Case Study of Curriculum Change

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## Accountability Movement

According to Barnett (1992), higher education systems have entered “the age of disenchantment” (p. 16). He believes “society is not prepared to accept that higher education is self-justifying and wishes to expose the activities of the secret garden. With greater expectations being placed on it, higher education is being obliged to examine itself or be examined by others” (p. 16). According to Alexander (2000), greater expectations are being placed on higher education by the government with the belief “a highly education and skilled workforce is a vital element for future economic growth” (p. 412). He observes an “increasing societal requirement” requiring colleges and universities to become “more responsive to national economic needs and new governmental demands for increased performance” (p. 411). As the value of higher education is recognized, there has been pressure to expand higher education services. According to Keenan (2013), researchers in education have determined “learning is best realized when the learner performs a skill through a knowledge of the requirement in an outcomes-based objective, practice of the skill under supervision, and authentic assessment to the mastery level” (p. 13). This process will make the learner successful in the workplace.

At the same time, there have been initiatives focused on “the creation and refinement of state evaluation systems devised to monitor and assess institutional effectiveness and productivity” (p. 413). These initiatives created “evaluative techniques to assess and compare the performance of colleges and universities” (p. 413). The general public is not satisfied with colleges and universities while government leaders argue institutions of higher education are not meeting societal and economic demands. As a result, “policymakers attempt to monitor educational quality and performance” creating an era known as the accountability movement focused on performance-based accountability. According to Alexander, “during the last fifteen years, two significant fundamental developments have combined to stimulate an increased state-level interest in higher education performance: (1) the massification of higher education systems and (2) limitations of public expenditures for higher education” (p. 415).

As public expenditures for higher education are limited, Barr and Tagg (1995) recommend shifting from an instruction paradigm to a learning paradigm. Under the instruction paradigm, colleges and universities struggle because “any attempt to increase outputs without increasing resources is a threat to quality” (p. 1). Whereas the learning paradigm “envisions the institution itself as a learner- over time, it continuously learns how to produce more learning with each graduating class, with each entering student” (p. 2). Barr and Tagg’s article, *From Teaching to Learning*, became an inspiration to faculty at University of Charleston prompting them to seek ways to move from the idea of providing instruction to producing learning.

## Institutional Context

University of Charleston is a private, not-for-profit institution of higher education located in Charleston, WV with sites in Beckley and Martinsburg, WV and online. The mission of University of Charleston is to “educate each student for a life of productive work, enlightened living, and community involvement” (<http://www.ucwv.edu/AboutUC/Mission.aspx>). The University of Charleston was founded by the West Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1888 as Barboursville Seminary to meet the need for higher education in southern West Virginia (UC, 2014).

After a large monetary gift from a coal developer, Morris Harvey, the name of the institution was changed to Morris Harvey College. In 1935, at the request of a group of prominent Charleston citizens, Morris Harvey College moved to Charleston, WV. In 1978, the Board of Trustees voted to change the name to University of Charleston as a reflection of the University’s strong ties to the city of Charleston and as a commitment to add graduate programs to the institution’s curricular offerings.

## Problem, Background, Motivation

Economic pressure was the primary driver prompting University of Charleston’s curriculum change. The University of Charleston (2005) saw changes in “technology, regional demographics, and increased competition from low-cost public institutions” (p. 4). Students and parents had greater demands holding institutions accountable for their financial investments. Students comparing the price of a low-cost degree from a public institution to that of the same credential from a private institution began asking why they should pay the price for a degree from a private college. Further, industry and business leaders complained of the inability for college graduates to read, write, calculate or think effectively.

An article, *From Teaching to Learning – a New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*, written by Barr and Tagg in 1995, compelled University of Charleston faculty interest in the ideas and philosophy. As a result of the widely circulated article, UC’s Long Range Planning Committee proposed the following to the Board of Trustees:

IDEA 1: Develop an outcomes-driven student learning experience.

UC should re-examine and revise the educational experience to base it on learning outcomes rather than traditional course units. While students will and should continue to pursue in-depth knowledge in one or two specific fields, the Committee believes that each UC graduate should know how to learn, think, write, speak, read, calculate, compute, and interact. (UC, 2005, p. 4)

This proposal prompted the period known as the “academic transformation”. UC faculty became motivated to shift from an instructional paradigm, focusing on completing a required number of courses and credit hours, to a learning paradigm, which defines learning when “students construct their own learning through well designed, active experiences leading to a desired goal or outcome” (UC, 2005).

## Process

**Stakeholders.** UC strives to involve both internal and external stakeholders. The University’s Board of Trustees is comprised of over 30 community leaders representing financial institutions, industry, military, health care, and utilities. These individuals provide input on industry needs.

Faculty, as stakeholders, were completely involved in the academic transformation. Faculty prompted the academic transformation on September 23, 1996 as the faculty passed the following motion:

The faculty commits to developing an educational system which encompasses the concepts of an outcomes-based program with comprehensive and continuous assessment of learning (UC, 2005, p. 5).

