

**Student Success Institute  
Marking Connections - Increasing Achievement  
An Overview**

On Thursday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Katherine German facilitated a lively discussion focusing on students and learning, an entrée to the development of faculty-staff proposals to be funded through the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI).

The session opened with a discussion of the ways in which our understanding of knowledge has changed and, similarly, the ways in which education has changed. Today, we are much more engaged in ‘constructing’ knowledge as a joint enterprise, and, therefore, education is focused much more on student learning, even when we are the students. Witness the transformation of the concept of the encyclopedia, from the set of knowledge to Wikipedia, the construction of knowledge. And, likewise, note the transformation of learning from a passive experience to an interactive environment.

This perspective on the transformation of knowledge and education fueled an intensive discussion of the characteristics that the students bring to their learning experience, among them:

- Knowledge of popular culture, technological savvy, and a 24/7 style
- Curiosity, perspective, and interest, as well as hope and fear
- Personal need for self-exploration, definition and introspection
- Goals, well-formed and developing, as well as a desire to improve social status
- A wide variety of life experiences including a sophisticated experience of recovery from a variety of personal problems and considerable survival skills
- Willingness to suspend judgment and follow the rules of engagement
- Personal backgrounds including values, judgments, and prejudices, as well as cultural diversity and openness
- Experiences of success and failure in school and, perhaps, college
- Desire for instant gratification and immediate response, even if superficial
- Fragmented attention span and susceptibility to peer pressure
- Inadequate understanding of how the College works or academic ethics

Participants acknowledged the need to create a learning environment in which these students can thrive by:

- Making connections among the students to build on the social nature of learning
- Focusing on learning in a personable and safe environment
- Building on the strengths that students bring to the experience
- Welcoming resistance, challenge and repartee through dialogue

- Setting and maintaining high expectations
- Ensuring that the learning environment is respectful of differences
- Capitalizing on their motivation, curiosity, and sense of inquiry
- Making connections visible through a transparent structure
- Using peer pressure to advantage by building a sense of the group
- Setting and maintaining goals and expectations - rules of engagement
- Integrating disciplines, instruction and support services
- Embedding counseling, tutoring, and supplemental learning with instruction
- Developing habits of sharing and critiquing within and beyond the classroom

Strategies identified to support such an enterprise include student learning outcomes and classroom assessment techniques, as well as a plethora of interactive instructional strategies ranging from cooperative and collaborative learning to problem-based and service learning as well as learning communities whether they are self-contained or interdisciplinary, paired or integrated. Moreover, it became increasingly clear that co-curricular learning resources needed to be embedded directly into the learning experience. And finally, as good teachers we all needed to assess the impact of our efforts - formally and informally - with a particular focus on learning.

When all was said and done, it was acknowledged that the learning environment had to be expansive - comprehensive - and integrated - for students as well as faculty and staff, a realization that led to the development of a vision of the Learning College. Such institutions hold learning at the core of the enterprise, maintaining high expectations, integrated support, regular feedback, and intense involvement college-wide with policies, procedures, and practices aligned with the focus to underscore the importance of learning. They make shared learning the norm, assess student learning regularly and provide feedback, and they connect the curriculum with the co-curriculum, supporting partnerships across the institution and investing in the continued development of faculty and staff engaged in the teaching-learning process.

All of this conversation led to consideration of innovations that we might develop and implement with the support of the Basic Skills Initiative. Meg Pasquel was introduced to the group to share her experience with - and support for - learning communities, a discussion which generated much discussion, many comments, and lots more ideas, all of which relate to the development of proposals for BSI funding.

By the end of the afternoon, it was clear that an exciting conversation had begun, and that it should continue. As a result, a Learning Community Workshop will be scheduled within the next few weeks for anyone with an interest in learning more about this exciting venture with Meg's support, and the deadline for BSI proposals will be extended to February 20<sup>th</sup> to ensure that all those faculty and staff that want to participate, can.