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**Re-Imagining the First Year of College**

Two facts I recently heard are haunting me. Several weeks ago, the Southern Education Foundation announced that for the first time in the history of the United States, a majority of the students attending public schools in our country qualify for free or reduced priced lunches. And about the same time, I read that a respected demographer, William Frey, has predicted that the percentage of young Americans with college degrees will start to decline in 2020, and not reach the rate of 2015 until 2050. Those two sobering statistics, of course, reflect much larger demographic consequences for higher education: increasing numbers of low income students, increasing numbers of students of color, increasing numbers of first generation students. And those students have historically not been well served by our school systems. For this country to remain a vibrant economy and a robust democracy, many more of those students must not only have access to higher education; they have to successfully complete a college degree. Yet we still offer a college experience, particularly in the first year, that looks like something out of the 1960s or 70s, ignoring demographic realities, exorbitantly high failure rates, and rising national concern.

The first year of college is broken. Students in the first year fail in large numbers, and given the changing student body, will continue to do at the same or higher rates. Those that survive are in danger of dying of terminal boredom. Beset by a host of structural challenges and outmoded legacy practices, the first year of college has to be re-engineered. I believe that the time has come to start over again. No amount of tinkering at the edges will suffice to remake the first year an effective and engaging introduction to American higher education. No fabulous first year experience course can make up for the dismal aspects of other experiences in the first year of college. The stakes are high, and getting higher. The lives of our students, the future of our country, and the fate of our institutions are bound up in the nature and quality of the first year. It’s time for action…on a grand scale.

Many if not most of you are involved in designing and delivering first year experience courses. Those courses vary enormously in length, in scope, and in design. But what they have in common is an effort to ameliorate the problems of the first year of college. Far too often, first year experience courses shoulder the burden of being an antidote to some of the maladies and bad practices of the first year, and indeed the core problems of American higher education.

I celebrate with you the focus you have on the first year experience courses, your hard work, your devotion, and your creativity. But today, I want to move beyond that work, important as it is, and ask you to take on a larger challenge. I want you to join in a movement to redesign the entire first year of college. So I challenge each of you to think about revolution, not evolution.

**So What’s Wrong?**

I recently received an email from one of the AASCU provosts. Here’s what he said:

“We want to reinvigorate the residential experience for our students.  We believe it is eroding and has been for the past several years.  We seem to be losing the essence of a residential learning community. Contributing to that loss are the following: students going home on weekends; lack of student attendance at activities and events; students spending huge amounts of time on social media, etc.

That email, and the observations that it contains, point to a very troubling phenomenon. Now it may be that report is an outlier, just a unique circumstance of that particular school. But I doubt it. I suspect that symbolically it’s more likely the canary in the coal mine. It’s a message from our students. It’s a message that there are lots of things that are more interesting, more compelling, and more engaging than the structures and experiences we have constructed on our campuses.

For those of us concerned about the first year of college, there are both a set of generic issues plaguing higher education and by extension the first year of college, and a distinct set of first year-specific issues, that create less than optimal conditions for the most powerful first year of college. Let me list a few of the challenges we face:

The first problem is the elephant in the room. One of higher education’s critical tasks is to teach, yet virtually no one is taught to teach. What’s remarkable is that this issue goes so unremarked. No other profession in the world prepares its workforce by deliberately ignoring the preparation of its workers for at least half of their job. It is truly an amazing thing to consider.

The reciprocal of that, of course, is the second problem. Faculty, trained in their discipline, and trained as researchers, honor research over teaching. So don’t be surprised that the recent study at Northwestern University found that full time adjuncts produced greater learning outcomes than tenure track and tenured faculty. That’s what I call a “duh” study. People who are assigned and paid to teach will usually do a better job than faculty who have obligations for both teaching and scholarship, particularly when we know which counts more for tenure, promotion, and prestige. The tension between teaching and research, and the genuflection at the altar of research, impoverishes teaching and short-changes students.

A third problem is more subtle but equally pernicious. We prize above all the autonomy of individual faculty members. That’s why we believe in the cottage industry model of course design. Everyone gets to design his or her course individually. That may make sense in some cases. But tell me if this makes sense. If every institution teaches Psy 101, and each institution has 4 sections of PSY 101 this coming fall, it means that we will collectively be teaching 16,000 sections of Psy 101 as if it has never been taught before. Does that make sense? Is that a good use of precious faculty time? I believe that’s an enormous waste of time and energy by faculty all over the country, time that could be devoted to working with individuals and small groups of students, conducting research on learning outcomes, and much more. And that enormous commitment of time and energy does not usually result in a more powerful course; it only produces at best a few truly stellar courses, a wide swath of average courses, and probably an embarrassingly large number of mediocre or downright bad courses. In other words, we are willing to tolerate wide disparities in outcomes for students to preserve and protect faculty autonomy.

