

Connected Learning Connected to Life:

A “Common Experience” in Higher Education

Christopher J. Frost, Ph.D.
San Diego State University
[formerly with Texas State University]

Context of the Common Experience

In reflecting on the past twenty years of discourse on teaching and learning in higher education, one can discern some distinct themes. In the 1980’s, for example, Carnegie Foundation reports (often authored by Boyer) cited “routine failures” in terms of students’ ability to make connections between their core curriculum courses and their major courses. The portrait painted was one of students wandering through a series of disconnected offerings. Even while making a defined trek toward a degree, with the ubiquitous degree outline in hand, learners could proceed toward the target, yet remain unaware of the connections between the academic disciplines, and between academic knowledge and life. Not surprisingly, as these students exited the university—degree in hand—many of them found themselves with a limited ability to transfer knowledge gained to new situations, to apply acquired knowledge to the concrete challenges of life.

In response to this perceived gap in student learning, colleges and universities have advanced, implemented and refined a number of initiatives during the last two decades: interdisciplinary curricula that seek an integrative core to learning, first year experiences, residential colleges and learning communities, common reading programs (some commencing in the summer prior to student entry into the university), revamping of core curricula (in some instances, tying the restructuring to such cognitive developmental schemes as that of Perry), explicit shifts from a “teaching paradigm” to a “learning paradigm,” civic education/American

democracy projects, infusion of service learning into the curriculum, and assessment programs explicitly intended to measure what students can “do” as well as what students “know.”

One inherent hitch, however, is this: these “enrichment programs” can, themselves, end up as yet additional pieces of an incredibly fragmented puzzle. For example, the first year seminar develops its own curriculum, packs in material not included elsewhere (but deemed “essential” for an entering student to know), and eventually morphs into “just another course” (at least, from many a student’s perspective). The same thing can happen (though not always, and not necessarily) with interdisciplinary curricula; the effort to bind an interdisciplinary program of study may become so intense that its borders become just as rigid as that of a traditional academic discipline. Interdisciplinary study morphs into an academic discipline in its own right. Who has failed to see the proliferation of programs, centers, initiatives, and reforms in our institutions of higher education, all “added to” whatever “it” is those schemes are meant to cure?

Additional student variables contribute to the centrifugal force, to increasing fragmentation. At Texas State, for example, over one-half of each year’s entering class are comprised of transfer students, who arrive with many hours of general education courses already in hand. Simultaneously, the number of “AP” and “IB” hours brought in by students entering directly from high school has increased substantially, removing them from a number of common, general education courses at our university. The result is a telling one: Professors teaching senior seminars, including those of the capstone vintage, can presuppose little regarding prior exposure of students to particular, courses or texts or intellectual themes. In some cases, instructors report that they are unable to identify even one text (classic or otherwise) that every student in the capstone course has read, even when those students hail from the same academic discipline.

Structure of the Common Experience: The “Common” Component

Whatever intellectual experiences students may be having in many undergraduate programs of study, then, they often seem to be of an isolated sort—varying by academic major, choices of courses taken as general education courses, advanced placement or transfer credit hours, concentrations within the major, electives within the major, and on the list goes. Does this lack of commonality really matter?

In *What Matters in College* (1993; as quoted by Joe Cuseo, FYE list-serv, 2004), Alexander Astin argues that it may well be that the *particular* general education courses required do not *per se* define the likelihood of a significant educational outcome. Instead, the curricular variable found to have “positive effects on educational outcomes was a ‘true-core’ curriculum, whereby students took exactly the same courses.” In other words, what mattered most was whether “*content had been commonly experienced by all students*” (italics added). In citing this finding, Cuseo quotes philosopher George Santayana, who “when asked about what ‘great books’ young people should read, . . . replied: ‘It doesn’t matter, as long as they read the same ones’” (cited in Atlas, 1988).

