Global Trends

The topic is timely. Globally, higher education institutions are now very mindful of strategic planning and—particularly—program evaluation. Although there are multiple reasons for these interests, the primary reason is pride in the profession. It is professionally inherent in us to strive for the best education possible for our students. A second, somewhat political reason is our need to respond to the public demand for assurance that we are accountable and are delivering quality education. Nations around the world are concerned, more than ever, about their competitiveness in the global marketplace, and the college degree has become essential to their productive workforce. Higher education’s recent steady enrollment increase is a direct result of these concerns. As college enrollments and educational costs have grown, so has the public’s voice become loud and firm for institutional accountability. In some cases, the demand has resulted in some regional accreditation associations’ developing new standards for institutional accreditation, specifically regarding learning and assessment. The public demands assurance that college graduates are prepared for life with meaningful careers and ability to contribute to a better world, and we owe the public—and ourselves—that confidence. For reasons of professional integrity, though, it behooves us to keep the two purposes in their first and second order, for as the professional purpose of high quality education for students is fulfilled, the political demand will also be addressed.

Other global trends affect the way we organize, facilitate, and assess co-curricular activities, such as transformative—or integrated—education. Recent research shows that education is not merely transferring knowledge and information; rather, it provides experiences that change and transform individuals. Transformative education develops students holistically and helps them understand who they are, their ability to reflect on
the values that drive their decisions and actions, how they use knowledge and information, and how they develop civic responsibility and participation. This requires integration of learning that takes place in the classroom with learning that takes place outside the classroom—on campus and in the community. Transformative learning is powerful. It broadens students’ interest in thinking about the world, about what they know and what they don’t know, about how they grow and develop and learn so that they will continue to learn on their own for the rest of their lives. What can be more powerful than that? Transformative education clearly indicates that co-curricular activities have an important role in students’ education.

A related global trend—student engagement in campus and civic activities—is an excellent way to facilitate transformative education and co-curricular activities. Research results firmly indicate that campus and civic engagement is vital to students’ development and learning. Involvement gives students a sense of belonging—a feeling of being at home on campus in a family-like environment—which enhances their retention and success. Co-curricular activities provide opportunities for students to learn and transform as they take action, make decisions, and reflect on their behavior and values as they perform service and volunteer work on the campus.

Transformative education and student engagement highlight the importance of another global trend—conscientious, intentional collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. Where this is being taken seriously, student affairs staff are succeeding at new, higher levels of participation in student academic learning.

The recent global trends are not new concepts. As educators, we have expressed and advocated these trends for decades. Their rise to the global level indicates they are now regarded with greater intensity than ever—in Europe, Asia, the United States and beyond. Assessment, learning outcomes and program review are major concerns, particularly in countries where institutional accreditation is affected. Student satisfaction surveys and other traditional forms of evaluation, alone and by themselves, are no longer sufficient in demonstrating that students graduate in a timely manner with adequate preparation to manage their lives in a complex society and contribute to a better world. These qualities are a nation’s foundation of existence and advancement, and nations rely on education to develop these qualities and abilities in their citizens.
The Process

Higher education institutions that develop academic learning and student development programs as separate entities generally do provide integrated learning to some students. However, to be a full-fledged transformative institution, the institution must intentionally provide integrated education to all students, not just to those who seek or happen by chance to find it.

At the outset, it may be unreasonable to engage an entire faculty and staff in changing its institutional culture. Collaboration requires large amounts of time for continuous, intensive, and extensive dialog and consensus. Not everyone will be able or interested to devote the time required to launch institution-wide change. One model is to start small and gradually expand. It begins with a single department or unit that volunteers to take the leap and commit to outcomes-based assessment and integrated education. The process may start as an experimental collaboration between a faculty member and a co-curricular staff. The administration can encourage experimental projects with incentives, such as providing funds for special activities, resources and other support. When faculty and staff in other units see the positive results, assessment data, achievements, and excitement of the faculty, staff and—especially—the students about what they learn, they begin to inquire and express interest in knowing more about the approach. When collaboration and transformative education become contagious, it is inspiring; the slightest show of interest by a faculty or staff should be welcomed, seized, and nurtured.

Transformative education requires an institutional culture of assessment of constant, consistent, persistent evaluation in a wide variety of forms and methods with results used intentionally to inform institutional decision-making for improving and strengthening learning. Assessment is based on well-thought-out student learning outcomes; distinctly-defined program outcomes; corresponding experiences to achieve the outcomes; a schedule of continual review, reflection, and—as needed—redesign of the process. This is not easily done, but it can be done. It is tedious work; but, it is also creative professional work. The end result of knowing you are delivering effective, high quality education to each student is invaluable.
Models and Examples of Collaboration

Among the numerous programs that promote integration of co-curricular activities in teaching and learning, some have clearly shown to enhance student learning outcomes in meaningful ways, such as service learning; leadership training; engagement in student government and campus life; new student orientation; career services; peer mentoring; peer tutorial; coaching; advising; and other activities that take place outside the classroom. These activities relate to academic coursework and provide experiences that impact institutional effectiveness and transform students in positive and rewarding ways.

