



QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

Re-imagining the University: Putting Student Outcomes First

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Introduction

Good morning. It is an honor to be with you again as you close out what I hope will be but the first of a number of projects in your continuing effort to improve student success in South African universities. It is a project that I was honored to help begin about four years ago. At that time, we asked, as do so many universities across the globe, what can universities do to retain their students and promote their timely completion? They ask what other programs should they adopt, what additional services should they add to help their students graduate? They do so in the belief that they can solve the challenge of student success by adding more and more programs. Have you ever heard of the term “program-its”? Adding more programs alone will not solve the problem as long as universities themselves remain unchanged; as long as their current procedures, policies, and modes of organization stay as they are. To address the issue of student success universities have to ask how they too have to change.

Today, I would like to answer that question and reflect on what a university might look like, how it might be organized, if student success was the driving force of university organization. In other words, I want to ask the question “How would our universities be organized if they took student success seriously?”

In asking the question of how the university might be organized, I will adopt the principle of backward curriculum design. To explain what such a design entails, I refer to Yogi Berra, the one-time coach of the New York Yankees baseball team, who once famously said “If you don’t know where you are going, it’s hard to get there.” When applied to a course, Yogi Berra’s dictum would argue that instructors must first know the students the course is designed to serve and the intended outcomes of the course before they design the course to serve those students. Once they know those outcomes, they then have to go back to the first day of class and organize the course to achieve those outcomes from the first class to the last.

Let us now take this principle and apply it to the question of how the university would be organized to promote student success. To do so the university must first answer the following questions:

- Who are students the university organization is designed to serve? What are their needs and resources?
- What are the student outcomes the university seeks to achieve?
- What is the acceptable evidence of those outcomes?
- How would the achievement of those outcomes be assessed?
- What experiences should students have starting with the beginning of the first year, through the first year to the last, that will achieve those outcomes?
- How would the university be organized to ensure that those experiences occur and be sequenced and scaffolded in ways to achieve those outcomes?

Planning Student Experiences

Stating that the university has to plan student experiences over the course of their journey through the university does not tell it what experiences they should have and how those experiences can be promoted by the way the university is organized. Nor does it tell it how the character of those experiences should vary over the course of the student “life-cycle” from entry to graduation. For most students, this involves four distinct stages:

- Entry, Transition, and Acclimation
- First Year: Gaining competence and sense of belonging
- Subsequent Years: Learning and occupational identity
- Final Year: Preparing for the Future

As regards student experiences, we have to turn to what the research tells us about the types of experiences students must have to succeed in the university. These are:

- Expectations
 - > Clear, consistent expectations
 - > High expectations
- Support
 - > Contextualized academic and social support
- Assessment
 - > Assessment of performance, early warning and feedback
- Engagement
 - > Academic and social engagement
- Learning
 - > Learning applied to meaningful problems or situations

The question can now be asked how the university would be organized over the course of the student “life cycle” to promote these experiences.

Entry, Transition, and Acclimation

To do so, we have to start at the beginning, namely student admission, transition, and acclimation to the university and the experiences that follow in the critical first year of study.

As regards admission, although applications usually close in September, more than a few students only have three to four weeks to decide which institution to attend, what they want to study, and prepare for the first year once examination grades become available in the first week of January. In practice, some students may only have a few days to decide because some institutions require students to accept or reject their offer of a place within a few days of the receiving the offer. But for institutions that do not require a response to their offer, as well as for students who try to apply only after the Grade 12 results have been released, many only

know which institution they will attend when they arrive on campus to register. It would be an understatement to say that this makes planning very hard. Perhaps this is why many students apply to several universities as they are unsure if they will be admitted to their institution of choice. For many students, especially those who are unsure of their academic interest, this situation poses an even greater challenge.

Once admitted, students need to get acclimated to the university. At the outset, they need to know where to go and who to see to attend to their various needs and address unresolved issues. In other words, they need to learn the organizational map of the university. Students also have to become acclimated to the social world of the university. They have to begin the process of community building and making friends. This is why effective orientation programs do not focus just on providing information that too many students soon forget, but on activities that allow new students to learn the social geography of the institution and organize group activities in which students get to know one another and begin developing the social bonds so important to students' sense of social belonging. But orientation should not be just a series of social activities. Need I ask if new students like to party? Rather it would combine academic as well as social activities that would begin preparing students for the academic life of the university, activities that would necessarily involve the teaching staff.

