Intergenerational Learning: Beyond the Jargon

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INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for intergenerational learning abound on college campuses. The advantages of these experiences for both young and mature learners are well documented, particularly in the context of service learning, civic engagement, and other experiences outside the classroom. Less well documented but no less compelling are the advantages of intergenerational learning within the traditional classroom setting. At the University of Richmond, our vision of intergenerational learning is one where adult students share the college classroom with traditional-aged students, and cross-school collaboration is a central tenet of the learning experience for all students. What follows is a presentation of why we are making it part of our institutional strategy, and some of the challenges we foresee in our efforts to create a meaningful and unique learning environment.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

Like many private colleges and universities, the University of Richmond followed a fairly circuitous path to become what it is today: highly selective, nationally ranked, and well endowed. The university began as a seminary for men in 1830, was incorporated as Richmond College in 1840, added Westhampton College for Women in 1914, and became the University of Richmond in 1920. The Richmond School of Law came into existence in

1870, and it wasn't until 1949 that a separate school of business was created. University College, now called the School of Continuing Studies (SCS), was spun off from the business school in 1962, with a core mission of providing access for working adults to the educational resources of the university. Finally, in 1992, the university created the first school anywhere devoted solely to the study of leadership.

Today, the university is composed of five distinct schools, each with a core constituency and program array. Included are the schools of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Leadership Studies, all of which focus on traditional-aged, residential undergraduates connected to a gender-based residential college; the School of Continuing Studies, which offers both graduate and undergraduate programs for nontraditional learners; and the School of Law.

While relatively small in size—less than 4,000 FTEs across all five schools—the university is nonetheless complex and subject to the usual disciplinary and departmental boundaries that exist on most campuses. The three undergraduate schools share a common first-year and general education core, but major and minor requirements make further collaboration difficult. Law and SCS have even less in common with the full-time undergraduate program, although it is typical for 50 to 100 traditional-aged students to take an evening class through the SCS, most often for scheduling convenience or because of interest in a specific applied course offered only at night. Since most SCS students are working adults, few are able to take classes during the day.

Going forward, the goal is for the separation between these distinct constituencies to change, and to change significantly. During the university's recently completed strategic planning process, our campus community committed to support five guiding principles, of which the first is the notion of fostering an "integrated academic enterprise." The concept is simple yet very powerful: creating a richer learning experience for all of our students, regardless of school or major or age, by collaborating in the classroom across these various boundaries.

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Intergenerational learning is not a new or unique concept; both formal and informal mechanisms have developed to transmit knowledge from one generation to the next. Mentoring programs, internships, externships, and guest lecturers are some of the ways that adults have been engaged

with younger students in the learning process on college campuses. More recently, service-learning projects have brought young and old together, either in service to one or the other, or working together on a community-based initiative. Some institutions such as Temple University and Eckerd College have gone so far as to create centers devoted to coordinating all of their intergenerational programming.

The influx of degree-seeking adult students onto college campuses has provided yet another opportunity for intergenerational learning, this time within the classroom itself. On some campuses, adult learners are mainstreamed into the regular classroom, routinely sharing instruction with traditional students. On other campuses, like Richmond's, adults are served separately through a freestanding school or division devoted to lifelong learning, only occasionally and haphazardly crossing paths with younger learners. In both cases, continuing educators have done a remarkable job of creating programs and enhancing services to meet the needs of nontraditional students. It is less certain that opportunities for shared classroom experiences across the generations have been maximized. The rationale for doing so follows.

THE VISION: INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING AS INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY

The idea behind a more concerted, intentional, and thoughtful kind of intergenerational learning is driven by the same ideas that drive a more general commitment to diversity. First, institutions in this nation have a responsibility to educate a broadly representative portion of our population because talent and potential appear in many places and in many forms. Second, different life experiences produce valuable differences in perspective that can be used to educate our students and ourselves more effectively. The first idea is about responsibility, the second is about possibility.

These two ideals, deceptively simple, prove challenging to put into practice. Institutions invite and incorporate difference with the intention of transcending difference. People of different backgrounds are brought together not to remain different but to realize shared ideals of understanding, collaboration, and equity. It is tricky work.

