

CHICOSTATE Inside

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Adding Value

On the occasion of its 90th anniversary in 2005, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the nation's leading higher education organization promoting liberal education, conducted a series of focus groups with students across the country to ascertain their hopes, concerns, expectations, and goals regarding college. AAC&U sought to understand student attitudes about, and perceptions of, liberal education, as well as the degree to which students both heading to and already in college recognize the value of a liberal education and its key outcomes to their own future. The findings of these focus groups should give us all pause, because they reveal a significant disconnect between the learning outcomes that academic, business, and civic leaders consider most important and those that students do.

Not surprisingly, because this has been validated in both the long-standing annual survey of student attitudes and characteristics conducted by Sandy Astin of UCLA and the more recent National Survey of Student Engagement, professional success was identified by the participants in all of AAC&U's focus groups as the primary reason for pursuing a college degree. To this end, they ranked increased maturity, strong study habits, time-management skills, self-discipline, and teamwork skills as the most important outcomes of their college experience. But, interestingly, with the exception of teamwork skills, these students did not recognize these qualities and skills as being direct outcomes of their collegiate studies. Rather, they viewed them as products of their own ability to handle the greater independence, freedom, and responsibility gained at college.

Even more provocative were the learning outcomes students valued least, ranking them at the bottom of their list: developing a sense of values, principles, and ethics; cultivating tolerance and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles; expanding cultural and global awareness and sensitivity; and gaining an appreciation of the role of a citizen and an orientation toward public service. In other words, the virtues of respect, civic engagement, service, and diversity—which higher education institutions across our country have been trumpeting for years as central to our missions, purposes, and visions—are clearly undervalued by the students in this survey. At Chico State, for example, we proclaim in our Mission Statement that “we seek the purposeful integration of liberal and applied learning that provides our students with the knowledge, skills, and moral and intellectual virtues that form the basis for life-long learning, civic engagement, and enlightened service.” This is a mission statement that the students who participated in the AAC&U survey would apparently find quite problematic.

What's going on here? Is this a case of “we know best,” even if our students don't get it yet? Are we so out of touch with our students' perceptions and mindsets when they arrive on our campuses that we are incapable of bridging that gap while they're with us? Are we so sure that we have it figured out for them that it doesn't matter where they are when they join us? Is our curricula, both in and out of the classroom, irrelevant to our students? Is the AAC&U sample just a bad set? Or, at least, one that could not possibly reflect the students of our university?

Although each of these questions merits consideration, the challenge, I believe, is not relevancy, but advocacy. It is helping students, prospective students, and their parents not only understand

why it is important to attend and graduate from college, but also recognize what really matters in college. It is emphasizing that what happens to students in college is more than gaining knowledge for instrumental purposes, more than acquiring educational credentials for personal advantage.

There is a tight relationship between the role we play as a place of public purpose and service and the responsibility we have to foster the personal and intellectual development of our students. In both matters, we are talking about adding value. In the former role, we identify public concerns, contribute to the public good, and demonstrate the value of those contributions to several stakeholders in our endeavors, including the legislature and taxpayers. Regarding the latter role, we aim to prepare our students to be better citizens and more effective contributors to society as a result of their time with us.

Just as we need to be confident in accepting this understanding and clear in articulating it, we must be bold in aligning our actions with these intentions. Our institutional action plan is our Strategic Plan. The draft update to it explicitly underscores the relationship between institutional performance and the values we aim to cultivate in our students. We affirm, for example, the responsibilities of public service through both the obligations we take on as an institution and the work of our faculty, but we also promote the value of service to others as a characteristic to define our students. We do not lack evidence that our students embrace this value. They contribute thousands of hours of service each year through CAVE and CLIC; they have raised funds on campus for Katrina's victims and journeyed to the Gulf Coast to assist directly with the hurricane recovery efforts; they provide leadership on campus and throughout the CSU on sustainability issues; they demonstrate their generosity through the clean-up of the Sacramento River after the Labor Day float, the local Community Challenge for the Boys and Girls Club of Chico, the national Up 'til Dawn campaign for children's cancer research at St. Jude's, and so many other less visible expressions of altruism and good citizenship. No, the service record of our students does not a national sample make. But those who doubt the place of service in the value hierarchy of students in our nation's colleges and universities should come to Chico.

Can we do the same with other institutional values, like those related to diversity, environmental stewardship, and civic engagement? Yes, we can—if we truly support those values—create expectations regarding them, align them with a strong sense of public purpose, and include them among those outcomes that indicate institutional success. In other words, a measurement of our quality is as much student learning relative to the competitiveness of our graduates in a global economy as it is the development of attributes and attitudes that enable our alumni to contribute to the health and well-being of their communities.

Shifting a focus from inputs (e.g., GPAs and SATs of students, selectivity indices, and transfer rates) to outputs (e.g., the record of higher education institutions as problem-solvers for society or as cultivators of greater tolerance and independent thinking in students) is a huge undertaking, and our funding formulas and rewards structures are not set up to do this. But we must not shrink from our responsibilities along the lines of the latter, even as we are compelled to pay attention to the former. For, in doing so, we communicate who we are and what we're about, and this includes the commingling of academic pursuit and public policy in achieving success for individuals, for our economy, and for our democracy.~

—Paul J. Zingg