A fourth problem is design. The paradigm for our institutions is fundamentally flawed. Barr and Tagg, in a classic article in Change Magazine in 1995, argued that our institutions have been created as teaching institutions, instead of learning institutions. That paradigm conflates means and ends. We teach, and therefore our work is done. How would things change if we focused on learning, a student-centered approach, instead of teaching, a faculty-centric approach?

A fifth problem is that our prevailing model of learning is flawed. We started by splitting academic affairs apart from student affairs, and as a result bifurcated the learning for our students into the two realms of substantially cognitive and affective, when they are in real life inseparable. Then we use the course as the core building block of learning, creating a set of discrete, often disconnected experiences that do not connect to other courses, other experiences during the semester, or to courses and experiences in other semesters. We leave it to students to make connections between courses, between discrete and atomized educational experiences, to make for themselves a comprehensive understanding of the educational experience they are undertaking.

But the greatest flaw in the learning model we have created is that the faculty member is far too often at the center. The faculty member is the expert, the center of the experience, the deliverer of the content. The course is faculty-centric. Despite the ancient advice to be a guide on the side, not the sage on the stage, most of us cannot resist the bright lights.

And there’s a companion problem. At the center of our institutions lies a core belief. We believe that our most fundamental responsibility is to teach. I would argue that has pernicious consequences. We assume that every learning experience grows out of a teaching experience. A second core belief is about where and when learning takes place. As a recovering academic, I have been startled to discover recently that students learn outside of class. Who knew? As a faculty member and teacher, I had always assumed that learning took place only in class. In fact, if I’m honest, I thought learning took place only in my class. And if I’m really honest, I thought that learning took place in my class only when I was speaking.

The truth, of course, is that students learn all the time, and in all sorts of places, within and beyond classrooms, within and beyond institutions. We are hard wired for learning. My seven year old grandson, Jacob, is amazing to watch. I teach him every time we hang out together. I taught him how hotel plastic keys work. I taught him how to tie his shoes. But he learns when I’m not teaching him, too. In fact, he learns more from me when I’m not consciously teaching him than he learns when I am. He’s watching and listening, and always learning from the way I interact with the world. Jacob is a little learning machine, and only a fraction of his learning comes from my teaching. All of our students are learning machines. Yet far too often, we repress rather than invigorate that instinct to learn. We bore rather than excite. And far too often, we do it not because we’re stupid or mean-spirited but because it’s just easier to keep doing what we’ve always done than imagine a different kind of experience.

In its most extreme form, the faculty-centric focus expresses itself in the assumption that no learning experience can occur without a teacher. Therefore, we have built a complex organization around courses, always led by teachers, which produce credits, which when aggregated represent a curriculum, which culminates in a degree. And at its core, this belief system assumes that our job is to teach. That assumption makes teachers and teaching the center of the organization. We become focused on teachers, and our institutions become faculty-centric. But in fact our job is not to teach. Our job is to create the environment which optimizes learning for our students.

But let me tell you why that’s a problem that will grow ever larger in this age of information. I recently traveled from San Diego to Chicago in a sleeping compartment on a train with that magic 7 year old grandson, Jacob.…47 hours of close encounters. Despite what you might imagine, it was a blast. As a protection against boredom, Jacob carried with him a rainbow loom, a series of pegs on a stick, which is used to weave rubber bands into rings, bracelets and the like. Not far out of San Diego, the rainbow loom came out. Boredom had already set in. Jacob started weaving, but then became confused. So he pulled out his ipad-mini, pulled up one of the 1,000 You Tube videos done by children about how to weave on the rainbow loom, played the video, backed it up and watched it again, and then went on with his weaving. That was fascinating to watch. When we got to Kansas, we started talking about tornados, death and destruction, the really good stuff for 7 year old little boys. I told him about storm shelters and what they looked like, and we tried to find one. But night fell, and we never found a storm shelter. Yet when we got to Chicago, Jacob built a storm shelter on MineCraft, despite the fact that he had never seen one. Recently, I spent time with Jacob over Christmas. We were building a Lego Star Wars B-Wing fighter. He talked about some things he had learned about Legos from his friend Evan. I said: “How old is Evan?” “7,” he said (just like Jacob). “Does he live in your neighborhood, or go to school with you, I asked? No, he said, I don’t know where he lives. Puzzled, I asked: “Well, then where do you see him?” Jacob looked at me patiently, and explained that Evan was on You Tube. In fact, Evan, the 7 year old, has a channel on YouTube about toys. He has almost a million subscribers, and his videos have been seen more than 800 million times. Jacob thinks of him as just another friend in his life.

