

VALENCIA'S **BIG** IDEAS

Sustaining Authentic Organizational Change through Shared Purpose and Culture

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An important part of the sustained efforts toward improving student learning at Valencia Community College has been the development of several key ideas that serve as fulcrums for change, signifiers for emerging organizational culture, and rallying points for action. The process of moving from promising innovation to large-scale pilot, to sustained solution, that is, the process of institutionalizing the work, depends heavily on a community of practice shaped by powerful common ideas. While these ideas aren't unique to Valencia, they are authentically ours in the sense that they are organic to our work, having rooted themselves in the discourse of campus conversations, planning, development, and day to day activity. A few of these follow:

1. ANYONE CAN LEARN ANYTHING UNDER THE RIGHT CONDITIONS.

This idea marks a change in belief about our students. Most of the culture of education is built on a long-standing myth that talent for learning is relatively scarce and that many, perhaps the majority of our population, just aren't "college material." Despite the fact that the scientific evidence offers no support to this position, the fact is that most people believe they themselves are mathematics disabled. Most believe that only certain people can learn to play the piano and that if they haven't learned a foreign language by a certain age, it is nearly impossible for most people to do so. This erroneous belief is comfortable for us because it gives us a ready means to ration educational opportunity rather than fulfill the promise of access we regularly make in our rhetoric. Further, it offers cover for methods of teaching that are known to be less effective for producing good learning results. And it reinforces framing our challenges in terms of students who are "under-prepared" for college while ignoring whether the college is prepared for our students.

The fact is nearly anyone can learn nearly anything, under the right conditions. This is a matter of scientific truth. While genius in selected fields seems to be relatively rare, the capacity for competence is almost universal. Our students, with extremely rare exceptions, have all of the biological gifts, the inherent capacities to learn everything we teach.

We often remind ourselves of this truth with an anecdote. After a speech when this point was emphatically made, the speaker was approached by a teacher who said she agreed that this was true in *most* disciplines. The speaker asked, "What is it you teach?" The teacher replied, "German, a language that is very difficult and non-intuitive. In fact, after twenty years of teaching, I can tell you there are some people who just can't learn German." The speaker thoughtfully replied, "Well, how fortunate for them they weren't born in Germany..." You see, virtually all Germans learn to speak German. This isn't a

genetic endowment, a sort of “Deutsche gene.” Rather, the conditions for learning to speak German just happen to be rather good in Germany and so nearly everyone learns the language. This should be no different for the language of mathematics or music or physics, or any other discipline we teach.

This idea shifts the focus from the deficiencies of the learner to the conditions of learning. Our task as a college is to partner with the learner, who controls many but not all of these conditions, to create the very best conditions for her to succeed. This has been a powerful idea for our work.

2. START RIGHT

A practical review of the evidence of student progress in nearly any community college makes this point, which has come to mean a number of related things at Valencia. This evidence reveals that the college, in spite of being the largest producer of graduates among community colleges in the country, still churns hundreds of students at the “front door.” Some fifteen courses, all of them available to first semester students and about a third of which are developmental, account for nearly forty percent of the college’s total enrollment. With success rates in each of these courses at most colleges hovering around fifty percent, the chances of students being successful in their first five courses on first attempt – a powerful predictor of future success and graduation – is often below ten percent. So START RIGHT is a reminder that the greatest challenge and opportunity for improvement in results is at the beginning of a student’s experience with us. Developing a deep and detailed understanding of the early experiences of our students has enabled the college to focus resources intensively on the pre-curricular, curricular, and co-curricular experiences of our students “at the front door” of the college to measurable effect. And this strategic allocation of resources is sustained with the support even of faculty and staff whose departments might have taken a more competitive view in advocating for their own resource priorities.

As the START RIGHT principle has taken root at the college, it also has come to refer to the details of each student’s beginning. We know that student success is enhanced by proper assessment, placement, advising, orientation, and readiness to learn, before the first day of class. Reengineering our schedule, admissions, registration, orientation and other processes to make this possible for all first time students has been a major effort driven by the START RIGHT principle.

