

What Does it Mean to be Learner-Focused?

I recently attended a workshop on the new criteria for accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. The speaker, Karen Solomon, discussed a number of things that I thought that I would share with you over the next couple of weeks. The first item I would like to share is her discussion about what it means to be learner-focused.

I think there has been a shift in the perception of what the proper function of an educational organization is from the idea that they exist to provide instruction to the idea that their purpose is to produce student learning. A common way of promoting this shift has been to encourage institutions and faculty members to become more learner-focused. We can see this trend in curriculum discussions in which the focus is less on content and more on what students are expected to learn.

I have noted that it has been increasingly common for colleges and universities to say that they are learner-focused and I have wondered what evidence they would use to justify those claims. In her workshop presentation, Dr. Solomon reviewed some of the indicators that various authors have put forth in regard to adopting a learner-focus (see below). She summarized the common attributes of a learner-focus as follows:

- Clarity and focus on student learning outcomes
- Instruction and assessment are coordinated in ways that promote student learning
- Structures and resources are aligned to serve student learning
- Works continuously to improve the environment for student learning

I think this information is worthwhile to keep in mind as we make decisions about assessment methods. The best assessment method is not the cheapest or easiest one, but rather the one that provides the necessary information for informing actions that can be taken to improve student learning.

Indicators of a Learner-Focus

O'Banion (2000)

- Engages learners as full partners
- Creates and offers as many options for learning as possible
- Creates substantive change in individual learners
- Assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities
- Defines the roles of faculty by the needs of the learners
- Defines success by documenting improved and expanded learning

McClenny (2002)

- Clearly defined outcomes for student learning
- Systematic assessment and documentation of student learning
- Student participation in a diverse array of engaging learning experiences that are aligned with required outcomes and designed in accord with good educational practice
- Institutional and individual reflection and action typically prompted and supported by data about student learning and institutional performance
- An emphasis on student learning in processes for recruitment, hiring, orientation, deployment, evaluation and development of personnel
- A focus on learning consistently reflected in key institutional documents and policies, collegial efforts, and leadership behavior

Tagg (2003)

- Emphasizes students' intrinsic goals
- Elicits a high level of student activity
- Has a high ratio of feedback to evaluation
- Has a long time horizon, thus promoting long-term investment
- Has a strong support community which encourages students to take risks, try new things and persist
- Promotes institutional behavior that is consistent and aligned with the learning mission of the institution