

High-Impact Educational Practices: What We Can Learn from the Traditional Undergraduate Setting

Cathy Sandeen

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

The higher education ecosystem is shifting. Lines are blurring. Continuing professional education—with its focus on nontraditional students, applied learning, support of workforce development, and use of innovative and technology-based pedagogy—was commonly perceived to function outside the core of the academy, which focused on a liberal-arts education for residential traditional-aged undergraduates. But now we observe traditional higher education becoming increasingly “vocalized” in order to attract and serve students, in many cases, first-generation or international students. At the same time US employers demand just the opposite of highly specialized professionally-oriented majors. They want broad knowledge and skills associated with a liberal-arts education: critical thinking, communication, problem solving, and an understanding of the historical, economic, scientific, cultural, and global contexts in which we live and work.

Over the past few years, various articles in the *Continuing Higher Education Review* have made similar observations and arguments. See, for example, Shannon, “Liberal Education and Lifelong Learning,” *CHER* 2011; Reimers, “Enlightening Globalization,” *CHER* 2009; and Schejbal and Irvine, “Global Competencies, Liberal Studies, and the Needs of Employers,”

© 2012 Cathy Sandeen, Dean of Continuing Education and UCLA Extension, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

CHER, 2009. Similarly, Scott Hutchinson and I wrote “Putting Creativity and Innovation to Work,” *CHER*, 2010. While each author made compelling cases for the necessary overlap of a liberal-arts and professional education, we provided less pragmatic advice on incorporating the broader liberal arts skill set within the realm of professional continuing education.

The purpose of this essay is threefold: to draw attention to some excellent work focused on the liberal arts enhancing high-impact educational practices within the traditional residential undergraduate setting; to explore the extent to which these practices are currently employed in the professional continuing education environment; and to suggest how such practices might be further implemented. Implicit throughout this exploration I hope to encourage the continuing professional education community to look outside its own boundaries and to leverage thinking and research from other higher education segments.

LEAP INITIATIVE AND HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

Sponsored by the Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U)¹, “Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) is a decade-long national initiative . . . [designed] to align the goals for college learning with the needs of a new global century. . . . [Further] the initiative is especially concerned with students who, historically, have been underserved in higher education” (Kuh, p. v). Hallmarks of the LEAP initiative include a strong orientation toward assessment and documented learning outcomes and validation of these outcomes through “multiyear dialogues with faculty, employers, and accreditors” (Schneider, p. 3). Desired student learning outcomes include “global knowledge, self-direction, writing, critical thinking, adaptability, self-knowledge, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, social responsibility, intercultural skills ethical judgment, and teamwork” (Schneider, p. 5).

The LEAP initiative acknowledges that teaching to these outcomes is challenging and falls outside the norm of traditional subject matter coursework. Ten high-impact practices were identified and developed as the best means for fostering student growth in desired outcomes like critical thinking and intercultural skills. The following are excerpts of descriptions of these practices from Kuh’s 2008 report (p. 9-11):

First-year seminars and experiences

This practice involves bringing small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis, placing a strong emphasis on critical

inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies.

Common intellectual experiences

These are modern forms of a “core curriculum,” such as a set of required common courses that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community. These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students.

Learning communities

Communities involve integrating learning across courses and involving students with “big questions” that matter beyond the classroom and may involve exploring a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines.

Writing-intensive courses

These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum where students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice across the curriculum has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and on some campuses, ethical inquiry.

Collaborative assignments and projects

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences.

Undergraduate research

Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines with the goal of engaging students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

Diversity/Global learning

Beyond traditional study-abroad options, this practice can include courses and programs that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and world views different from their own and that may address US diversity, world cultures, or both—often exploring “difficult differences” such as

racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for social justice.

Service learning, community-based learning

A key element in these programs is the opportunity for students to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Internships

Internships provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for course credit, students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

Capstone courses and projects

These culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they have learned.

Common threads across these practices include “deep-level processing [that] emphasizes both acquiring information and understanding the underlying meaning of information” (Kuh, p. 14) through attention to purposeful tasks, frequent feedback, human-scale experiences (as opposed to the anonymity of large lectures), interaction with people from different groups, interdisciplinary inquiry, and opportunities to synthesize and apply knowledge.