More to the point of our Common Experience model, Cuseo argues that “the impact of a common reading experience. . . may be magnified by multiple conversations students have, [whether] through formal faculty- or staff-led discussions and spontaneous student-student conversations that may ‘spill over’ to informal settings anywhere on campus. If such conversational synergy occurs, then two key theoretical principles of student retention and learning are likely to be implemented, namely: (a) active involvement (Astin, 1984, 1985), because these multiple conversations increase the amount of student time and level of student involvement invested in the learning experience, and (b) social integration (Tinto, 1975,1993),

because this common source of conversation promotes student interaction with other members of the college community (e.g., peers, faculty), serving to ‘connect’ students with the institution and strengthen their sense of community membership” (2004). To the extent that Astin (1993) is correct, one of the most significant variables on student development is “the frequency of student-student and student-faculty interaction.” It is important to note here that we are talking about conversation both within and outside of the classroom. Imagine then, a scenario wherein students, faculty, staff, and community members engage in an ongoing conversation, bounded by a common theme, that endures throughout an academic year, that occurs both within and outside of the classroom, and that even extends beyond the boundaries of the campus.

A primary, overarching goal of the Texas State Common Experience initiative is embody that scenario, that is: *to promote sustained, multiple conversations, on a common theme, both in and out of the classroom, in such a manner as to connect students, faculty, staff, and the broader community.* In a university of over 27,000 students, we are talking about engaging tens of thousands of persons in connected conversations, a singular fact that suggests the enormity of the task. And because the program is designed to initiate and sustain *deliberate dialogue on difficult topics*, the challenge is all the more complex. As the authors of *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (core reading for the American Democracy Project) remind us, colleges do well in teaching competencies, but fail miserably in “teaching commitment.” Teaching commitment, they argue, addresses head-on the critical question of “Education for what purpose?” When instructors from multiple disciplines guide students in exploration of difficult questions that a difficult topic and a compelling text (in conjunction) suggest, the capacity for making difficult choices and aligning oneself with mindful commitments are developed.

Structure of the Common Experience: The “Experience” Component

Central as it is, it is not just the “common” component that is essential; indeed, we also emphasize the “experience” piece. The word experience is etymologically related to the root *poros* (“passing through”) and to such words as portal (something through which we pass) and expert (someone who has passed through, and thereby acquired, a relevant body of knowledge or skill domain). To experience something, in the original sense, is to *pass* that bit of information *through* one’s own mental mechanism. It connotes active engagement and involvement in something, with the quality of knowledge or skill obtained directly proportional to the level of firsthand exposure. Where this *active processing* is missing, the experiential element is absent.

Returning to Joe Cuseo and his thoughts on the “common” component: “I think it is reasonable to contend that the positive impact of shared intellectual conversations centering around a common reading experience are magnified further when these conversations are relevant to a common transitional issue that students are experiencing at the time of the reading (e.g., issues relating to the transition from high school to college, or to the transition from work world to college). Such transitional relevance increases the personal meaning and significance of the common reading for students, because they experience it at a time when they may be most ready or receptive to its message. If this contention is accurate, then an optimal reading would be one that is not only commonly experienced by all students, but also has common relevance for a life transition that all students are currently experiencing.”

A second major goal of the Texas State Common Experience initiative, then, is this: *to identify a common theme, and at least one related common text, that is likely to engage students, faculty, staff, and community members alike in a profoundly significant way. Providing multiple*

avenues “through” which participants “pass,” yet all of which remained connected by way of the common theme, enhances the experiential component.

Students, for example, simultaneously read and engage with a powerful text, explore related themes in the University Seminar, write responses and reactions to the text in writing courses, participate in related symposia with scholarly panels, see films related to the Common Experience theme, explore the experience by way of the fine arts, engage in informal discussions in residence halls and coffee shops, and extend the exploration via avenues of their own choosing (e.g., talking with parents about what is going on, seeking out other texts that relate to the theme, beginning a personal journal).

It is this “*passing through*” that is absolutely critical; students are not “hearing about” an intellectual issue, memorizing a text or set of notes delivered to them, or checking off a course on the degree outline. Rather, they are immersed in an intellectual sea of ideas, and have multiple ways in which they are to engage.

Broadly speaking, then, we designed the Common Experience model as a way (1) to cultivate a “common intellectual conversation” across a large, disconnected campus, (2) to enhance student participation in the intellectual life of the campus, (3) to foster a sense of community across our entire campus and extended community, and (4) to promote more refined critical reasoning and dialogical skills, honed via attention to a current topic of importance to us all. And most importantly, perhaps, we structured the initiative by making connections to existing institutional programs, curricula, and initiatives, rather than as a program “added to” what already existed. The intention here is for the Common Experience to exert a centripetal force within higher education, to help move toward the “uni-” in university.