A series of faculty subcommittees were formed, financial support secured, and additional positions were approved to ensure the success of this campus wide academic transformation. Six faculty roundtables, one for each liberal learning outcome, were formed and tasked “to develop specific learning outcomes, provide standards and competencies for achievement and assessment, and assist other faculty to integrate opportunities for students to practice and/or achieve these outcomes in discipline courses” (UC, 2005, p. 5).

Students became and continue to be involved in the process. UC’s learning-instruction culture creates a collaborative culture between students and faculty. The institution’s motto which engages the student in *Learning Your Way* describes the collaborative effort of students and faculty in the design of a student’s educational plan. According to the University of Charleston (2004) academic catalog:

The “Learning Your Way” promise encourages each student to explore all available options for demonstrating achievement of learning outcomes. Examples of such options include mixing traditional classes with internships or service learning experiences, constructing portfolios, or creating self-designed, faculty-approved Independent Learning Plans. University faculty help students select options appropriate for demonstrating specific outcomes, and assess the level of demonstrated achievement (p. 4).

UC’s *Ad hoc* student committees meet with faculty and the administration to discuss the curriculum (UC, 2005). Based upon student performance and feedback, revisions are made to the curriculum. This practice has been institutionalized and has continued since the academic transformation.

**Design.** In response to economic pressure, UC’s liberal learning outcomes were tightly woven into the curriculum in all academic programs. This integration serves to emphasize the importance of liberal learning, making it clear that no matter what the academic major, the ability to think, to write, to read, to calculate, to act ethically and to participate as a citizen are essential for UC graduates. At the core of the curriculum are the institution’s Liberal Learning Outcomes (LLOs) requiring students to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes in six subject areas:

* Citizenship - The rights and responsibilities associated with social, political and economic communities that an individual demonstrates as an engaged and knowledgeable member of society.
* Communication - The ability to effectively send and receive messages.
* Creativity - The process of generating original ideas or making new connections among existing ideas for the advancement of human endeavor
* Critical Thinking -The process of reflection, reasoning and imagining through which the

individual willingly, systematically and habitually examines and explores statements, problems, issues, beliefs and social constraints.

* Ethical Practice -The disposition to treat others with honesty, fairness, justice, integrity and altruism within communities and areas of professional service.
* Inquiry -The application of concepts and tools to create, verify and communicate new knowledge. (www.ucwv.edu/academics/llos.aspx)

UC designed the curriculum with opportunities in courses and other learning experiences to practice skills and demonstrate competencies, within and outside of major academic fields (UC, 2005). All academic programs have clearly articulated outcomes, levels of achievement, and measures for assessment. There is a shared understanding between students and faculty with expectations articulated in course syllabi.

UC’s shift from an instructional to a learning paradigm made feedback from the faculty member a form of continuous assessment. The feedback “guides student efforts and increases learning” (UC, 2005). Competencies are assessed multiple times throughout the curriculum at the foundational, midlevel, and advanced levels. Rather than relying on paper and pencil exams, faculty utilize course-embedded forms of assessment providing more frequent and meaningful feedback on a student’s performance.

**Implementation.** Faculty redesigned every course in every program to be learner-centered and outcomes-based by 2003, with assignments and assessments tied to outcomes (UC, 2005). Students upload key assignments designed to measure the outcome to an online portfolio. The online portfolio, known as Chalk & Wire, allows students to document the completion of an outcome. Faculty access portfolio submissions and evaluate based upon rubrics designed by faculty to measure the level and outcome. As Kahn (2014) found, “emerging research demonstrates the multifaceted benefits for students of well-conceived, well-executed e-portfolio programs: improved achievement, retention, and graduation; deeper engagement and learning; and enhanced capacities to think integratively across learning experiences and disciplinary boundaries” (p. 2).

The academic transformation experienced by UC created living/learning communities within an innovative first year program (UC, 2005). The communities include a mentoring program designed to support student success. The University’s Freshman Year Program “was selected by the Policy Center for the First Year of College and Students in Transition and the Council of Independent Colleges as one of 12 programs nationally to develop *Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year*” (UC, 2005, p. 3).

## Key Elements

When Dr. Edwin Welch became President in 1989, he felt the school was similar to a community college. He believed academics competence could create a niche for UC. Welch asked University administrators “What do you want from a liberal arts education?” (Traub, 2007). In the mid-1990’s, the University focused on redesigning the curriculum to demonstrate student learning. In order to be an educated citizen in the 21st century and engage in “enlightened living,” faculty and administrators believed:

A student must be able to communicate effectively, act ethically, respond aesthetically, and engage in creative thought in his or her professional and personal life. He or she must also be able to think critically and analytically, and be able to locate and evaluate information necessary for discipline-specific research and the pursuit of lifelong learning (UC, p.13).

There are several key elements to the outcomes based curriculum. First, each program incorporated the six liberal learning outcomes into their curriculum at the foundational, mid, and advanced levels. Courses meeting outcome requirements were noted as “icon” courses. Icon courses included specific assignments known as key assignments which measured the students ability to meet the outcome. Faculty collaborated to create rubrics to measure each outcome for each level. Curriculum maps identifying required courses and icons were developed to assist faculty and students with advising.

