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## **A Community College Offers Directions for the Road of Life**

### **The simple tenets of 'learning centered' theory are changing 2-year institutions**

By JAMILAH EVELYN

Orlando, Fla.

The swervy road that leads to the West Campus of Valencia Community College is lined with eye-catching banners. "Life's a Trip," reads the first, featuring a young woman peeking from behind a lamppost. The next, about 80 yards farther and featuring a young man pointing toward campus facilities, imparts, "You'll need directions."

The banners riff on the 26,000-student college's LifeMap, an all-purpose handbook -- and philosophy, really -- that college officials developed to help students plan not only their semester, but their broader goals. It was born out of a belief that the institution's job is not just to help students make it through the two-year college but to aid them in charting life's harder courses -- to teach them how to learn.

"That's part of what being a 'learning college' is all about," says Sanford C. Shugart, the college's president.

The learning-college concept is now the modus operandi at Valencia. Quite simply, say its advocates, being a learning college is about putting learning first. Faculty members say they are giving students more responsibility for their own learning by having them play a bigger role in planning their classes and academic programs. Professors also say it's more important to teach life skills -- such as good study habits and analytical thinking -- than the actual content of a course. The entire process involves rethinking the syllabus, the lecture, and the function of the student.

The learning-college movement has picked up a notable amount of steam at the two-year college level. Officials at the League for Innovation in the Community College -- the learning-college movement's biggest backer -- say some 95 percent of the nation's 1,200 community colleges claim to be on board. Though even League officials admit that that figure is hard to interpret.

"No one is going to say that they are not learning-centered," says Terry U. O'Banion, president emeritus of the League for Innovation.

Still, for community colleges facing pressure from legislators and the rest of higher education to prove themselves like never before, the learning-college movement has

particular appeal. It provides a way to package -- and perhaps build upon -- community colleges' traditional strengths, helping them both to fight off the competition from for-profit higher education and to answer the demands for accountability from state lawmakers. It also has reinvigorated some faculty members' enthusiasm for teaching.

Additionally, says Frank Newman, former president of the Education Commission of the States, the concept gives community colleges a chance to ask themselves whether their rhetoric matches their reality.

"It's one thing for institutions to say that they are effective, but it's another thing entirely for them to agree that they are going to devise a system so that they can actually measure outcomes," says Mr. Newman, who is currently director of a national project to examine the future of higher education.

Still, some skeptics wonder how much of the learning-college concept is marketing and how much is a real shift in what colleges have always done.

Today, community colleges have been putting learning-centered principles long enough that it should be producing some results -- namely improved graduation and retention rates.

The tenets of learning-college theory have probably been around for nearly two decades, first formed and circulated in academic publications and through informal conversations among those who study higher education. The concept took off in community colleges in 1997, when Mr. O'Banion, a well-known scholar of the two-year college world, wrote *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, jointly published by the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges.

Mr. O'Banion made the convention rounds, planting the seeds for his revolution of sorts. But observers say the learning college really took root when for-profit colleges like the University of Phoenix started to spread to more cities and attract more students -- with the trademark community-college pitch that their programs were designed with students in mind, for a student body of working adults.

"This is clearly a reaction to those market forces," says Mr. Newman, a professor of public policy at Brown University. "But it's also a response to the fact that lawmakers are increasingly frustrated with higher education because they think it's not responsive to the needs of society."

The emphasis on helping students works well in today's performance-based environment. And the movement sets community colleges apart from the increasing competition. "If they can claim they've cornered the market on learning, they accomplish the feat of distinguishing themselves from an increasingly congested pack," says Richard C. Richardson, a professor of educational leadership and policy at New York University.

At Valencia -- designated by the League for Innovation as one of 12 "vanguard" colleges

for its exemplary efforts to become learning centered -- Roberta J. Vandermast sips coffee in the lobby of the Learning Resource Center, a two-story brick building in the heart of West Campus that is part classroom building, part counseling and students-services center. Amid a steady bustle of students searching for room numbers on the first day of the semester here, Ms. Vandermast leans back in her seat and crosses her arms.

"Eight years ago, I felt a real disconnect between myself and my students," says the humanities professor. "I just sensed that I was reaching fewer and fewer of them. I was coming to class and teaching the way I'd always done, but I wasn't sure that all of my students were learning."

A key tenet of learning-college theory is that there is a difference between teaching and learning. Teaching at the college level traditionally manifests itself in the lecture-question-test format. That system does not always help students learn.

So learning-college faculty members say they spend a little less time lecturing and more time engaging students to work together in groups.

"It's a way to force us to determine whether we're effective based on whether students learn, not whether the teacher taught," says Mr. Shugart.

Ms. Vandermast says that when she first began using learning-centered teaching techniques, she stopped handing out a prepared syllabus on the first day of class. Instead, she asked students which authors they preferred, which writing formats -- journal entries, essays, or other forms -- they were most comfortable with. It's partially a "setup" she says, because students think they get to make the easy choice, but she takes steps to make sure the work will still be challenging.

"It doesn't make a difference to me whether we read Shakespeare or Marlowe," she says. "When you involve students in the design of the course, they take more responsibility for their learning."

It's a process that has at times forced Ms. Vandermast to keep two sets of books, but "it's worth it if it produces learning," she says.

On the first day of her chemistry class, Melody A. Boeringer-Hartnup passes a flash-card size slip of paper to all her students. She asks them to fill out their entire schedule -- not just their class schedule, but a manifest of everything students have on their plates.