Substance of the Common Experience: Year One

The common text for our inaugural year was Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and the common theme was "hatred" (and responses to hatred). To capitalize on the value of the "common" component, the text was adopted for use in the Summer Reading Program and the University Seminar (first year experience) program (over 7,500 copies of the book distributed at the outset). That, however, was just the beginning; the book was also used in all basic English writing classes, in advanced undergraduate subjects where appropriate (and at instructor's discretion), and in relevant Honors Program classes. Additionally, a workbook and teaching essay was produced (Frost, 2004) and made available both as hard copy and placed on the Common Experience website (see "2004-05 Common Experience" link, <http://www.txstate.edu/commonexperience/>). Training workshops were also held for resident assistants and interested staff members, to facilitate informal discussions in residence halls and in the workplace. Related lectures were held out in the community, and the Mayor of San Marcos led a discussion of *Night* at the public library.

Again, that is not all; research connections were also made. A special issue of the journal, *Humanity and Society*, (2004: Vol. 28, #1) was guest edited by Frost and colleagues. Entitled "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hatred," the journal featured a preface by Elie Wiesel, and contributors to the journal were brought to Texas State for a well-attended Symposium on Hatred. There were also lectures pertaining to the book, *Moral Cruelty* (Hulsey and Frost, 2004), philosophy dialogue lectures from multiple disciplines, and an outdoor lecture event featuring Judy Shepard. Former Ambassadors Robert Krueger and Tibor Nagy addressed international dimensions of the theme.

Still, there is more. We also strove to make connections to the arts and film. The Texas

State Campus Activities office sponsored a film series, featuring works that challenge perceptions of hatred. One month following Judy Shepard's talk, the Texas State Drama Department produced "The Laramie Project." In February 2005, the Austin Symphony Orchestra (including Peter Bay, conductor) and related music groups performed original compositions related to the theme (setting thematic poetry to music), interspersed with literary readings, as part of an event entitled, "Of Hate and Redemption: A Common Experience in the Arts." In March, Elie Wiesel presented an open lecture at the University of Texas–Austin campus, a forum that brought Common Experience participants face to face with the author of the text. Additional lecturers and an ecumenical panel were also brought to the Texas State campus, and the yearlong initiative culminated in late April with the opening of a play, "Candlestein," authored by Texas State faculty member, Charles Pascoe. (See Figure 1, a graphic representation of the inaugural Common Experience.)

According to our "best estimate," over 15,000 people were involved in some facet of the common intellectual conversation at some point during the year-long initiative. But as large as the numbers sound, they represent only a small part of the story. As a student writing about the inaugural Common Experience cautions us, "the initiative is more than just a series of events on a calendar." As powerful as many of the speakers and events are, it is the continuing dialogue and debate, the exploration furthered by an event, the individual stories of struggle and growth, and the truly serendipitous conversations that spawn across the intellectual water of the campus that lie at the core. The experience continually unfolds because the conversation continues.

Substance of the Common Experience: Year Two

The common text for our second year (2005-2006) was Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, and the common theme was "courage." As in year one, the text was adopted for

use in the Summer Reading Program and the University Seminar (first year experience) program, was used in all basic English writing classes, in advanced undergraduate subjects where appropriate, and in relevant Honor's classes. This year's workbook and teaching essay was produced by English instructor Sue Beebe, and made available as hard copy and on the Common Experience website (<http://www.txstate.edu/commonexperience/>). Training workshops were again held for resident assistants and interested staff members, to facilitate informal discussions in residence halls and in the workplace. Related lectures were held out in the community, and the Mayor of San Marcos led a discussion of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* at the public library.

A very rich connection for this year stemmed from the fact that O'Brien is one of our own; he holds the *Mitte Endowed Chair in Creative Writing*. O'Brien introduced this year's Common Experience theme at our New Student Convocation, and then held a series of "conversations"—open to students, faculty, staff, and members of the community. At each of these open forums, O'Brien spoke of courage and his work, but then saved the majority of the time for open-ended questions and discussion. Every person attending, including each first year student, enjoyed the opportunity for direct dialogue with the text, the theme, and the author. There were additional opportunities as well, throughout the year: lectures and symposia that examined courage, philosophy dialogue lectures from multiple disciplines, and outdoor lecture events featuring Maya Angelou and Spike Lee. Again, former Ambassador and U.S. Senator Robert Krueger moderated symposia that examined international dimensions of the theme.