## Successes

In 2004 the institution was recognized as a national leader in curricular design. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) selected the University in 2003 to serve as a national model for the integration of liberal learning across the curriculum (UC, 2005). The University’s assessment system was noted as an exemplar in an occasional paper published by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) (Ewell, 2013).

For students who persist, there is evidence that real learning is taking place. Fall 2001 freshmen who took the Academic Profile on entering and again at the end of the sophomore year in late spring of 2003 showed a net gain score of 11 points, larger than the 9 point national average net gain score for sophomores at liberal arts colleges (UC, 2005). John Gardner, Executive Director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, discussed the complexity of the curriculum and its effect on retention with members of the Academic Planning Committee on February 19, 2004. During that visit he indicated to the members that the institution’s particular approach to outcomes-based, integrated liberal learning is unique in higher education, and “…if you can iron out the bugs you will have made a significant contribution to American higher education practice” (UC, 2005).

The University received further accolades for successfully preparing students for the mission’s “productive work” component. The institution was noted as the only institution of higher education in Appalachia in The Best 201 Colleges for the Real World, by Michael P. Viollt, (2001) and in the re-titled subsequent annual editions, Great Colleges for the Real World (UC, 2005).

## Challenges

Barr & Tagg note, “…it will take decades to work out many of the Learning Paradigm’s implications” (p. 14). In light of that comment, the extent of curricular transformation that has occurred at the University of Charleston since the September 23, 1996 decision to become an outcomes-based institution is extraordinary. The greatest early challenge involved faculty who were required to redesign every course in every program to be learner-centered and outcomes-based by 2003, with assignments and assessments tied to outcomes (UC, 2005). According to UC (2005), additional challenges at the onset of the academic transformation involved institutional structures including “questions of equating outcomes to credit hours, definitions of faculty work, tuition structure, and tracking student achievement of outcomes” (p. 9).

Challenges continue as a result of the academic transformation. As the Universities graduate offerings have increased, the University Curriculum Committee and Faculty Roundtables are working on the integration of learning outcomes at the graduate level. From the Registrar’s perspective, there is a disconnect allowing students to pass a class even though they may not have earned a passing grade on the key assignment designated for the learning outcome. Additional challenges involve workload for faculty. Faculty must review portfolio submissions at the conclusion of each semester which adds additional “grading” time. Faculty roundtable committees continue to be burdened as they review new and revised courses requesting approval for “icons,” a designation that the course met a specific Liberal Learning Outcome, (LLO), indicating the course was contributing to completion of an LLO (UC, 2005). Additional challenges have been presented with the onset of online course delivery. Key assignments which worked well in the classroom, may not be conducive in the online classroom.

## Key Agents

The University’s Long Range Planning Committee played a key role in the change. As the 1995 Long Range Planning Committee pondered the institutional response to economic needs and governmental demands, they became influenced by pedagogical theory and an accountability movement. In addition, UC faculty played an instrumental role in the change. Faculty committees designed the liberal learning outcomes articulating the desired competencies, designing plans for assisting students to achieve the desired competencies, and identifying methods for students to demonstrate their achievement. Faculty carried a heavy load as they integrated key assignments into their courses to meet the liberal learning outcomes.

## Current Status

According to UC’s 2013/14 catalog:

UC’s outcomes-based curriculum requires each course and degree program to have clear statements about the skills or knowledge a student must demonstrate (competencies) to meet a specific learning goal (outcome). The levels of achievement expected (standard), and how each level of achievement is to be measured (assessment) must also be well-defined. The information assures that students and faculty share an understanding of the work that needs to be done and how it will be judged. This approach provides a rich educational experience” (p. 13).

Students must demonstrate achievement in six Liberal Learning Outcome (LLO) areas: Citizenship, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Ethical Practice, and Inquiry with most LLO’s demonstrated at multiple levels before the outcome is met. Opportunities to practice skills and demonstrate competencies occur in courses and other learning experiences, within and outside the student’s major field. Liberal Learning Outcomes are tightly woven into the curriculum in all academic programs. Faculty created “key assignments” which have been integrated into nearly 300 UC courses. Faculty submit courses and “key assignments” for peer review. Upon review and approval by designated “round tables”, courses receive the appropriate LLO designation.

The faculty at the University of Charleston continue to experiment with ways to deliver this unique curriculum in pedagogically sound ways. Currently the University is adding outcomes based assessment at the graduate level and fine tuning the integration of key assignments into online courses.

## Conclusion

The University realized it would have to change in order to survive. According to Paulson and Ewell in a report from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), “true, there is more work to be done. But the amount and quality of work done to this point compares favorably with other similar institutional transformations, and the likelihood of success is high, given appropriate time and planning” (UC, 2005). UC has truly experienced an academic transformation with the implementation of outcomes based learning.

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institutional performance in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *71*(4),

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