In most representations of diversity in higher education, the differences are usually imagined on a horizontal plane: age is held constant so that differences in ethnicity, geographic origin, and class can be incorporated. Gender, its own kind of difference, has undergone great changes in recent

decades, changing its shape as women come to outnumber men on college campuses. Institutions have made great progress incorporating these kinds of diversity into their central purposes and into their daily practice. The benefits of diversity are made clear every day.

The University of Richmond, broadly committed to inclusivity, is determined to add age to its understanding of diversity. Richmond aims to convert a grid of youthful diversity into a three-dimensional matrix, with age—and the differences of experience, perspective, and knowledge that age brings—adding a new kind of depth.

The University of Richmond might be an unlikely place to look for an experiment in intergenerational learning. Though we draw a broad national and international student body, and though we are making heartening progress in class and ethnic diversity, almost all of our 3,000 undergraduate students fall between 18 and 22 years of age. Our school was built for such a clientele and therefore has fewer nontraditional students than larger, public, urban, non-residential, less selective, and less expensive schools.

Richmond can only imagine taking on the challenge of intergenerational learning because our School of Continuing Studies has such momentum. That school, like many of its counterparts at other universities, has operated on a parallel set of tracks since its inception almost half a century ago. SCS is quite successful and has attracted older students—whose average age is 37—to a broad array of majors, programs, and courses for decades. The SCS track and the traditional university's tracks have joined over the years and promising junctions have developed at those points. Productive discussions, surprising discoveries, and warm friendships have developed in programs such as teacher education, arts management, and film history.

It is obvious to many people, students and faculty alike, that making the connections between SCS and our traditional courses more frequent and more intentional would be a good idea. Goodwill and openness appear on all sides. Precisely because Richmond's parallel tracks have carried such distinct kinds of passengers, we can coordinate them more purposefully and, we hope, effectively.

TRANSLATING STRATEGY INTO ACTION

The challenges this strategy poses, ranging from the philosophical/cultural to the pragmatic/logistical, are not unique to Richmond and likely familiar to most continuing educators. On the philosophical level, the characteristics most valued by continuing educators and most attractive to adult students—

an applied orientation to the curriculum, the use of teacher-practitioners in the classroom, a focus on outcomes rather than standardized admissions exams, flexible scheduling of classes, alternative delivery models, among others—run counter to the prevailing norms on most campuses and certainly at a primarily liberal arts college. One precondition, then, must be a cultural shift that allows the tracks to merge and partnerships across boundaries to occur. This requires clear and constant articulation of the unique quality indicators that define our programs, students, and pedagogy. It also requires the leadership of the university to highlight constantly our successes and communicate the message that our students and our divisions are full and equal partners in a shared educational journey.

While a cultural shift is a necessary precondition for going forward, logistical and mechanical considerations will ultimately determine the success of our efforts. These are as mundane as streamlining registration procedures or ensuring that classes are scheduled conveniently for multiple audiences. At Richmond, a further complication is the fact that SCS, the School of Law, and graduate business programs award credits while the rest of campus is on the unit system, forcing various workarounds to accommodate the needs of our various constituencies. These kinds of issues need attention up front but all are solvable, provided there is institutional will and institutional support.

To date, our successes have been episodic, ranging from individual students creating interdisciplinary majors from across multiple schools to departments collaborating on courses or developing joint concentrations. But the anecdotal evidence from students and faculty alike is powerful and suggest that the goal is worth pursuing.

CONCLUSION

The tracks of continuing studies and traditional undergraduate education can never be completely merged, for the riders get on at different times for different purposes. But Richmond plans to coordinate the schedules and routes of the two tracks so that they join together on a more frequent and predictable basis. On this journey, we need passengers to be able to switch trains and to travel to common destinations. We need conductors to explain the routes along the way and stations where people can meet and explore travel arrangements they may not have considered. As a result of our efforts, we are convinced that our students will be better off and the university will be a better place in which to learn. ✍

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