But many students, especially those who enter traditional and comprehensive universities, are not sure of their field of study. Though most will declare a major if only because they perceive doing so is a requirement to gain admission, many will in fact be unsure. The fact is that most 18 year olds have little practical experience upon which to make informed decisions about their careers. In the United States, for instance, more than half of all undergraduates change their major at least once before they graduate, that is if they had a major when they began. While it is true that some universities allow students to delay their choice of major until the end of the first year of study, they often leave it to the student to figure out what to study. Even when they do decide, many students have to put together their own course schedules with little if any input from advisors. Not surprisingly many end up making less than optimal choices that extend time to completion.

This is but one reason why mandatory early advising and career counseling for new students is so important to student success. In response, many universities have established first-year advising and counseling centers staffed by professional advisors as well as career counsellors who provide such guidance. In some cases, centers also work with individual instructors in different programs who serve as program advisors for their students after the first year. Other universities have moved to the use of "meta-majors" that allow students to select a broad area of interest without choosing a specific program within that area. In turn, they have developed first-year curricula designed to provide students exposure to those areas of study to facilitate more informed choices. But while such initiatives help, they do not eliminate the need for early advising and career counseling, for even when it is available, students are often faced with programs that do not have clear curricular pathways that students need to follow to complete their degrees in a timely fashion. It is still the case, in the United States at least, that too many students need what amounts to an academic GPS system to find their way through the maze of

the curriculum. Unfortunately, too many get caught in the maze and end up taking more courses than they need to graduate.

What does this mean for the university? First it tells us that there needs to be a close relationship between admissions, orientation, and advising and career counseling that together would oversee all aspects of the entry, transition, and acclimation of new students. Rather than having these functions be provided by separate units, they would fall under the broad auspices of an office for first-year students whose task it would be to bring together under one roof all the various services new students typically require in the first year, an office that is in continuing contact, if not partnership, with academic programs across the university. For new students it would amount to a one-stop shop where they can easily find and access services appropriate for the transition to university study. Currently most universities require students to hunt for different services often located in different organizational and physical parts of the campus. In the case of a “one-stop shop,” the organizational and physical structure of the university responds to the needs of students, not the other way around.

Another way in which universities have reorganized themselves to address the needs of new students is the use of first-year seminars or what are often referred to as freshmen seminars. Their purpose, in part, is to help new students make the transition to the university and provide them with the information, guidance, and support they need to do so. They have put into one course some of the functions of orientation, advising, and academic support that might otherwise be provided by different offices in the university. In effect, the seminars serve as a curricular one-stop shop for new students. In the United States first-year seminars have proven, when implemented appropriately, to improve student persistence and completion. I should add that one of the virtues of the first-year seminar is that it can be adapted to the differing needs of new students by varying what is emphasized in the course. For undecided students, for instance, the seminar would include a greater emphasis on advising and career counseling together to exposure to the various programs in the university.

The First Year: Gaining Competence and Sense of Belonging

Beyond entry, transition, and acclimation, students must begin acquiring the skills they need to be successful in the university in the years that follow. It is a period of academic transition and adjustment that many students find challenging and without support, academic and sometimes social, difficult to overcome. This is but one reason why universities need to ensure that first-year students have access to the types of support that been shown to be effective in helping students succeed, namely those that are connected to the individual courses in which students are enrolled, or what is referred to as contextualized academic support. Such support is effective because it enables students to directly apply the support they receive to the immediate task of succeeding in the specific course in which they are registered. This is the case, for instance, with supplemental instruction and co-requisite instruction, both of which are now widely employed in American universities and colleges. So too does it apply to those support strategies that embed support staff within the course such as is the case for the program

in the United States known as I-Best. But to be effective such strategies require that the academic and support staff work together. This in turn requires an organizational structure that facilitates, not hinders, their collaboration. To facilitate collaboration, a number of universities are combining those functions in one organizational unit whose task is to oversee student academic support.

The effectiveness of such support also depends on when it is provided. Here the general rule is the earlier the better. This is the case because early struggles if left unaddressed tend to undermine student motivation and reduce subsequent effort. Thus the importance of early assessment of student performance or what is referred to as “early warning” systems that alert universities to students’ need for support earlier enough to make a difference. Mid-term grades will not suffice.

