



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ACADEMIC RIGOR IN THE OPEN-DOOR COLLEGE

The community college is a distinctly American contribution to higher education. Nowhere else in the world can one find such commitment to access to higher education. This noble endeavor also brings with it significant challenges—one of which is maintaining academic rigor.

Indications are that more students than ever before expect to achieve high grades in college but appear unaware of the commitment and sacrifice required to accomplish their expectations. When one contemplates the combination of open-door admissions and student expectations, it is easy to appreciate the challenge of establishing and maintaining academic rigor. A relentless vice, with twin jaws of student expectations and open-door admissions, exerts a continuous force upon faculty—while multiple economic, cultural, and political factors press upon the academic policy-makers simultaneously. Finally, the “right heart” attitude of compassion and activism that motivates community college academic leaders to support an open-door admissions policy may also create an impression that academic rigor is less important than increased access. It is precisely these challenges that demand our attention.

What is academic rigor and integrity?

Academic rigor can be defined as the set of standards we set for our students and the expectations we have for our students and ourselves. Rigor is much more than assuring that the course content is of sufficient difficulty to differentiate it from K-12 level work. Rigor includes our basic philosophy of learning—we expect our students to demonstrate not only content mastery but applied skills and critical thinking about the disciplines being taught. Rigor also means that we (higher education professionals) expect much from ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions.

It is one thing to set high expectations for our students by assuring the difficulty of a course through significant amounts of content knowledge to be gained

or complexity of the materials to be learned. It is another thing entirely to accompany such expectations with a commitment to put similar emphasis on the expectations we have for ourselves by defining our success in terms of direct measures of learning that occur with each student. In short, if we are serious about academic rigor, we must increase our own mastery of our discipline content, improve our ability to apply our learning, and model critical thinking for our students.

The accompanying concept of academic integrity may be thought of as two distinct, but interwoven, threads. One thread is moral integrity. In this sense, academic integrity becomes the commitment we have to hold one another accountable (students and colleagues alike) for meeting and/or upholding our standards and expectations. The second is structural integrity and involves the idea that each aspect of the educational experience must be designed with the integrity of the entire experience in mind.

In November 1999, The Center for Academic Integrity distributed copies of “The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity” (www.academicintegrity.org). This powerful treatise identifies the core values necessary for academic integrity and at its outset identifies the premise for why academic integrity matters: “Academic integrity is essential to the success of our mission as educators. It also provides a foundation for responsible conduct in our students’ lives after graduation” (p. 2). We must consider the moral definition of academic integrity as we deal with the issues of academic rigor.

As for structural integrity, one must think of integrity in regard to how each aspect of an academic experience fits with and supports all other aspects of the experience. We must ask ourselves the tough questions such as:

- How do the activities within any given course build on and support the student learning within the course from day one to completion?
- How does a specific course support and build on a student’s program of study?
- And in the broadest sense, how does a learning experience, activity, course, or program of study fit across disciplines and departments to achieve the



mission of the institution?

In essence, do the student learning experiences provide both an excellent means for learning content and lay the *foundation for responsible conduct in our students' lives after graduation*?

If we are to achieve this goal of true academic rigor and integrity, we must begin to think from a "systems" definition where each component of an academic experience is strategically designed in light of how it affects the whole experience. The systems-thinking approach recognizes that no component of the college operates in a vacuum; thus, the potential impact on the entire institution is always taken into account when curricular changes are proposed.

How can we enhance academic rigor and integrity?

One strategy for meeting this challenge is to engage our leaders, faculty, and professional staff in activities designed to evolve a shared understanding of our *ideal academic culture*. This ideal culture may include a variety of core educational experiences, as well as values and expectations.

The academic leadership team at Iowa Western Community College has undertaken three strategic initiatives to address the issues of academic rigor and integrity. First, we implemented a series of dialogues, hosted by the vice president of academic affairs and open to all faculty members and professional staff. We used the six key principles from *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (O'Banion, 1997) as a focal point for each discussion.

- The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners.
- The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
- The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

These discussions provided opportunities to re-examine the values of our institution, to celebrate what we currently do well, and to examine how we should proceed to meet the challenges of education in the new century.

Second, we formed a work group to review relevant

data regarding academic dishonesty, as well as model policies and practices. The group convened for one intensive working day to draft policy. Members included faculty, coaches, advisors, and chairs. Both an effective policy statement and a clearly defined set of procedures for faculty were products of their hard work.

A key aspect of this work was the drafting of a simple honor code statement that will be included on all student applications in the future. Follow-up work with student leaders has resulted in a formal resolution from the student government supporting this new policy. Student leaders have agreed to assist in promoting the importance of academic honesty as we move to implement the new policy. The honor code statement reads:

"Upon enrolling in the College, I assume an obligation to conduct my academic affairs in a manner compatible with the standards of academic honesty established by the College and its faculty. If I neglect or ignore this obligation, I understand that disciplinary action will be taken."

Finally, we recognize the critical importance of the chairperson's role. To assure that we are constantly striving for an ideal academic culture that is shared by many, we have implemented a series of leadership development activities for current chairs. This series of 10 events is ongoing throughout the year and provides opportunities for chairs to develop their management and leadership skills. No small part of this activity is an extended discussion of personal philosophies and beliefs regarding community college education and how our personal thoughts and beliefs become a "collective culture" for our colleagues and students.

The unique history and nature of a college play a major role in the formation of its academic culture. However, culture is an evolving entity that shapes and is shaped by the members of the institutional community. As academic leaders, we should identify what we believe are the essential aspects of an academic culture and discuss our thoughts with our colleagues. To that end, ongoing dialogues involving all members of the college community are essential activities if the institution is to establish and maintain an academic culture that values rigor and integrity. Making and taking the time to do this is critical to its success.

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