One of the things that we had not anticipated from the outset was the extent to which the fine and performing arts could connect so nicely to Common Experience themes and texts. One month following Maya Angelou's talk and the first in a series of Conversations with Tim O'Brien, the Texas State Drama Department unveiled (world premiere) an adaptation of

O'Brien's "Going After Cacciato." In February 2006, the Texas State School of Music performed original compositions related to the theme, interspersed with literary readings, as part of an event entitled, "Celebration of Courage." By including selections of music composed in and in response to the Holocaust, this fine arts event managed to connect to last year's Common Experience, as well as this year's initiative.

An additional play was performed on stage, "The Exonerated"—Winner of the 2003 Outer Critics Award for Best Off-Broadway play, the Dramatist Guild Award, and The John Gassner Playwriting Award. The playwrights of this incredible play conducted interviews with more than forty exonerated death-row inmates across the nation. It is a dynamic character study of the effect of having one's freedom and future torn away from six of those wrongly accused, and it examines how these innocent people demonstrated courage in reclaiming what was left of their lives and spirit. In keeping with the experiential focus of the Common Experience, the production featured a post-show discussion with Joyce Ann Brown, who served over nine years in a Texas prison before being exonerated for a crime she did not commit. Brown is the author of *Justice Denied* and is the Executive Director of MASS: Mothers (Fathers) for the Advancement of Social Systems, Inc.

According to our "best estimate," between 4,000-5,000 people packed our outdoor campus mall area to hear Maya Angelou, and another 5,000 or more to hear Spike Lee [insert latter figure after event/count is done]. By factoring in the thousands who participated in reading the text (both in courses, and outside of the classroom), attended any of the O'Brien conversations, fine arts events, art exhibits, lectures, symposia, and so on, the ripples from the launching of the single text and theme continue to spread outward, across the community.

Substance of the Common Experience: Year Three

Thomas Jefferson argued that, “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.” Indeed, non-violent protest and dissent have shaped the social and political processes of the United States from its very founding. The tarring and feathering of tax collectors in response to The Stamp Act and the Boston Tea Party protesting what the Patriots viewed as an unfair tax on tea represent early attempts to change laws by way of protest and dissent. The voice of political dissent was also active in the discussion of the foundation of our nation in the Federalist and Anti-federalist Papers. Techniques of bringing about sociopolitical change have evolved and broadened since the Revolutionary War. Non-violent protest and dissent has been furthered through the creation of visual art (e.g., the photography of Dorthea Lange), architectural design (e.g., Maya Ying Lin’s Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial,), literary art (e.g., the poetry of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*), textual design (e.g., the “hippie” fashions of the 1960s, the “hiphop” fashions of the 1990s), and performance art (e.g., the rap of NWA, the play *The Laramie Project*). This new vintage of protest and dissent extends traditional non-violent physical protest, such as the suffrage marches and the civil rights protests within our country.

Varied voices of dissent and protest have been central in shaping the United States of the 21st. Century as well. Unfortunately, many young adults are unaware of ways through which individuals can create social and political change through legal, non-violent actions. The Common Experience for 2006-2007 will attempt to address this void by focusing on the theme, “Protest and Dissent,” and will use Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* as the common text and point of entry into that topic.

In 1978, Luis Valdez wrote *Zoot Suit* as a protest play, detailing inequities surrounding the incidences in Los Angeles in 1942 and 1943. The so-called Zoot Suit Riots of that period were actually attacks on Latino Pachuco youths who wore zoot suits, led by U.S. soldiers and sailors, as well as the LAPD. The ensuing non-violent protests against the outright racism of the Anglo press, the injustice of the boys' trials, the prejudice of the U.S. military establishment and LAPD, and the widespread discrimination against Mexican Americans in the U.S. at this time, led to great changes in housing, schooling and employment rights for Mexican Americans. *Zoot Suit* exemplifies not only a portrayal of the direct protest against the inequities of the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and its aftermath, but also the power of performance to serve as an agent of social change. It has been argued that Luis Valdez is the most celebrated and recognized Hispanic playwright of our time, and the play is seen as one of his best.