"This semester, I had a student account for 40 hours a day," she says. "This helps students identify in a humorous way that they are overextended."

Ms. Boeringer-Hartnup calls this her "keep-them-from-shooting-themselves-in-the-foot intervention." It ties in with learning-college theory, she says, because helping point out to students the reality of what they are taking on "helps them learn more effectively."

Still sound simple? While learning-college advocates swear by this movement, most admit that indeed, simple it is.

"Sure, there are many faculties all across the country that are doing these things every day," says Mr. O'Banion. "But when you make an institutional commitment to putting learning first, you can have a huge impact on student outcomes. There aren't many colleges and universities that can honestly say they make learning an institutional commitment."

At Valencia -- which has received a total of nearly \$23-million in state, federal, and private grants to finance the learning-college effort -- officials say their institutional commitment runs so deep that they have a learning-centered budget process.

"Before every decision we make, we ask ourselves two questions: How will this impact learning at Valencia, and how do we know?" says Mr. Shugart, who was chosen to head the institution this past January through what officials describe as a "learning-centered presidential search."

Mr. Shugart says that as part of the transformation into a learning college, officials at the institution created several committees comprising administrators, faculty and staff members, and even students, which now make many of the decisions -- like putting together the budget -- that were once left in the hands of only a few administrators.

But what has this all meant in concrete terms? Critics who say they'll hold out on a ringing endorsement of the concept point to the fact that right now, the numbers represent ambiguous results. Many of the colleges that are furthest in the transformation process already were performing pretty well.

Five years into the project, Valencia's already notable retention rates haven't improved remarkably, though learning-college advocates say it really takes about 10 years to see extraordinary change. In 1990, roughly 72 percent of students who entered Valencia with no previous college experience returned after the fall semester. In 2000, roughly 78 percent of those students returned. On the other hand, in 1986 the Community College of Denver -- another "vanguard" college -- graduated only 13 percent of its remedial or "at risk" students. In 1998 -- when "at-risk" student enrollment had doubled -- it graduated 47 percent of those students.

Skeptics say these mixed results may stem from the fact that the learning-college concept is slippery. "I recently spoke with someone at length about the learning college, and I came away from the conversation feeling like I was closer to understanding it," says Mr. Richardson. "But if you asked me now to define what a learning college is, I'd be hard-pressed to give you a concise answer."

What's more, learning colleges' emphasis on faculty engagement can backfire.

Ronald P. Colburn, head of the Faculty Senate at Valencia, says that while he supports

the learning-college concept, he does know that it has ruffled the feathers of some of his colleagues. Some faculty members who had comfortable schedules have been forced to work nights and weekends. And Mr. Shugart says he's considering the idea of linking faculty compensation to how much the students learn, though he admits he is not quite sure how the logistics of that would work. "That's going into a whole different ballpark for what faculty have been used to here," Mr. Colburn says. "There's going to be people who will be very angry about that."

Vernon M. Kays, a mathematics professor at Richland College, in Illinois, says that though his college is not fully on the bandwagon, Richland has been pushing faculty members to use some learning-centered techniques in preparation for a forthcoming accreditation visit. But he doesn't see administrators there and or other institutions putting their money where their mouths are.

"Administrators talk about how faculty are going to do all these things, but they don't give us the resources or the time to do them. Change doesn't happen that way," he says.

Mr. Kays says he too agrees with the learning-college concept. But he's spent countless hours teaching himself how to design online courses and hasn't gotten any release time for it. He says that most of his colleagues rarely have opportunities to go to national conferences that would nurture these ideas.

"My issues with the learning college are not with the things it seeks to change," Mr. Kays says.

"They are with the unwillingness of the leadership to provide the resources for change."

Such charges are "valid," says Mr. Newman, but to let them stop this movement from having an impact only fosters the notion that higher education is resistant to change.

"I've seen colleges with no money go very far with this and have tremendous impacts on students," he says.

But if the learning-college concept is somewhat mushy, supporters of the movement say it's made the biggest differences in ways that are hard to measure. At Valencia, administrators say faculty members are more engaged and students are happier.

Thomas D. Doyle, a former Valencia student now majoring in media studies at the University of Southern Maine, says that the learning-centered emphasis on teaching life skills has helped him in his current studies.

"The things that I learned -- the study habits, how to write a good research paper -- have really stuck with me," says Mr. Doyle, one of Ms. Vandermaast's former students.

Mr. Richardson -- a former community-college president -- points out that this experiment may not have paid off yet in better retention and graduation rates nationwide.

But its current success in simply reenergizing community colleges is no small matter.

"If it does nothing more than that, it's still a wonderful thing," he says. **EXCERPTS FROM A 'LIFEMAP'**

*Valencia Community College's combination notebook, guide, and appointment calendar, the "LifeMap," answers questions that students might have about their role in the "learning college." Some excerpts:*

While it may be "too hard" to think about your entire Life Goals at this time, it is important to have some general ideas about what you are shooting for since your decision about a career and your education (i.e. college degree) should flow from your general goals for life.

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Learning takes effort, and research on college students has shown that students who invest more time in learning get better results! Many times students feel helpless when they experience difficulty in class. ... However, it is important that you take responsibility for your learning and build partnerships with your professors.

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Success is a choice. Your choice. To get what you want, it helps to know what you want and know how to go about it. ... Becoming a master student is a lifelong process. The final destination is up to you!

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