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# Engaged Learning
## Enabling Self-Authorship and Effective Practice

**We advance a new model for a university-wide curriculum that we call the "Engaged Learning University"**

RECENTLY, through its Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) synthesized the college outcomes necessary for successful practice in twenty-first-century life: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning. Because these outcomes span the cognitive, social, and personal dimensions, achieving them requires more than information acquisition or even critical analysis. It requires transformative learning, or learning "to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (Mezirow 2000, 8). Most importantly, it entails a shift from uncritical acceptance of external authority to critical analysis of authority in order to establish one's own internal authority. This internal authority is what developmental theorists call self-authorship, or the capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda 2001; Kegan 1994).

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Kegan argued that self-authorship requires us to "take charge of the concepts and theories of a course or discipline, marshalling on behalf of our independently chosen topic its internal procedures for formulating and validating knowledge" (1994, 303). According to him, self-authorship not only encompasses epistemological maturity, it also requires cultivating a secure sense of self that enables interdependent relations with others and making judgments through considering but not being consumed by others' perspectives. Effective partnering, work, and citizenship in a diverse society necessitate the capacity to manage external realities using the compass afforded by our internally generated beliefs, identities, and social relations.

Evidence abounds that, in recent decades, students have typically entered college relying on perspectives they have uncritically accepted from others and are not sufficiently challenged and supported to transition to internal authority during college. Students who have experienced significant challenge, particularly as a result of marginalization, may exhibit self-authorship prior to college or during college (Abes and Jones 2004; Pizzolato 2003; Torres and Hernandez 2007). Intentional efforts to promote self-authorship in college also show promise. The possibility of developing self-authorship earlier than has typically been observed implies that a carefully sequenced and developmentally appropriate curriculum can help college students develop self-authorship.

We advance a new model for a university-wide curriculum that we call the "Engaged Learning University." Based upon research on student development, this model features principles and practices that lead students steadily toward self-authorship in which epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal

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maturity are integrated. Before articulating details of this model, we describe the evolution of students' meaning making during and after college. Then, we offer an engaged learning philosophy to promote transformational learning, and finally, we conclude with a description of our comprehensive curriculum designed for twenty-first-century life.

### The evolution of self-authorship

The concept of transformative learning is grounded in the constructive-developmental perspective advanced notably by Jean Piaget (1950). This perspective asserts that people construct reality by interpreting their experiences and that the ways of constructing reality evolve according to regular principles of stability and change. We generate meaning-making structures, or "rules," based on our experiences of how the world works. We use these rules to interpret new experiences until we encounter experiences that cannot be explained by our rules. Initially, we regard those experiences as exceptions; but when too many exceptions overwhelm our current meaning-making structure, we adjust it to a more complex one that accommodates the new experiences. For example, if adolescents are socialized via their schooling to accept authority uncritically, then they bring to college the meaning-making structure that holds all knowledge to be certain and possessed by external authority. If they are challenged and sufficiently supported to learn to evaluate knowledge claims and generate an internal belief system, then they exchange their initial meaning-making structures for increasingly complex ones.

Adopting increasingly complex meaning-making structures represents the developmental growth that underlies transformational learning and assists students in achieving the complex learning outcomes of liberal education. Despite variations in pace and particular dynamics that vary by group, research portrays adult development as a journey from following external formulas, through a crossroads in which one's internal voice begins to unseat external formulas, to internally defining one's beliefs, identity, and social relations.

Those who regard all knowledge as certain trust others more than they trust themselves, seek others' approval, and follow external formulas. Individuals begin to move into the crossroads when they gain an awareness that knowledge may be uncertain, begin to take stands that differ from the authority figures in their lives, and recognize the limits of dependent relationships. In learning contexts, they rely heavily on external sources for knowing but are aware of the need to construct their own perspectives. Working through these tensions to view knowledge as contextual, view identity as internally constructed, and achieve the capacity for mutual negotiation in relationships yields self-authorship.

Self-authorship enables learners to evaluate information critically, form their own judgments, and collaborate with others to act wisely. It is, however, necessary to adopt increasing complex meaning-making structures in the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. For example, students who learn to analyze knowledge claims critically and to generate their own ideas have achieved a self-authored epistemological structure. Yet, to achieve effective practice in life, they must also have a self-authored intrapersonal structure that enables them to register disagreement and to argue for their perspectives. In addition, they need a self-authored interpersonal structure that values standing up for one's beliefs over gaining affirmation from others. To illustrate the need for all three dimensions for superior practice, consider the nurse-practitioner who knows from his understanding of infectious disease that the doctor is prescribing an outdated and ineffective treatment but does not say so for fear of admonishment. Lack of complexity in one dimension can inhibit the use of complex meaning-making structures in other dimensions.