Like prior Common Experience themes and texts, *Zoot Suit* the play, as well as the Zoot Suit Riots, can be approached from many perspectives: historical, political, sociological, literary, and so on. Further, many other areas of study (including, for example, Art and Music, Theater and Dance, Family and Consumer Science, and Mass Communications) are central to the conflicts that created the Zoot Suit Culture and the prejudice that surrounded it. By taking the theme of Protest and Dissent beyond the central reading, discussions can also center around such topics as stem cell research, genetic therapy, the abortion debate, sexual education in the schools, and federal school legislation, bringing in topics that will incorporate contributions from additional academic disciplines.

Potential activities related to the theme and text abound. An art installation of visual art as protest, as well as musical performances of protest music (which could range from traditional African American spirituals to the Nicaraguan resistance movement), dance performances such

as *The Green Table* by Kurt Voss (choreographed as a protest against the First World War), and theater presentations (including but not limited to a production of *Zoot Suit*) would create a strong artistic representation of potential modes for Protest and Dissent. There are local speakers who can speak to topics related to Protest and Dissent, and an interdisciplinary seminar on attempts to limit Protest and Dissent in a Post-9/11 America could be both timely and stimulating. A keynote event could include a screening of the American Experience film, *Zoot Suit Riots*, created by San Antonio native, Joseph Tovares. Other options would include a national speaker such as Fernando Chavez, son of Cesar Chavez, an expert speaker on Service Learning and Civic Responsibility; Edward James Olmos, star of the film version of *Zoot Suit* and Latino community activist; and/or Luis Valdez, author of *Zoot Suit*, and founder of El Teatro de Aztlán.

Organizational Structure of the Common Experience Initiative

In adopting an organizational structure likely to achieve the lofty objectives for a Common Experience, we faced an initial challenge: How does one make intricate connections across an institution that is, at its core, characterized by disconnections—horizontally and vertically? How does one undertake an initiative that connects to and integrates across existing programs, rather than implement a program that might only add another piece to an already fragmented puzzle?

In taking this challenge head-on, we believe our structural solution was as innovative as was the initiative itself. We began with an assumption that many organizational problems of unity and coherence are inherent in institutional metaphor and structure—a “pyramid” and the structure that ensues therefrom: layers and layers of boxes, with a dual, linear arrangement (horizontal and vertical), accompanied by a decreasing “n” as one approaches the “top” of the

structure. Lines of authority, lines of communication, and levels of power are fragmented by design, turf boundaries are rigidly delineated (and defended), and the assumption that there is “no alternative” to such a structure is widely assumed.

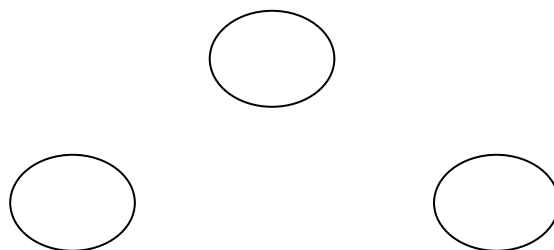
In challenging such institutional barriers to collaboration and coherence, we chose an intentional alternative. We chose to organize according to a circular structure, rather than a pyramidal one, a pattern that has served natural processes quite nicely—from the macro level of the solar system to the micro level of the molecule (see Figure 2, a graphic depiction of the circular organizational structure of the Common Experience). Some background information is necessary here.

As consultants, we work with companies and nonprofit organizations as they seek more effective ways to carry out their respective missions. One key step that provides an essential foundation for more effective organization entails figuring out precisely what it is workers actually do and precisely which of those actions are of greatest value (“task analysis”). Data that ensues from the task analyses are then statistically examined using factor analysis (or path analysis, a more sophisticated technique) to analyze relationships among tasks and outcomes. By clustering the tasks and outcomes that significantly overlap, we (as consultants) can identify “core process areas” of a company, a procedure that often cuts across traditional departments and suggests an organizational structure that is potentially more seamless.

For example, assume that five major processes are identified empirically (see Figure 3); each major process is visualized as a large circle, while the “sub-processes” are smaller circles that conceptualize self-directing work teams defined by a set of related tasks. And, should further detail be desired, even smaller circles could be placed to represent individual workers that comprise sub-teams. A key distinction to circular organizations resides here: individuals

workers can sit on particular teams, regardless of where their position is formally “housed” within the company. Persons from across an organization and from all levels (line position, up to and including CEO) can volunteer, be nominated by peers, or selected for membership. The criterion is a simple one: Can a person contribute to the particular task assigned to a specific team?