But in providing support, universities need to balance the support they provide students with the students’ responsibility to take advantage of that support and put the effort into their studies required of university success. Universities must expect more of their students, require more of them, and construct settings which by their very nature require students to be actively engaged in their education. Not the least of these is class attendance and active participation in classroom activities. Remember “no one rises to low expectations.”

Among the courses first-year students have to take, none are more important than the key gateway courses. Without success in those courses, subsequent course success is threatened. While many universities have responded by attaching support to those courses, such as supplemental instruction, some go further and are redesigning the courses themselves. They have appropriately asked how those courses should be designed to facilitate student success. In other words, they have applied backward curriculum design.

The same can be said of the curriculum of individual programs. They must be organized to facilitate student success and be arranged and sequenced in patterns that promote progress and timely completion. It is noteworthy that number of universities in the United States have moved to develop more structured curricular pathways beyond those in professional programs such as nursing that students are “required” to follow upon entering a field of study. Doing so has been shown to promote completion.

As regards course schedules, it is my view that universities should change first year course schedules to facilitate student-teacher contact, not make those critical contacts more difficult. They should be scheduled so that there is at least twenty-five minutes between classes. Doing so gives students and teaching staff time to speak to each other before and/or after the class. Of course, it remains the case that students and teachers have to take advantage of that extra time. While that may not happen, it cannot happen when there is little time between classes.

Another important issue facing first year students is the need to become a member of an academic and social community and develop a sense of social and academic belonging. It is a feeling of mattering and belonging that serves to not only bind students to the institution but

also shapes students' motivation to continue their pursuit of their degrees often under trying circumstances. Lest we forget, persistence to completion takes effort. Without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely.

Sense of belonging can be achieved both inside and outside the classroom. Though observers often refer to the use of student clubs and organizations as means to promote belonging, there are activities within and connected to the classroom that can achieve the same end. Activities, such as cooperative learning that requires students to work together within class, has been shown not to only promote social connections but also a sense of academic belonging and the learning that follows. This can also be said of learning communities where students take all or some of their courses together over a semester or academic year. When properly implemented learning communities have been shown to not only promote student sense of belonging but also enhance student learning. It follows that the curricular structure of the first-year should be organized to facilitate the development of learning communities and other forms of academic community. Doing so, however, would require faculty course loads be such as to enable, indeed encourage, their formation.

To achieve what we hope for in a student-centered university requires that we also understand the student development process and the concomitant need to sequence and scaffold student experiences over the course of their educational journey. This is especially true during the critical first year when new students are trying to adjust to the new and more challenging demands of university life. It is a developmental period during which students have to grow, academically and socially, into their role of a successful student.

A number of universities in the United States, for instance, have come to the view that the first year should be treated as a distinct year with its own particular outcomes and organizational structure. Some have established first-year colleges within the university whose structure and processes are geared to address the particular needs of new students. Some have even asked the radical question "Who should teach first-year courses and what skills should they have to do so?" Unfortunately, it is too often the case, in my country at least, that new, inexperienced academics, many part-time, get thrown unprepared into teaching the large first year courses.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U) in the United States has established a program involving forty-four universities entitled "Re-Imagining the First Year of College" that is focused on redesigning their first-year programs to better promote student success in that year especially among low-income and under-represented students. It will be interesting to see what arises from this program.

Beyond the First Year: Learning and Occupational Identity

Though a successful first-year improves the likelihood of completion, it by no means ensures it. Beyond the first year and the foundation it provides for subsequent success, universities

must also focus on the developmental process of learning that occurs over the following years of university study. This requires not only the continuation of academic support, but it's being sequenced and scaffolded in ways that allow students to enhance their skills over time. Lest we forget, the acquisition of competence is itself a developmental process that takes time. Unfortunately, such support is often difficult to obtain beyond the first year.

Critical to the acquisition of competence is the work of the teaching staff and in turn the classroom to student success. Yet as contrasted to elementary and secondary school teachers who are trained and certified to teach, university instructors in most countries are not. Would we ever go to a hospital or send our children to a hospital if the doctors were not trained to help them get better? Yet we continue to send our youth to universities whose instructors typically are not trained to help them learn. This is not to say that there are not many talented instructors. There are. But as a matter of practice university instructors are not required to be trained as a condition of their employment, not provided the skills they need to be effective in the classroom, nor provided the time and support to acquire those skills. To be a student-outcomes centered university this must change.