### An educational philosophy for promoting self-authorship

The promotion of self-authorship entails a fundamental shift in how we imagine and structure the whole undergraduate experience. As an initial step, it requires that we shift away from what Barr and Tagg (1995) have termed an "instructional" paradigm, which emphasizes instructors telling students what they need to know, to a "learning" paradigm, which emphasizes the design of active learning environments that encourage students to construct their own ideas.

Yet, a more ambitious transformation that extends beyond Barr and Tagg's learning paradigm must occur for students to construct new

knowledge. To discover new ideas, learners must possess an internal set of beliefs that guide decision making about knowledge claims, an internal identity that enables them to express themselves in socially constructing knowledge with others, and the capacity to engage in mutually interdependent relationships to assess others' expertise. These capacities cannot be cultivated solely by engaging actively with the raw materials and tools of the academy or by participating in a student-centered classroom, although these are essential. Instead, they emerge gradually when educators foster students' holistic growth through continuous self-reflection, seamless and authentic curricular and cocurricular experiences that steadily increase in challenge, and appropriate levels of support.

Put succinctly, the following are the key tenets of our intentional, engaged learning philosophy:

- Guide students to develop an internally defined and integrated belief system and identity, which prepare them personally and intellectually for lifelong learning.
- Actively engage students in discovering new knowledge in a sequenced, developmentally appropriate way to enable them to evaluate evidence critically, make informed judgments, and act ethically.
- Create a vibrant campus learning community that blends curricular and cocurricular learning opportunities and capitalizes on the roles of all constituents (faculty, staff, and students) in promoting student learning.

In order to achieve these tenets, educators must progress away from giving answers to and exercising authority over students and toward encouraging questions from and sharing authority with students (Mitchell 2006). At first blush, this shift sounds simple. As students gain intellectual and personal maturity, educators steadily relinquish authority and empower them to assume greater agency over the discovery process and learning environment. Yet, in practice, this educational philosophy requires intentional design; a shared sense of ownership and, thus, partnering among educators and students; continuous critical reflection; and heavy doses of patience and courage.

**Self-authorship enables learners to evaluate information critically, form their own judgments, and collaborate with others to act wisely**

Although the Engaged Learning University aims to empower students as thinkers and scholars, it does not imply that educators must meet students' every wish, coddle, or befriend them. What it means is that educators must move away from the traditional role of the expert or avoid the tendency to seek students' approval and instead push students to gain intellectual, relational, and personal maturity through continuous feedback and high expectations. Educators can help students become more internally focused by validating them as thinkers and burgeoning scholars, presenting thorny problems and topics that lend themselves to multiple legitimate perspectives, introducing them to competencies needed to address those topics, and helping

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them form, and accept responsibility for, their own decisions and actions in ways that are consistent with their own identities. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the students' journey toward self-authorship.
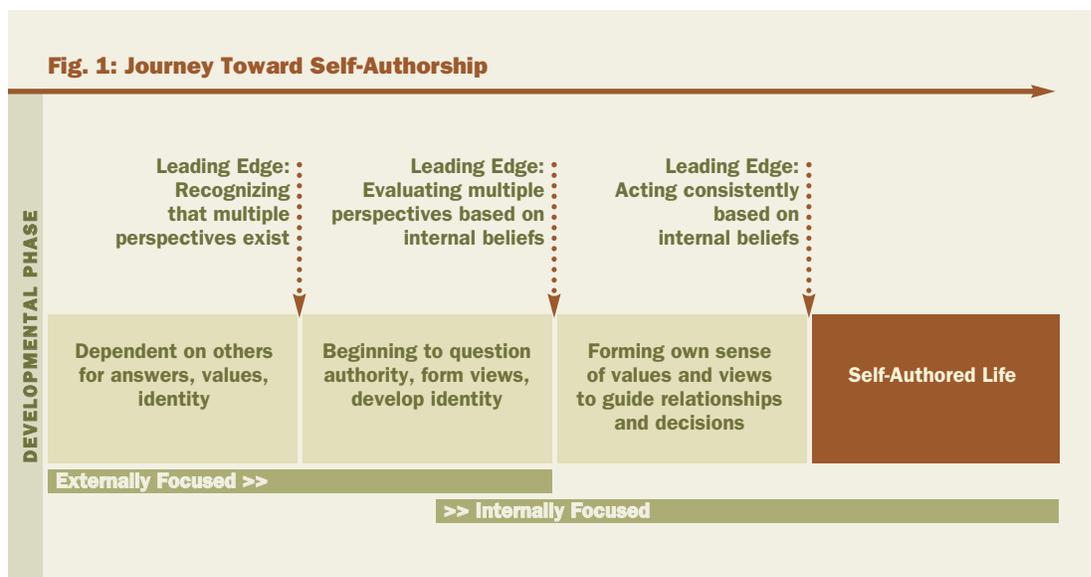
**A three-tiered, comprehensive, developmentally sequenced curriculum**
At Miami University, we have established a three-tiered framework to help our educators design learning environments and curricula that promote students' development toward self-authorship (Taylor and Haynes 2008), and we hope to advance this or similar frameworks across the university. Underlying the framework is what Baxter Magolda (2004) calls "the Learning Partnership Model," which advances three educational principles: (1) validating students' potential as scholars, (2) situating learning in their experience, and (3) mutually constructing meaning with them. Although the principles undergird all three tiers, the way they play out in practice shifts depending on the students' developmental level.