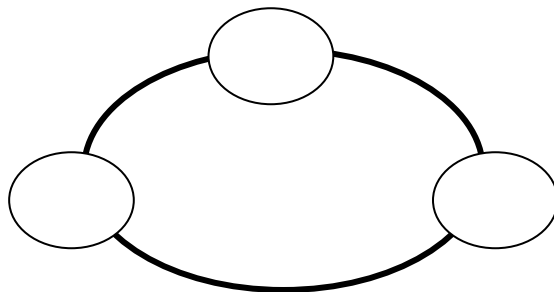
In a company, the various teams are defined, as we described above, by grouping related tasks that need to be done, that is, by processes. In adopting a circular design for an initiative such as the Common Experience, the process areas need not be defined by way of task analysis and statistical process. Instead, the teams can represent existing activities within a university setting, even if they are not commonly thought about as “process areas.” When we began sitting down and talking about how to make connections likely to lead to a “common experience” for our students, for example, there were essentially three circles represented: (1) areas in which the Honors Program director and NEH Distinguished Teaching Professor were involved; (2) areas in which the University (FYE) Seminar Director were involved; and (3) areas in which the academic Deans were involved in discussions regarding undergraduate education. Simply envision these three domains as three isolated circles on a sheet of paper:



In discussing particular needs across the three domains, we discover the following: the Director of the University Seminar wants to initiate a Summer Reading Program, and would like

suggestions for a book to adopt for the inaugural year. The Director of the Honors Program is looking to sponsor a “distinguished speaker” series, and the NEH Distinguished Professor is seeking to sponsor a series of intellectual symposia on challenging topics, that is, to promote deliberate dialogue on difficult topics. The academic Deans are interested in greater attention to how undergraduate students are experiencing their curriculum, especially as more resources and attention are being allocated to graduate programs.

In discussing the related concerns, a proposal is put on the table: Why not adopt Elie Wiesel’s *Night* as a text for a new Summer Reading Program, and use the book in the University Seminar sessions? The Honors Program Director had already constructed and taught an honors course that incorporated *Night*, “The Anatomy of Hatred in Life, Literature, and Art,” and so the thought of a common text was immediately followed by the notion of connecting theme that could be broadly explored: hatred. The notion of a common theme provided the all-important piece for centripetal initiative: it is the force that holds the other circles in common orbit. The three isolated circles are now easily connected:



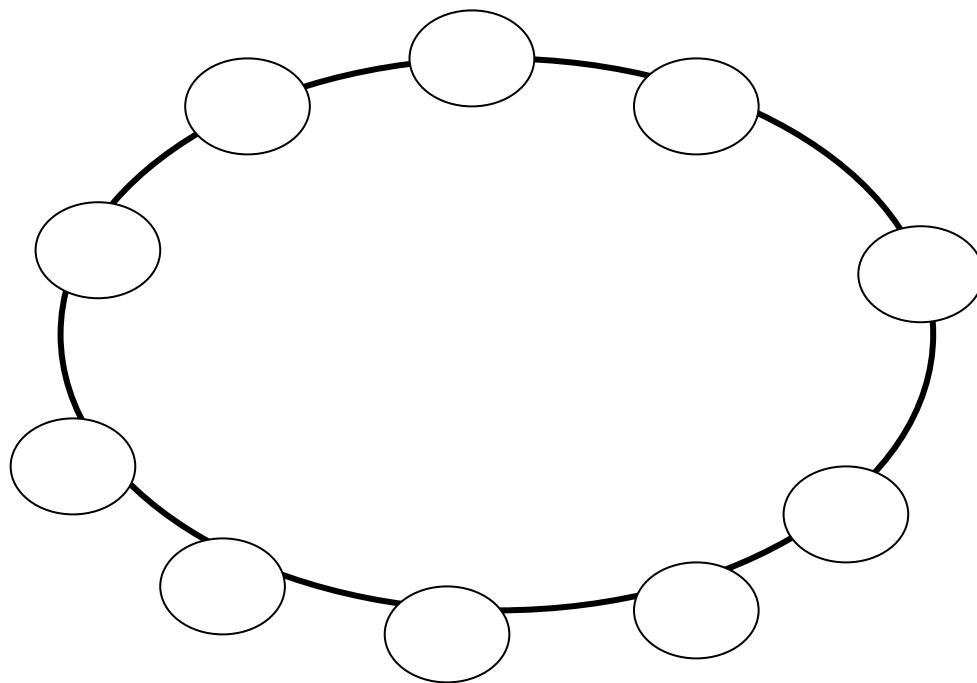
At this early stage, we have already achieved the following outcomes: 1) a common theme and a common text have been selected, both of which can be used to align diverse people, groups, and institutional entities along a common dimension; 2) a basic organizational structure is in place, held together by a defining theme; and 3) a handful of individuals housed in different university