Besides fostering mastery of identified LEAP learning outcomes, these high-impact practices also have been found to increase persistence and retention as well as GPA. Positive effects are even more pronounced in historically underserved students and when students participate in more than one practice. Unfortunately, according to Kuh, these proven practices tend to be offered on a limited basis and are not widely available to all students throughout their undergraduate career.

RELEVANCE TO CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION (CPE) STUDENTS

The typical nontraditional continuing professional student and the educational environment in which these students learn differ from the classroom-based residential setting on which Kuh's work focuses. CPE students are older, have life and work experience, and may have earned one or two degrees. They complete their studies on a part-time basis, attend class evenings or weekends or online, and are largely taught by adjunct faculty who have relevant professional experience. CPE students most often are motivated to complete their programs in order to advance in their current career or to transition to a new one. In either case, obtaining employment or a promotion are the predominant desired end states.

One need not look too far to realize many CPE students also share some similarities with traditional undergraduates. Many are completing their first degree after a long break from the classroom. They need help in enhancing their writing and quantitative skills, developing technological and information literacy, and learning how to learn. The needs are especially acute among the historically underserved and international students CPE divisions increasingly serve. CPE students are busy with work, family, and community responsibilities and require support in order to persist in completing their program. Finally, if employment is the ultimate goal—and since employers seek individuals with broad liberal-arts skills—are we shortchanging students by not intentionally incorporating more high-impact practices into our CPE curricula?

Kuh acknowledges the challenges of implementing high-impact practices in a traditional undergraduate setting where a high proportion of regular, full-time faculty might make integration of these practices more feasible. Where does that leave those of us in the CPE setting, which relies heavily on adjuncts and part-time faculty and online delivery to a greater extent? How do we create learning communities and internship experiences when students are geographically dispersed? How do we integrate common content across the curriculum in a coordinated and effective way when it is difficult to gather all faculty in one place to have a discussion? How do we provide incentives to faculty for such planning and coordination activities? Most importantly, how can we begin to assess the outcomes of any high-impact practice we implement?

CURRENT APPLICATION OF HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES IN CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

In exploring some of these questions, I reached out to several groups of colleagues for information on their use of such practices.² In varying degrees, CPE units do employ some of these practices. Given the professional nature of most CPE programs, it is not surprising that internships were a common practice. Capstone projects that require reflection and synthesis of prior learning at the end of a program also were common, and one CPE unit requires the capstone project to be based on original research. Several mentioned use of a cohort model as a type of learning community. Collaborative assignments and projects were common as well.

Writing-intensive courses appeared mostly in communication-oriented programs like “Communications Practice” and “Strategic Communications,” and were not required as a practice across the curricula. Diversity and global learning were featured in some programs but were not intentionally integrated across the curricula. Many programs mentioned pre-program orientations, but these are not exactly equivalent to introductory seminars and experiences like freshman seminars.

High-impact practices that do not appear to be commonly employed by CPE units include research with a faculty member, yearlong introductory cohort experiences, and service learning. Fostering interdisciplinary study also was less common than other practices.

Interestingly, online programs seemed to do a better job at intentionally incorporating many high-impact practices. Like many others, NYU’s online programs, for example, are designed to “provide structured opportunities for students to meet one another, learn about student services available, and even see and talk to each other online, in real time [and] faculty provide multiple opportunities for students to network and collaborate with their peers and experts from the field” (DeMaria & Bongiovanni, p. 39).

These programs also strive to enhance critical thinking by “channel[ing] our students’ capacity to ‘think out loud’” and where technology can allow all students to see and think about ongoing comments and analysis by fellow students and the faculty member (p. 38). Critical thinking also is enhanced through the use of “blogs, where they reflect on what they are learning and connect it to their prior knowledge” (p. 40). Online pedagogy incorporates opportunities for students to give and receive frequent feedback.