The first tier is designed for students who are generally new to the college experience, tend to view knowledge in absolutist terms, have a limited vision of themselves as legitimate authors of new knowledge, and thus rely on external authorities for guidance and approval. To meet the needs of Tier 1 students, Miami's Office of Liberal Education recently instituted the "Top 25" project, which offers grants to support departments as they redesign

their largest enrollment, introductory liberal education courses to make them more discovery-oriented. A geology survey course, for example, was transformed from an entirely lecture-based course into one that invites students to engage several inquiry-based modules. Similarly, a theatre appreciation course now offers students the opportunity to witness a weekly "master class" of experts who demonstrate a fundamental principle of drama. At the other weekly meeting, students assemble in small groups to write and perform their own mini-plays that illustrate the mastery of the principle introduced in the master class.

Transformations are also being made outside the formal classroom. The University Honors Program recently revised its approach to summer orientation in order to help new students move away from depending so heavily on authority figures, such as parents, for their choices. Rather than simply give students a handout with a list of program requirements, advisers now ask students to engage in a series of reflective exercises prior to course registration. Students, for example, write an imaginary dialogue about their goals for their college experience between themselves and a dominant figure in their life and then are invited to think about how they can fulfill what they seek in college while still maintaining a relationship with this important person. Meanwhile, parents meet elsewhere to discuss their hopes and concerns for the students. Advisers help parents identify ways that their role will need to shift in order to enable students to gain

### Fig. 1: Journey Toward Self-Authorship



**DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE**

Leading Edge: Recognizing that multiple perspectives exist

Leading Edge: Evaluating multiple perspectives based on internal beliefs

Leading Edge: Acting consistently based on internal beliefs

Dependent on others for answers, values, identity

Beginning to question authority, form views, develop identity

Forming own sense of values and views to guide relationships and decisions

Self-Authored Life

Externally Focused >>

>> Internally Focused

mastery over their own decisions and development.

Experiences that encourage students to balance external authority and their own voices push them to move toward Tier 2, or the "crossroads" phase. Students typically arrive at this phase when they begin to question external authorities' definitions and beliefs, recognize that knowledge is not absolute, and begin to identify their own beliefs, interests, and approaches to their personal and academic lives.

To foster students' development, Tier 2 experiences offer students opportunities to make key decisions about the learning experience; practice authentic methods, approaches, and skills of scholarship or leadership with others; and explore how discovery processes and ideas align with their budding system of beliefs.

An example in the cocurricular realm is our Scholar-Leader Living Learning Community in which the residents (sophomores and juniors) and the hall director brainstorm diverse ideas and collaborate to construct their own community standards, hall outcomes, and programming. In the academic arena, Tier 2 faculty members encourage students to participate in the process of discovery, focusing on authentic questions and problems. For example, after noting students' natural interest in Sudoku, mathematics professor Jeffrey Wanko decided to discard the typical approach to math courses and invite students to apply various aspects of logical thinking and

**When the internal voice overtakes external influences, students are moving toward self-authorship**

spatial reasoning to a variety of linguistically and culturally independent puzzles and then work collectively with him to design original puzzles.

Note that the role of the Tier 2 educator has shifted from serving as the principal designer of the learning environment with the aim of actively involving students in the topic of study (which was appropriate for the Tier One context) to one who codesigns the learning environment with the students. This sharing of authority aids students in fashioning their own perspectives on learning and discovery and in feeling a sense of belonging in the scholarly and professional world.

When the internal voice overtakes external influences, students are moving toward self-authorship. Marcia Baxter Magolda found in her longitudinal study that this phase features adults who have "shifted from 'how you know' to 'how I know' and in doing so began to choose their own beliefs. They acknowledged the inherent uncertainty of knowledge and took up the challenge of choosing what to believe in this context . . . This emerging sense of self required renegotiation of existing relationships that had been built on external approval at the expense of personal needs and the creation of new mutual relationships consistent with the internal voice" (2001, 119–20).