domains have the core of an initiative that can pull diverse constituencies together, rather than contribute to additional fragmentation.

The question then became one of this: How to engage the university and community in the initiative, to make the Common Experience inclusive while remaining connected and coherent. It is here that a circular structure is especially suited to the enormity of the task. As we began communicating with colleagues in other areas of the university, the idea seemed to strike an immediate chord: “We spend so much of our time in little pockets on campus, disconnected from the whole. Here’s a way to connect.” As persons from students affairs, the fine and performing arts, residence life, campus activities, stepped forward to ask how they might participate, the answer was itself a question: “What ideas do you have for making connections between your piece of the university universe and the common theme?” For example, one person from the arts stepped forward to represent art, music, drama, and dance, another “circle” added to the structure. She conveys ideas from diverse areas and constituents, and then returns to lead the “arts team” (which even sub-divides into multiple sub-teams) as they plan connected events and activities. In this manner, we can keep an optimum size of 8-12 persons as the Common Experience Team level (groups beyond that size rarely succeed in functioning effectively), while involving literally hundreds of people at the sub-team level. The University Seminar “circle,” for example, should actually be represented with over 100 small team member circles, because each person teaching US 1100 undergoes training related to the Common Experience text/theme, and is involved directly in the conversation.

As persons from other areas choose to get involved, we can add a large circle whenever needed, or combine two process areas into one (Honors Program and Liberal Arts represented by one person at the core circle level) to maintain optimum size (for group effectiveness). The

inclusiveness knows no bounds, however, because the number of sub-teams and the number of team members on a sub-team is unlimited. Indeed some individuals, having heard about the common theme and common text, organized events of their own with no direct interaction with the Common Experience Team. The theme itself enabled them to “connect” to the initiative. Where we began with a few isolated circles, we now have a number of major circles—connected and held in common orbit—with an unlimited number of smaller circles that can be coherently connected. And at the core? Persons defined not by their titles, positions, or status, but by their passion, interest, and commitment to engaging a community in sustained, deliberate dialogue and artistic representation.



The issue of organizational change in general, and of centripetal versus centrifugal forces at play in our institutions of higher learning in particular, is far more complicated than simple

choice of graphic. The point, however, is this: how we depict an organization influences not only how we “see” the structure, but also how we think and talk about it as well (e.g., Morgan, 1997). By altering the way we look at organizations, we may begin to work in a direction as envisioned by Simone Weil, who said:

Our age has its own particular mission, or vocation—the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work. The thoughts relating to a presentiment of this vocation, and, which are scattered about in Rousseau, George Sand, Tolstoi, Proudhon, and Marx, in papal encyclicals, and elsewhere, are the only original thoughts of our time, the only ones we haven't borrowed from the Greeks. It is because we have been unequal to this mighty business, which was being conceived in us, that we have thrown ourselves into the abyss presented by totalitarian systems. . . .

The problem is, therefore, quite clear; it is a question of knowing whether it is possible to conceive of [a liberating] organization. . . .If we can manage to conceive in concrete terms the conditions of this liberating organization, then it only remains for us to exercise, in order to move towards it, all the powers of action, small or great, at our disposal. (Weil, in Frost, 1998, pp. 65-67)

With Weil, we may come to perceive the possible contours of a liberating organization and then “to move towards it [with] all the powers of action, small or great, at our disposal.” It may be well past time for institutions of higher education to consider their role in such a transformation, both in terms of content (“what” we do), and in terms of structure (“how” we carry out our mission).