Jacob, and other children his age, will be in our institutions in 11 years. They will expect to control their learning. They will expect to control the pace of their learning. And they won’t be excited about a 50 minute lecture. It will be dead on arrival. What we need to do as faculty members, in this age of incredible information and analytic power at the fingertips of our students, is quit thinking that we have to deliver instruction, especially content. We don’t have to teach the course. Instead, we have to create environments in which students learn, sometimes alone, sometimes with other students in the classroom, sometimes with others around the world, and yes, sometimes even with us…but with us truly as guides, not lecturers.

So that’s the general context, the environment in which we think about the first year of college. But there are also several first year-specific problems as well. Here are two:

We spend the least amount of money on the first two years of college, and then seem to be startled that those are the years of the greatest loss of our students. A study of four university systems found that if the average weighted cost of instruction for the first two years was one, upper division costs were one and a half times as much, master’s level three times as much, and doctoral education four times as expensive. We spend the least amount of money in the first two years, and we lose the greatest number of students. What’s wrong with that picture?

The second problem with the first year is the curriculum. It’s largely irrelevant to the lives of students. Crafted by faculty members to reflect faculty and discipline-specific interests, the typical first year curriculum is a series of introductory classes in potential majors, often resembling the Platte River, a mile wide, an inch deep, and about as interesting. Laced through the first year curriculum are also the courses to fulfill general education requirements. The design of the general education portion of the curriculum is often the focus of protracted philosophical arguments and battles among faculty members, with a substantial amount of departmental self-interest thrown in, yet for students, most of the time general education is two from column A, and three from column B. I call the first year curriculum the broccoli curriculum. It looks nice, and may be good for you, but nobody wants to eat it. Students take things that look strange, disconnected from their lives and experiences, but are told that it will be good for them later on. I return once again to my star pupil, Jacob. When I spent time with him recently, one night I cooked broccoli. He allowed as how he didn’t think he wanted any. I tried all of the usual arguments, and heard myself say: “But it’s good for you.” He was not persuaded. Finally, I pulled out what I thought was my trump card. “Look,” I said, “I like broccoli. I’ll eat it myself.” He looked at me with a look that said: Knock yourself out! But the fact that I liked broccoli was unpersuasive. It didn’t matter that I liked broccoli. He didn’t. And when we plaintively say to students, “But we like it,” about our disciplines, I think that they, like Jacob, far too often remain unconvinced. The fact that we like it doesn’t necessarily mean our students will like it.

**Creating a New First Year of College**

So how do we go about creating a new design for the first year of college? As our students become more diverse, and as tuition becomes the most important single source of revenue, and as states implement more and more performance funding, pressure to revise the first year will grow. So advocates for a revised first year of college have some built-in support for their interest in revision. But what would a completely redesigned first year look like? I think a redesigned first year will have four critical elements: Institutional intentionality, faculty, curriculum and students.

First, we need to be much more purposeful and intentional about how we construct the first year. We need the entire institution to become focused, to harness the collective energy and boundless capacity of the university to work together for a common goal. We call that institutional intentionality. If you look at the work that John Gardner has done over the past decade, first in the FYE program and more recently in the Gateways to Completion work, I think he would say that most of that work, at its heart, is about institutional intentionality, about focus, about commitment to the first year.

An example of institutional intentionality comes in two studies that AASCU did about student success. We were interested in the wide variation in graduation rates among our 420 member institutions. So we conducted a study in which we disaggregated the 420 institutions into 12 clusters of similar institutions, and then sent accreditation-like teams to each of the 12 top-performing institutions in each of the 12 clusters. We looked for programs, structures, or other elements that might explain the high graduation rates, sometimes 40-50% higher than a similar institution in the same cluster. The dominant conclusion of that study was that what mattered most about graduation success was not a specific program or special funding but culture; a campus culture where faculty and staff believed that their role was to help students become successful. Culture is a critical component of a redesigned first year of college.

