching to design an organizational learning syllabus and appropriate learning measurement instruments.

Clearly, learning happens without a plan. But with someone within the organization responsible for asking members "What did you learn?" and documenting their responses, learning can be documented and shared throughout the institution. A staff member in one department who discovers a new approach for serving students more effectively should be expected to share this new knowledge with her or his colleagues, as it could have significant implications for improving student retention.

Who at your college is responsible for encouraging the intellectual curiosity and growth on your campus? This is not a task for someone to assume on top of their existing responsibilities, but rather a full-time endeavor. Moreover, to be successful, an organizational learning guide must have visible support from the institution's senior administration, faculty, and trustees, and should report directly to the president or provost.

Organizational learning is not a function that can be added to an existing office of institutional research or strategic planning. This is not to undermine the importance or effectiveness of traditional institutional research functions. Colleges are typically served well by the data collection and reporting activities of their institutional researchers, many of whom also lead or support their college's assessment initiatives.

The collection and understanding of traditional institutional data, even when driven by a set of agreed-upon performance indicators, is one type of activity in which a successful college must engage. But to set organizational learning goals and measure their progress toward achieving them requires leadership from an organizational member with proven expertise in teaching and the assessment of learning. Also, while organizational learning is in some sense a strategic activity for advancing the organization,

these activities complement—rather than duplicating—strategic planning activities, which themselves require considerable attention and assessment.

Rewarding learning

Members of an organization must be rewarded for demonstrating what they have learned and incorporating that learning into their daily work. In the classroom context, we use grades to reward students who demonstrate that they have effectively learned what we expected them to learn—for example, critical reasoning skills, the ability to draft poetry, statistical equations or a foreign language. In addition, the grading system presumably encourages all students to apply themselves diligently toward learning generally. Many faculty consider it a given that our approach to teaching and learning encourages the kind of lifelong intellectual curiosity that benefits both the individual and the larger society.

Learning is often viewed as fluid and individual-specific, yet we know that groups can and do learn collaboratively. Further, groups which apply their collective energies toward documenting what they have learned, and then make that knowledge available to other groups, produce a lasting impact on the organization as a whole.

Our colleges and universities must become organizations dedicated to "lifelong learning." Guided by thoughtful planning and leadership and adherence to the concepts of organizational learning, colleges and universities can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to respond to current and future challenges with increasing sophistication and success. How higher education leaders respond to the need for organizational learning will largely determine success or dismal failure. In time, perhaps one measure we use for determining an educational institution's quality will be their response to the question: "What did you learn today?"

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