Transformational Education

The traditional notion of academic learning (that is, acquiring general and disciplinary knowledge) as separate from personal and social development has given way to a more robust sense of integrative, *transformational learning* centered in the education and preparation of the whole student. The ultimate purpose of the College Outcomes project is to help define a transformational approach to college learning. It is based on the conviction that the core purposes of higher education go beyond providing useful and transferable skills contributing to students' intellectual growth to include their full development as individuals—their well-being and sense of civic purpose.

We define transformational learning as:

Developmental. During the college years, students experience fundamental shifts in their perceptions of self, others, and community. Changes in these three areas have profound implications for the ways students make meaning of their learning and experiences, as well as their functioning in relationship to other individuals and to society. These transformations are along the lines of what psychologists call "developmental" change, in which challenges in the environment cause individuals to move toward new – and generally more complex – ways of being in the world (Perry 1999; Baxter Magolda 2004; others). This developmental view provides a starting point for the work of the Outcomes Project and our understanding of transformational learning – that a college education can be both catalyst and medium for the journey toward complexity in knowing and doing across a range of domains (intrapersonal, interpersonal, moral).

Holistic. Research confirms that most college students gain substantial academic knowledge and skills through college participation, as well as identify and move toward a career path during their time at college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). However, change during the college years is not limited to the academic and vocational realms, while these areas remain the focus of much of the academic enterprise. Rather, by crisscrossing the cognitive, affective, psychosocial, and behavioral domains, learning that is transformational encompasses multiple aspects of the self (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This kind of learning is not limited to an acquisition of specific content or mastery of a set of skills, but is "deep" in engaging the learner's capacities for understanding, feeling, relating, and action.

Integrative. Transformational learning involves the integration of experience, reflection, and action in a learning cycle that is iterative rather than having a definite endpoint (Kolb, 1984; Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988). In a Deweyian sense, transformational learning is distinguished from other types of learning by being active and involving ongoing experimentation, rather than a passive absorption of information. In addition to fostering integration of these *learning processes*, transformational learning also integrates learning from *multiple settings*. Learning that is transformational resembles a latticework of meaning-making and application across students'

experiences in and out of class, as well as on and off campus; it also transcends physical sites to integrate sources of learning, such as expert (faculty)-driven and peer/self-directed.

Contextual. Rather than occurring in the "vacuum" of the individual, transformational learning requires engagement with social contexts. Through transformational learning, students come to understand the interdependence of self and society, engage in the construction of shared meaning in collaboration with others (Wenger, 1998), and negotiate for shared action that benefits the common good (Jacoby, 2004). In this way, transformational learning ultimately develops civic capacities for democratic participation and engagement in community life.

Transactional. All learning involves interaction between the individual learner and the specific learning environment. This interaction occurs through continual, mutually-shaping "transactions" between the individual learner and the environment, as suggested by Bandura's (1986) concept of reciprocal determinism. Transformational learning is more likely to occur when the potential of these transactions is maximized through the intentional design of learning environments. For example, certain pedagogies and practices are better suited to eliciting learning with the above attributes; in other words, they foster complexity in students' thinking, feeling, relating, and acting (developmental and holistic), as well as create connections between students' learning experiences and with social contexts (integrative and interactive). An environment that capitalizes on these approaches is more conducive to transformational learning, as opposed to an environment that is unintentional or "piecemeal" in its approach to student learning. Any success achieved by the latter is often a function of chance and, more importantly, such an environment ultimately fails to harness its transactional potential for learning that is transformational.

In view of this last attribute of and condition for transformational learning, the College Outcomes project seeks to identify outcomes that are *evidence* of transformational learning. We call these outcomes the **transformational learning outcomes**.

(Note: this is another term we might be able to use vs. non-cognitive, psychosocial, etc. which fail to reflect the holistic nature of transformational learning as described above)

L. Swaner

May 2008