Institutional intentionality also involves funding. We have to put resources in the first year that are commensurate with our rhetoric about caring for students. We cannot spend the least amount of resources in the first two years, and expect anything to change. When people talk about a broken business model, they are often referring in part to the old model that marginalizes the first two years to more richly fund upper division and graduate programs. That has to change.

Institutional intentionality also involves building a new set of incentives and rewards to encourage faculty and staff to devote more attention to the first year. One key issue is time. We have to free up time for faculty and staff to work together to focus on and improve the first year. That shouldn’t be a hard sell, as every student who we retain as a result of that work means greater financial resources for institutional improvement. But we have to do more than simply provide time and opportunity for faculty to work together. We have to build reward structures, especially tenure and promotion pathways, that will encourage faculty to focus on the first year. We need new titles, new structural arrangements, and new ways to recognize the invaluable work that focuses on the first year.

We also have to build data systems that provide granular feedback on student progress and success, with early warning systems, and appropriate intervention strategies, to help students remain on track. And we must have the most rigorous data analytics to track what is happening and intercede in timely ways. I won’t catalogue here all the ways that some institutions are using data analytics but both the usage and outcomes of some of the new data analytics are simply amazing.

Finally, institutional intentionality means that we share our intentions with students. We need to help students understand where they are, where they are going, and why. It would help if we actually told students what our broad goals were for them, the broad learning outcomes, both cognitive and affective. We need to build a seamless, coherent, and intelligible education for our students. In the first year, I would argue, some of the most important elements of education, particularly for traditional age students, are the life lessons that students learn on a campus, connected to core questions like who am I, how do I relate to others, and what is my purpose in being here? Right now, the plan seems to be for us to provide a variety of offerings, delivered by a variety of programs, departments, and offices, yet make absolutely no effort to help students connect the dots. In the academic curriculum, we’re famous for telling students that they must take general education courses but never explain to them what the purpose of general education is. We carefully design courses in a sequence within an academic major but then far too often make sure that students never see any connection between one course and another. We must be explicit with students, in as many ways as we can, about the purpose of our structures and programs.

**Curriculum** The second key change in transformation of an institution is a change in the curriculum. I can think of at least two ways to go about this work. There are obviously many variations that could be effective.

One strategy would be to build cohorts of students who take their entire first year together, and then get the faculty who work with those students to build a common set of outcomes, with appropriate assessments, tracking and intervention tools, and constant monitoring. Faculty could share common rubrics for general education and core competency outcomes.

A second, more radical approach would be to free up a significant portion of the first year for a completely revised and integrated program. I know I can’t realistically hope that the entire first year curriculum could be redesigned. But maybe we could have half…say 6 or 8 hours of each semester. The hallmarks of the revised curriculum would be experiential, community-connected, growing out of the interests and passions of students, integrating key learning outcomes [math, reasoning, etc.], and addressing both cognitive and affective outcomes.

The most substantial problem with the current curriculum is that it lacks both relevance and coherence for the students that experience it. Substantial numbers of students come to us unprepared for college. That number is likely to increase, as we hollow out the middle class and create the 21st-century higher education version of segregated public schools in America. Here’s what we tell our less well prepared students when they arrive at our doorstep. “I know the last 12 years of schooling have been difficult for you. You have been made to feel like a failure. Your schooling is disconnected from your family, from your community, and from what you care about. You been required to do things that seem mindless. But now you are entering college. Well, guess what? Welcome to college. We’re going to do the same damn thing to you for the next four years.”

If you look at studies of student success, most notably the work of people like George Kuh, the key to student success seems to be deeply connected to engagement. Engagement, in simple terms, is the idea of people being interested in what they’re doing, involved in what they’re doing, passionate about what they’re doing. It’s often connected to a student’s core concerns, their life experiences, and their most deeply held values. Yet we have examples throughout higher education of misguided efforts at engagement and student success. One of the ones that I remember from many years ago was the concept of “time on task.” Back in the 1970s, researchers concluded that students learn more if they spent more time on it. That became codified as “time on task.” It became a popular and much used strategy to produce learning outcomes. And then Jack Frymier, a professor at Ohio State University, punctured the argument with a simple observation that time on task had to be connected to meaning. Items which had no meaning required much more time on task. Items with high meaning required little time on task. His simple illustration: if I ask you to memorize 5 lines of gibberish, it may take a series of repetitions for you to be able to recall that. If I tell you that your mother just died, you probably won’t have to repeat that several times before you understand its meaning.