Although few participants in Baxter Magolda's study actually reached this phase



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while in college, we believe that with the appropriate levels of support and challenge, students can attain this level of development prior to graduation. Students founding their own organizations, spearheading major leadership endeavors in their Greek organizations, and initiating community-service initiatives are appropriate out-of-class opportunities for Tier 3 students.

Culminating projects, such as a thesis, also provide potential venues for developing students' personal and intellectual maturity. The capstone course offered by the Department of Manufacturing and Mechanical Engineering, for example, requires students to operate as design engineers in a multidisciplinary team with the faculty adviser serving as "consultant," rather than co- or lead investigator as in Tier 2. A recent capstone focused on designing, fabricating, and installing a human-powered water pump system for the village of Gwele Kona in Mali, West Africa, so that an orphanage could be built. To complete this project, students had to study the native language and culture and investigate the geography in order to develop the design and implementation plan. They also had to raise funds, pack and ship the pump system they selected, design a reliable and affordable power source, and travel to Mali to assist with the installation. Although the site selected by a local drilling contractor failed to yield water, the students nevertheless made a significant impact on the community. One of the Mali leaders sent the following message to his pastor detailing what happened:

> It is very hard for me to tell you that our drilling work has failed . . . The villagers are very sad and disappointed, and . . . I was really downcast when I saw tears in people's eyes, but I could not show my anger because I had to strengthen everybody as a leader . . . We praise the Lord for . . . the Miami students who were here to install the pump . . . Even if we have not found the water we were looking for, their names will be written in the story of these villages—the story of the heroes who have fought the battle for water, the battle for life.

Inspired by their students' diligence, the engineering faculty will ask next year's capstone team to learn from this team's work and try again—just as scholars build on the work of others.



This team project would not have been possible for students to achieve in their first year or Tier 1. The students needed to have attained a certain level of personal, relational, and intellectual maturity—a maturity made possible through supportive and challenging learning environments that gradually increased in sophistication throughout their undergraduate lives.

Research demonstrates that self-authorship benefits all learners because they are able to manage complex intellectual, work, and personal challenges (Baxter Magolda 2001, 2009); overcome the effects of oppression, racism, and marginalization (Abes and Jones 2004; Pizzolato 2003; Torres and Hernandez 2007); and engage in authentic, interdependent relationships with diverse others (Yonkers Talz 2004).

**Transforming the university: transforming ourselves**

Generating the vision for engaged learning constitutes the first step in a complex process of transforming the university. We must work with our colleagues in much the same way as we work with our students, namely by applying

the principles of the Learning Partnerships Model—validating them as fellow scholars and professionals, encouraging them to apply the principles in ways that are aligned with their particular departmental contexts, and coconstructing new ways of educating together.

Educators who have engaged in large-scale organizational transformation at other institutions emphasize the challenging nature of the process. In telling the story of how the Learning Partnerships Model was used to reframe general education at Virginia Tech, Terry Wildman notes that "old designs run deep. Indeed they are embodied in the classrooms where knowledge is *delivered*, in the curriculum practices where requirements are *checked off*, in the space utilization policies where time is *parsed out* in small manageable chunks, in the textbooks where knowledge is carefully *scripted and decontextualized*, and even in the organizational structures where disciplines can be *isolated* and protected within their own departments" (2004, 250–1). Using the lessons learned at other institutions, we will focus on the following strategies:

- Make concerted efforts to deploy faculty, staff, and parents as partners in students' development.
- Engage educators through "communities of practice" to invent new ways of learning and collaborating across traditional boundaries.
- Use assessment to guide practice.
- Revise policies and practices to move away from a focus on customer satisfaction, checklists, and formulas toward authentic reflection, development, and learning.

We have already taken steps to advance institutional transformation, including the "Top 25 Project" as well as a new faculty and staff "community of practice" focusing on engaged learning and involving fifteen departments.

To achieve our vision, we must clarify and deepen, as well as foster enthusiasm for, a coherent educational vision of engaged learning by promoting learning everywhere and with everyone. Faculty, staff, and committee meetings must become open sites of learning where our mental models and deeply ingrained assumptions about education are uncovered, scrutinized, and reimagined; innovation and experimentation are encouraged; and members engage in continuous assessment and reflection. Although this may seem like a tall order, viewed from another perspective, the

task is relatively simple. It means that we must remind ourselves to focus on what universities do best: advance the learning and liberal education of all. ☐

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