Finally, START RIGHT also refers to the way every semester and class begins. Most colleges experience great chaos at the beginning of every term. Much of this is self-inflicted: poor scheduling, extended late registration, drop/add, and other poor management habits often condemn the first week of every semester to “housekeeping.” Beleaguered faculty often resort to what is known as “syllabus day,” the tradition of handing out a syllabus, going over a few procedural matters and dismissing class early. This is rational behavior when one can’t be sure who will be in the class by the second or third meeting.

So we have worked to create a START RIGHT experience for every semester, using precision scheduling, dramatically reducing any late adds to classes, enforcing an application deadline for new students to give time for all these processes, etc. to reduce the chaos of the beginning of term and to reclaim the first week for learning. Our rallying cry is “make the first minute of the first meeting, of the first class a learning minute.”

These choices involve risk for various stakeholders – potential loss of enrollment, tougher and earlier requirements for planning, more demanding conversations with late-arriving students who have expectations that they will be served as “customers” rather than learners, and so on. Our innovations related to START RIGHT are able first to be tried and measured, and later sustained and institutionalized because of the broad commitment to the underlying idea. And when our results aren’t as good as we might have hoped, we can return to the innovation and refine it or try something else with less baggage because the big idea continues to fuel our consensus on goals.

3. CONNECTION AND DIRECTION

Valencia’s model of student services, the way we engage students to be ready for learning, is based on this principle. We believe students must make a real connection very early in their experience at the college with staff, with faculty, and with other students. Without this connection, commitment to the program is weak and hard to sustain, leading to attrition or half-hearted engagement. Many students find the college culture intimidating, strange, and overwhelming. Both our students and many staff and faculty remind us that the students with whom our strategy of “closing the gap” is most concerned are also most likely to require relationships with persons they trust in the college in order to be ready to learn. Developing both face to face and virtual options for these connections to occur for all students is an ongoing theme in our work.

But students don’t come to college just to make a connection. They are here for a purpose, sometimes barely understood even by the student. We believe a student needs a clear direction, a plan to graduate, as soon as possible in her college career. Most community colleges have a planning tool for this – oddly, it is generally required in the *final* semester and is called an Application for Graduation. A plan developed early in one’s college experience can change, but to have no plan at all, a common experience for community college students, is far worse than having a plan that may need revision. So the college has built complex systems of student support around the importance of developing and following a plan as early as possible in one’s college career. Using a geographic metaphor and designing processes around a model of student development, we call these systems LifeMap. The tag-line you will see around the college, including significant marketing efforts to existing students to become more engaged, is “Life’s a trip, you’ll need directions...” The CONNECTION AND DIRECTION idea has become shorthand for years of deep thought and discussion of the value we bring to students when student services and academic services partner effectively. And it serves as a touchstone in the active conversation of what is working or not working in the college, while also providing a framework for inquiry into the student experience of our programs.

4. THE COLLEGE IS HOW THE STUDENTS EXPERIENCE US, NOT HOW WE EXPERIENCE THEM.

This notion seems obvious, but the deep culture of nearly every college and university in the country tends toward marginalizing students, who after all are temporary members of the college community. Our basic unit of analysis in most of our conversations about the college is a group of students – a section, a class, a cohort, a demographic. None of these classifications speaks to the way students experience the college. They are *persons*, unique individuals, and they experience college in a powerfully personal way. This came home to us in a student focus group led by a renowned researcher on student persistence. When he asked five very different students who had succeeded against the odds at a community college what had made the difference for them, each gave essentially the same answer – a person’s name. No one named the college’s great technology, the programs of instruction, the learning resources, or the tutoring programs, where in fact they had met the persons they named. They all named people who had taken a strong interest in their learning and supported them in some way. We learned from seeing the college as the students experience it that our programs are merely vessels, the persons who work in them are the wine. This principle seems true for all students, but especially true for students of color, of alternate language, and of other conditions that may make the college seem a foreign and unwelcoming place. (See Connection and Direction above)

It is easy to plan for what is best for the college – what programs, what buildings, what staffing and salary structures, what partnerships will benefit the institution or one of its interest groups the most. But the more important question in all of these decisions and many others is “What do we want our students to experience?”

For Valencia, this principle has powerfully shaped our program strategy, our scheduling of classes, our technology decisions, the way we deploy staff and faculty, our admissions and registration systems, our campus environmental planning, our building designs, our approaches to institutional research and analysis, and many other college systems. But it is in the nature of this work that it is never really “finished.”

5. THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT IS TO IMPROVE LEARNING

No college will significantly improve its results in student learning until it steps up meaningfully to the assessment challenge. The difficulty here is that most colleges in the US have a mixed history with learning assessment. Beginning in the 1960s with Management by Objective models brought over from industry, to the institutional accountability models developed and deployed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, mostly to limited effect, assessment has been used to describe many things that are far removed from the actual learning process. And they were perceived, perhaps justly, as a means of addressing distrust of faculty or institutions. Therefore, it is no wonder many faculty are,

at first, anxious over this conversation. This situation has been no less true or important to our work at Valencia than at any other college and we may have further to go in this area than any other in our journey toward learning-centeredness. Rightly understood, establishing clear learning expectations and identifying the methods of assessment are essential steps to partnering with an adult learner. Only when equipped with this information, can the learner effectively adjust her own conditions of learning for improved results. Therefore, the most important user of authentic assessment is...the learner. And next to the learner, the most important user is the facilitator of learning, or professor. Everyone else – the department, institution, state office, the USDOE – is a footnote.

This is not to say that others in the college shouldn't be using assessment of learning also for the purposes of creating better conditions, testing the effectiveness of various methods and innovations, etc. But they need to be kept properly in the secondary role or they will inevitably undermine the most important work to equip students and faculty with the information they need to make a difference in learning.

Because of these dangers, Valencia began its deep work in learning assessment with years of collegial development of assessment techniques directly with faculty. Long before initiatives like Achieving the Dream came along, hundreds of faculty had been exposed to the value and practical methods of assessment for the classroom – formal and informal, formative and summative. While the goal of creating a community of professional practice around norms of effective teaching and learning hasn't been fully realized at the college, our progress in this work has made the more difficult and intrusive conversation about assessment much easier and more productive.

Furthermore, when someone has a great idea about something else we should be asking our faculty, staff or students to measure and report, we have a test that keeps us from wandering too far from best practice – how will this assessment improve learning? This frees faculty and academic leaders to collaborate on a common assessment agenda and defuse the traditional sources of anxiety around the college placing a serious emphasis on assessment. It also gives a basis for making decisions to use such tools as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and a reason and template for engaging a deeper and broader conversation about what the data may say and mean.

6. COLLABORATION

These ideas, and others, are deeply influential in our work because they have become a part of our culture, our way of thinking about and representing our work, a vocabulary for our discourse about the things that matter most to us in our work. They represent more than “strategy,” the way we choose to focus our efforts to get things done. These ideas help us decide what is worth doing and enable us to agree on purposes. When agreement on purposes, on ends, is strong, disagreements on means become less likely to become obstacles. In fact, dissent on means becomes a vital faculty in our work to get the results we all seek. But these ideas don't come from the top down or the bottom up. Because they are a part of culture, they emerge from an ongoing dialog in the organization over

the reality we are facing, what the data say and mean, what we believe, what might make a difference in our students' learning. This is collaboration. It is different from "buy-in," which implies someone selling an idea. In fact, advocacy – the habit of selling one's ideas – actually hinders our work more often than not. Inquiry is the better habit. And to cultivate this habit in such a large organization, we have had to invent new "technologies of collaboration." Committees certainly don't work. We use a variety of "high band width" meetings, on-line polling tools, processes for making meaning from data, redesigned governance structures, and most of all the habit of dialog to reach conclusions, especially on big issues. Everyone has voice and if the group struggles to reach a clear conclusion, the dialog continues. In this cauldron of work, our best ideas are formed and shared in a way that makes it impossible to identify whose idea it originally was. This is collaboration at Valencia and all the other Big Ideas depend on this value, process, and commitment for their legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

These are a few among a number of Big Ideas that have made and continue to make a difference in the efforts at Valencia to make dramatic and sustained progress in student learning. We should emphasize that these ideas have emerged from deep discourse, important stories, long reflection, iterative and inclusive planning, and, most importantly, deep collaboration within our organization. The ideas themselves may have some value, but their power to engage, change, sustain, redirect, unify, and encourage our work is rooted in the authenticity of their origins in our ongoing conversation. It is to this conversation and the big ideas they may yet produce that we commend our colleagues.