Students in the first year of college, perhaps more than any other students, suffer from what I called the myths that we live with. Many of those myths find their way into the curriculum. All of higher education is bound up in mythology, but the first years myths are particularly pernicious. For years we were told that college algebra was absolutely essential for students’ lives. In fact, it was only essential for graduation, for our constructed concept of the elements of a proper college degree, and perhaps for the well-being of the mathematics department. Now it turns out that college algebra is not always necessary. The Carnegie Foundation is demonstrating that quantitative reasoning and statistical understanding may be as good or better, depending on one’s major. I am haunted by the question: How many students did we lose, and how many lives were irreparably damaged, by our misguided insistence that algebra was the only path to a college degree?

The same mythology has shaped our remedial courses. We believed that there is a proper sequence to coursework. If you didn’t have that prerequisite knowledge, you have to take a remedial course first. But the success rate in remedial courses was terrible. So what did we do? We required students to take a second and even a third remedial course in the same subject. The dropout rate of students increased with every remedial course they took. Now, it turns out, a remedial course does not necessarily have to be taken before a regular college course. In fact, the greatest success in remedial education seems to come when a remedial course is paired with a regular college course. Those are but two examples of the myths that have shaped our first-year curriculum, and harmed our students.

There are a number of creative and imaginative approaches to the first year of college that are being experimented with on many campuses. The problem with most of those efforts is bringing them to scale. Far too often, the innovation is for a special subset, such as Honors students, or an experiment in one college or program. Yet when I think about the problems of bringing innovation to scale, I’m reminded of Portland State and the creation of the capstone course. Every senior at Portland State, a campus with more than 28,000 students, takes a capstone course that is multidisciplinary, problem-centered, and community-based. Now that’s a stunning example of institutional intentionality.

**Faculty and staff.** The third key element in transformation of the first year is changing roles for faculty and staff. I envision tenure-track faculty whose commitment to and support for the first year is explicit, whose identify is as a first year scholar, who are rewarded for that commitment with tenure and promotion, and who have prestige and status for that special role, as well as appropriate pay. I imagine a world where faculty conduct research on students learning outcomes, student progress, and student well-being, and a place where that research is as valued as any research being conducted at the university. I recently came across a report from the AAUP that called for more research on teaching. Here’s what the report said: “…if even a small portion of the ingenuity and persistence which are now being expended on research of the usual type in American colleges and universities could be deflected . . . toward research into the results of their own teaching, the improvement in the general standards of collegiate instruction might be considerable” Unfortunately, that report was published in 1933.

I also imagine institutions being more thoughtful about the use of one of their great assets, their adjunct or non-tenure track faculty. I envision a dedicated corps of non-tenure track faculty, perhaps whose work is directed by senior tenure track faculty. But non-tenure track faculty are going to be increasingly important to student retention and success in the first year of college, and institutions committed to the first year will devise new approaches to the best use of this critical human resource, the non-tenure track faculty, who now comprise, by the way, 3/4ths of all faculty in higher education.

Institutions will also have to create new roles for faculty and staff. I imagine that faculty and staff dedicated to the first year will work together in teams, much as the medical teams that are being formed to treat patients holistically. Not all faculty will teach. Some will track student progress; some will design learning environments, and some will focus on affective issues that create obstacles to student progress. But all of the first year faculty and staff will focus laser-like on student progress and student success.

A key to this work will be finding faculty who can challenge their own orthodoxies and beliefs. A key change will be in thinking about students and the faculty role. There are faculty members who believe their role is to weed out students who should not be at the university. They sometimes exhibit behaviors that suggest to students that the students are not expected to make it. One of the most influential articles I read this year was Paul Tough’s article in The New York Times Magazine entitled: “Who Gets to Graduate?” Much of the article was about how changing faculty support and other support systems produced remarkable results for students at risk. Faculty have to think about their own conceptions of their work. In the 20th century, the number of students a faculty member failed was often thought of as a measure of rigor, sometimes even pride. In the 21st century, the number of students a faculty member fails should be a measure of that faculty member’s own personal failure and the failure of the institution.

One thing is for certain. Faculty roles will change. Courses will no longer routinely be built by individual faculty members. Much more of the design will come from groups of faculty and others, including instructional designers, cognitive scientists, and others. Courses will increasingly be built elsewhere, and used locally. Faculty will spend much less time delivering content, and much more time working with students, in activities that add real value to students lives. Faculty will spend less time teaching, and more time creating environments in which students learn.