A number of countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and The Netherlands for instance, have already made this change. They require instructors to participate in a one or two-year collaborative training program before they can become senior lecturers. They have also developed a variety of ways of assessing instructor pedagogical competence and put in place various incentive systems to further promote continued professional development.

To be effective in promoting student learning, however, such training should not focus solely on pedagogical skills – which they must – but also on giving instructors the knowledge they need to construct classroom environments in which they teach that are promotive of student learning. This requires, among other things, that they be sensitive to the expectational climate of the classroom and learn how to assess student learning in class and provide effective feedback. It also requires that instructors work with each other and with academic support staff whose cooperation is necessary to construct such environments. Here again is why a collaborative organizational structure, not one marked by silos, is so important to the success of a student-centered university.

As to the classroom, universities have to provide for a variety of ways of engaging students in the curriculum not only through different pedagogical strategies such as cooperative learning and problem-based learning, but also a variety of learning settings from on-line classrooms to hybrid classrooms and service learning that allow students to learn in class, out of class, and on-line. But doing so requires that instructors also acquire the skills needed for effective use of on-line and hybrid learning environments. For anyone who has taught on-line courses, as I have, knows that teaching online is very demanding.

These years are also those during which students need to acquire an occupational identity, one that connects them to the field in which they will soon be working. It is especially important in an increasingly fluid society as a strong sense of occupational identity provides a degree of

resilience that buffers the individual against the inevitable ups and downs of occupational life. By contrast, individuals who only weakly identifies themselves with a field of work are more likely to suffer burnout over the long term and reduced occupational effectiveness if not departure from the occupation.

Here is where internships can be especially effective for they enable students to participate, if only briefly, in the occupation to which their studies are directed. In so doing, internships help students see themselves as a future member of that occupation in ways that reflect the reality of occupational life. In less direct manner, occupational identity can also be nurtured through the use of cohort programs in which students travel through the curriculum together. Though such programs are prevalent in fields like nursing, there is little reason why they cannot be constructed in most fields of study.

The Last Year and Beyond

As students approach their last year of university study, universities and in turn the program of study in which they are enrolled should place greater emphasis on applied learning such as that which arises from problem and project-based learning. Such pedagogies not only enhance student learning but also promote critical thinking skills and the skills of applying what is being learned to real world problems or situations. Beyond the university, what matters is not just what students know, but how they apply what they know to address pressing problems, occupational or otherwise. Lest we forgot the object of a student-centered university is not just to promote student completion and learning but also produce graduates who can make meaningful contributions to society.

Let me also suggest that universities should ask more of their students in their last year of study. They should ask, indeed require, them to become mentors to new students. They should take seriously the saying “Lift as you climb.” They should be made to understand, by doing, the obligation they have to help other students who are just beginning their journeys. It is a hallmark of what we hope for our societies.

Closing Thoughts

What then of the organization of the university? How should it be changed to better promote the goals of student completion and learning. Let me suggest the following re-organization. First, the university should establish a distinct first-year college for many, if not all, students. That college would itself be organized into a set of collaborative units that unite what have hitherto been separate functions, academic and support. Failing that, each program should develop its own first-year program. Second, universities need to move beyond the silos that now mark university organization. It must be collaborative in structure, one that brings together the work of many offices, programs, and services all addressing the same goal, namely student success. Third, the university should require all new instructors to participate in a one or two-

year training program in which they learn and apply the skills they need to promote learning in the classroom. Fourth, the university must be assessment driven. It must take seriously the task of assessing student outcomes and use the results of those assessments, both summative and formative, to revise their organizational structures over time. In doing so, the university must see their organization through the eyes of their students. Only by gaining insight from their perspective can a university become truly student-centered. Fifth, the university should rearrange its internal budget system such that each unit's funding is based, in part, on its ability to improve student completion and learning. Incentives and rewards matter.

In closing, let me observe that it is one thing to change an organizational structure, it is another to change the culture which inhabits that structure. While we move to reorganize our universities, so too must we reshape its culture. It must be one that enables, not hinders, program development and provides meaningful incentives and rewards for the achievement of student outcomes. It must be one that values student outcomes as the primary purpose of university existence. It must be a culture that leads students to want to persist, learn, and complete their studies. This requires that all members of the university, management, academic and support staff, and professional staff are focused on student success and direct their energies accordingly. It is not the responsibility of some members of the university. It is the responsibility of all members of the university. Only then will we see the gains in completion and learning to which we aspire.

Thank you.