Some programs developed collaboratively by student affairs and academic departments in other universities have had profoundly positive results. Examples:

- Students in an accounting class were informed that some homeless persons receive a small monthly income. Knowing that these persons must complete government-mandated annual income tax reports and may need help completing the forms, the students visited shelters for homeless persons and offered their assistance. The results of their volunteer work were astounding and inspiring. Every homeless person the students assisted received a tax return from the government. The students made it possible for the homeless persons to receive, in total, more than US$120,000 (HK$840,000) of income tax returns. For the rest of their lives, these students will know that, as they practiced and applied their new classroom-acquired accounting knowledge and skills, they helped a homeless person file a tax report and receive a return check. This was a collaboration between the business college and service learning program.

- A student in a writing class volunteered to deliver lunch every other day to an elderly, disabled gentleman who lived alone and could not prepare his own meals, as part of a community program called Meals on Wheels. This was a collaboration of service learning and the writing program. The writing professor encouraged the students to engage in conversation with their clients—to develop a relationship—and, perhaps, discover interesting topics for writing. In his conversation, the student was surprised to learn that his client was a descendant of an old, significant, historical family.
The elderly gentleman had researched his family genealogy and yearned to write a book on the family history, but could not do it on his own. Such a book would be invaluable to the literature and history of his ethnic group. It was natural for the student to offer with the writing. After all, this volunteer work was part of a writing class. As a result of assisting his client with the writing, the student became co-author of the book. At the young age of 22 and an undergraduate student, his name as co-author appeared on the spine of a book! The experience totally transformed the student. He became a better writer than he imagined he could be. As he reflected on the experience, he became aware of his values, his abilities and how his mind and spirit had expanded. He had changed; became more confident and broader-minded; and had higher aspirations for himself.

- A biology professor and a political science professor team-taught a course on regional environmental problems. Their collaboration with the co-curricular program stimulated a variety of integrated experiences in the course. Some of them were planned, some spontaneous, and all would probably not have occurred in a traditional class. For example, after each class, the professors held optional follow-up discussions over lunch, which led to interesting experiences for the students.
  - one student became an undergraduate research assistant for the class and helped write a research paper with the professor and other assistants, then traveled with them to co-present the paper at a regional conference on water policy.
  - the other professor helped secure a paid internship in the community for another student.
  - Another intern participated in developing a recommendation on water conservation for the community district—which the regional office actually adopted; the intern also taught water conservation to students at local elementary schools.
  - after the course, the professors and students formed an environmental club on campus.
These engaging experiences made the subject come alive for the students. Through activities, they applied their new information and knowledge to life situations. They transformed, grew, and accomplished significant undertakings and developed abilities they did even not know they had.

• Other academic and co-curricular collaborative activities gave students integration and synthesis in their learning and raised their confidence.
  o A poetry reading event at the campus center gave students in poetry courses a stage to perform their creative poetry.
  o International Week provided a campus-wide event of speakers, performances, cultural and food demonstrations of international students from various countries.
  o Health and wellness activities in residence halls linked co-curricular events to classroom exercise and wellness topics.
  o Talent nights brought together faculty and students in performing arts programs to share their talents.
  o Leadership development and involvement in the student center allowed students the opportunity to develop, manage and assess an activity or building project from start to finish, with newly-learned skills that will be useful throughout their lives: critical thinking, organizing, planning, implementation, decision-making, initiative, teamwork, problem solving, communication, interpersonal relations, financial management, and marketing.

Essential to integrated learning is a built-in process for intentional self-reflection and self-awareness, through personal essays, group dialog sessions with other students, and individual interviews with faculty. This is the crux of transformative education and outcomes-based assessment.
A final example of collaboration—faculty and residence hall staff partnered in designing new models for residence halls that would house residential and academic living/learning centers, theme housing programs, honors programs, and learning communities that would also accommodate collaborative programs in academic advising and support, personal and interpersonal development, academic coaching, and cross-cultural dining.

Curricular and co-curricular assessment has many forms, such as capstone learning experiences, essays, group dialog, pre- and post-questionnaires, standardized tests, portfolios of student work, creation of follow-up action plans, and others. The possibilities are unlimited, and the specific method of evaluation of each experience is generally selected or designed to match its purpose and intended outcomes. However, each institution is unique in its purpose and mission; faculty, staff and students; resources; and how it defines an educated person, program outcomes, and student learning outcomes. With so many variables, it is not practical to simply adopt a single particular model. Rather, it is a matter of each institution’s faculty and staff coming together to collaborate and develop assessment programs that would be effective and desirable to reinforce the mission and uniqueness of the institution.

Involving students in planning the assessment program is a must. At one institution, students commented on the endless, constant evaluation. However, because they participated in planning the assessment, they clearly understood the benefit of evaluation and its role in raising the quality of their education. Rather than groaning and complaining about having to fill out questionnaires and writing essays, they passionately defended the assessment program and the faculty. Students noticed and genuinely appreciated changes the faculty made to the curriculum as a result of students’ evaluations, and they were pleasantly surprised when they saw first-hand the changes and improvements faculty were willing to make immediately as a result of their essays and test outcomes.