**Students**: Finally, in the institution committed to student success in the first year, we would have students doing things differently as well. We would organize students into cohorts, around themes, using competition. I was in Taipei several years ago, and was invited to a cheerleading competition. Something was clearly lost in translation, for when I entered the arena, there were about 15,000 screaming fans, the university president and his entire senior cabinet, and the entire first year class. The first year class had been organized into cohorts when they arrived at the university, each cohort with a faculty adviser, and they spent 7 months getting ready for this competition, which was a 4-5 minutes choreographed show, with props, music, and acting, all done with incredible energy. But what the competition really was, when you cut through all the pomp and showmanship, was a fabulous way to build an enormous sense of belonging and connection to one another and to the university. It was brilliant.

In the institution committed to student success in the first year, we would insist on high quality advising, indeed intrusive advising, as well as just-in-time help. I’d probably reduce the number of pathways and choices. I’d also change the concept of the classroom. We talk about our AASCU institutions as “stewards of place.” In that new formulation, the classroom is not only a room on campus; the classroom is also the community and region.

Beyond helping students understand the core outcomes we are seeking for them, we can also help students with their awareness by providing portfolios and other tools that help students see and track progress. There is recent evidence that portfolios actually help students become engaged in their own education; portfolios also appear to contribute to greater retention and student success.

I’d be much more thoughtful about majors. Recent research has indicated that students who select a major early have a better chance of graduating. What do we do with that research insight? Far too many institutions are now urging students to select a major earlier, in hopes that it will make them more successful. The fact is, selecting a major is a proxy for identifying a career. And if you don’t have an idea about what you want to do for your career, you are as clueless about selecting a major as you are about selecting a career, and no amount of early selection will change that situation. What needs to happen is that students need to take interest inventories, as they do at Florida International, to start them thinking about meta-majors. They need to take courses that help them think about the nature of work and a career, their own interest, and how their interests and possible careers intersect, as they do at the Stella and Charles Guttman Community College in New York.

For far too many students, the first year of college is still a pretty dismal experience. But it doesn’t have to be. We have the capacity, the imagination, and the creativity to build immersive, engaging programs. We have technology tools that can connect our students to worlds beyond their imagination. But our legacy systems and past practices constrain us, limiting our vision of higher education and the first year of college.

To transform the first year, we cannot do it piecemeal. We cannot hope that one intervention somewhere will challenge a pervasive and pernicious set of institutional rigidities. We can’t put in place one new strategy, one new program, or one new approach, and hope that will solve the entire problem. It won’t. We must attack the failed system in a systemic way, seeking radical, transformational reform, and rejecting minor adjustments, one shot hopes, or even stellar but silo’d initiatives that only reach a handful of students. It’s time to be bold. It’s time to be challenging. It’s time to be confrontational. And it’s time to be honest. The first year program that exists in too many of our institutions is deeply flawed.

So what can you do to start the process of transformation? First, I’d create a team, either formally sanctioned or a skunk-works underground group. I’d create a team of imagineers (to take a term from Disney) to talk and work together on building a transformed first year of college. I’d explicitly think about the drivers of change for student retention and graduation, as well as institutional success, and how those drivers are linked to, and indeed encourage institutional success. And I’d invite the provost or his/her designee to join you.

The second thing I would urge you to do is ask good questions. Most of you are not in a position to change institutional practices. But you can constantly ask good, provocative questions, such as:

* How can we create a more powerful, more engaging first year of college that increases student retention and success?
* How can we identify, reward, and recognize faculty and staff committed to transforming the first year of college?
* How can we build a curriculum that is integrated and interesting, that addresses student interests and passions, that connects students to the community and region?
* How can we build data systems that provide robust information on every student, in real time? How do we get the university to act on the information we collect?
* How do we organize students to optimize engagement, learning, and a sense of belonging?
* How do we change the culture of campus to honor teaching equally with research? How do we use the emphasis on research to study learning outcomes? How do we implement the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)?
* How do we create a culture of experimentation and innovation? How do we create a culture that celebrates failure as a way of learning?

Good questions. Thoughtful questions. I think good questions could be a powerful tool in the arsenal of change.

Here’s what I believe. I believe that we have the power to change the first year. We have the power to create a more powerful educational experience for all students. We even know what to do. Now all we need is what the lion in the Wizard of Oz was seeking: courage; the courage to tell the truth; the courage to ask hard questions; the courage to not accept the failed system that we have both inherited and been co-conspirators in perpetuating; the courage to imagine a better way of doing things.

What we need is a revolution. Won’t you join me?

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