Though many CPE practitioners have incorporated some high-impact practices into their programs, the practices seem to have been implemented on a somewhat ad hoc, piecemeal basis and are not integrated across the curricula or throughout an entire program as Kuh's work indicates they should. The application of these practices will no doubt assume different forms in the CPE setting; nevertheless, in order to allow students to gain broad, complex, and difficult-to-master skills like critical thinking, writing, and multicultural and global awareness, CPE units should begin to adopt these high-impact practices. In addition, like LEAP initiative projects, assessing learning outcomes should be a key part of our practice as well.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

In general, implementing high-impact practices would be improved by reviewing an entire curriculum and working with faculty to incorporate certain types of practices or activities regularly throughout an entire program. Below is a brief list of ideas for incorporating high-impact practices as well the learning outcomes each support.


- Require writing-intensive projects throughout a program (critical thinking, writing).
- Do the same for quantitative reasoning, information literacy, technological literacy, and/or ethic inquiry (critical thinking, quantitative, information and technological reasoning).
- Require collaborative projects at several points in a program (teamwork, adaptability, intercultural skills, global knowledge).
- Integrate international students into classes and ask faculty to be inclusive of these students in class discussions; provide training to assist faculty in doing so (intercultural skills, global knowledge).
- Require a capstone experience for all programs, preferably research-based (integrative and applied learning, critical thinking, writing, oral communication).
- Require one cross-disciplinary course or one course team-taught by faculty from different disciplines in every program (integrative and applied learning).

- Use technology (e.g., social media) to create learning communities and provide structured assignments and activities that encourage interaction (writing, intercultural skills, teamwork).
- Use technology (e.g., blogs, such as at NYU) to encourage synthesis and reflection (critical thinking, self-knowledge, writing),
- Require some form of internship, practicum or service learning at some point in a program (social responsibility, teamwork, intercultural skills, integrative and applied learning),
- Encourage case-study pedagogy to some extent in most or all courses in a program (critical thinking, integrative and applied learning, writing, oral communication).
- Provide faculty with data about learning outcomes and employer preferences from research literature as motivation to incorporate more high-impact practices into programs.
- Make incorporation of such practices a requirement for new faculty.
- Provide release time or additional compensation to faculty for participating in program reviews.
- Provide structured opportunities for regular holistic review of program curricula by faculty and program administrators.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Increasing degree attainment and other forms of postsecondary education is a noble goal, but attainment in and of itself is not enough. Likewise, a strict focus on highly specialized career-oriented education may be too limiting. Helping students master the broad liberal-arts skills that will serve them throughout their working lives should be proactively addressed as well, though doing so will not be easy.

Because of our naturally innovative nature, continuing professional education units are well-positioned to answer the call. Branching out beyond research specific to our field to benefit from prior research and best practices from other higher education segments—such as AAC&U’s LEAP initiative—makes sense. This is especially true in the new normal where

boundaries are blurring and where continuing professional education is migrating closer and closer to the center of the action. 

ENDNOTES

1. According to AAC&U, the organization “is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,150 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.”
2. I used a convenience sample, sending e-mail inquiries to three groups of which I am a member: CE deans of research universities, University of California deans of extension, and UPCEA board members. These groups tend to represent larger CPE programs but otherwise provide institutional and geographic diversity.

REFERENCES

- DeMaria, R. & Bongiovanni, T. (2012). Dispelling myths about online education. *BizEd*, March/April, p. 36-40.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Reimers, F. (2009). Enlightening globalization: An opportunity for continuing education. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 73: 32-45.
- Sandeem, C. & Hutchinson, S. Putting creativity to work: Continuing higher education’s role in shifting the educational paradigm. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 74: 81-92.
- Shannon, D. (2011). Liberal education and lifelong learning: A value proposition. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 75: 32-50.
- Schejbal, D. and Irvine, G. (2009). Global competencies, liberal studies, and the needs of employers. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 73: 125-142.
- Schneider, C. G. (2008). Introduction to liberal education and high-impact practices. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities, p. 1-8.

OTHER LEAP TITLES THROUGH THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- *Liberal education outcomes: A preliminary report on student achievement in college*. (2005).
- *Communicating commitment to liberal education: a self-study guide for institutions*. (2006).
- *Making the case for liberal education: Responding to challenges*. (2006).
- *College learning for the new global century*. (2007).
- *Assessment in cycles of improvement: Faculty designs for essential learning outcomes*. (2007)