

# Leading a revolution



*Alverno students, left to right, Diana Peterson, Deborah Petri, Alicia Gomez-Solis, Valerie Miller, Susan Younger and Kay Keyes.*

# in higher education



by Pat Hutchings

It happened again. On a recent visit to Inter American University in Puerto Rico, I was working with faculty on issues of teaching and learning. During the workshop, I said something about putting assessment in the service of learning, making it good for students.

"But how would you do that?" said a man in the front row, looking skeptical. "Well, I said, 'Let me tell you about Alverno College....'"

The fact is, many of the questions I hear most often as I travel from campus to campus these days are questions I first encountered at Alverno College. Indeed, since I moved from my faculty position at Alverno to my current work with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), I've been struck repeatedly by how many of the issues that campuses are grappling with today are issues with which Alverno has long experience — and considerable success.

Many of these issues were first sounded on the national scene in fall, 1984, in the National Institute for Education's report on "conditions of excellence in higher education," *Involvement in Learning*. That report makes three recommendations for improving the quality of undergraduate education: 1) involve students in their learning, 2) set high expectations, and 3) do assessment and give feedback to the learner.

The list sounds simple, but, in fact, it calls into question some of the hallowed ways of doing things in academe: lecturing, grading practices, advising, the hiring of faculty. It is a useful template for looking at Alverno's work.



## Involvement in learning

Under the heading of "involvement," the recommendations of the NIE authors boil down to one apparently simple but — again — transforming principle: What matters is not just what students know, but what they can do with what they know. Learning must be active, not passive.

Interestingly, that insight is one that Alverno came to back in the early 1970s — more than a decade before the NIE report — when the college began work on its outcomes-oriented curriculum. In Alverno's radical plan for undergraduate education, graduation requirements were specified, not in terms of the usual course requirements and credit hours, but in terms of demonstrated student competence in eight abilities. (See the box on the following page.)

Having been at Alverno for nine years, I know how easy it is in the ongoing, evolving life of the place, to forget how radical this focus on what students can do — on performance — really is. By way of reminder, I think back to my first encounter with Alverno's curriculum.

On my first semester's teaching docket, I was puzzled to see an item called "OCEL." I found out that OCEL stands for "Off-Campus Experiential Learning." With faculty from various other disciplines, I was to teach a seminar for students engaged in off-campus internships. There, they were to apply and test out and refine what they learned in other courses.

It wasn't long into the semester before I found myself asking questions I had never asked before. I wanted to know, for example, how the study of literature contributes to the student's ability to perform, not only beyond the field of literature, but beyond the campus. How would the fact that the



Architectural details from the entrance to Alverno College's Liberal Arts Building

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# Alverno's Eight Abilities

Every class at Alverno has two aims: 1) to help students acquire the knowledge traditionally associated with a strong liberal-arts degree; and 2) to help students learn how to *apply* that knowledge — how to solve problems with it, make decisions with it, and communicate effectively with it. That is why every class includes activities to help students learn how to use what they are learning. By the time an Alverno student graduates, she must have mastered eight abilities that help her put knowledge into action for the rest of her life.

## Communication

*Make connections between yourself and your audience. Learn to speak and write effectively, use graphics, electronic media and computers.*



## Analysis

*Think clearly and critically. Fuse experience, reason and training into considered judgment.*



## Problem Solving

*Figure out what the problem is. Find answers that work in different situations. Then, get done what needs to be done.*



## Valuing

*Recognize different value systems while holding strongly to your own ethic. Recognize the moral dimensions of your decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions.*



## Social Interaction

*Learn how to get things done in committees, task forces, team projects and other group efforts. Elicit the views of others and help reach conclusions.*

## Responsibility for the Global Environment

*Act with an understanding of and respect for the economic, social and biological interdependence of global life.*

## Effective Citizenship

*Develop leadership abilities. Be involved and responsible. Act with an informed awareness of contemporary issues and their historical contexts.*

## Aesthetic Response

*Understand that some truths are best expressed through the written and performed arts. Appreciate the various forms of art and respond to their symbolism and message.*





student had read, say, *The Great Gatsby* or the poetry of Adrienne Rich, make a difference in the way she did her work (as one English major did that semester in OCEL) at a project at the Milwaukee Historical Society? What did all that discussion of and writing about literature add up to in terms of her ability to analyze the archival material she was working with? How did it affect her ability to work with professional colleagues? To solve problems and make thoughtful decisions?

Those are, I now see, questions about "involvement in learning." They are questions to which many other campuses have now come as they grapple with what it is they want their students to know and be able to do at graduation.

No campus is going to import another institution's curriculum (local situations matter too much), but it's notable that almost 600 educational institutions have visited Alverno and heard about the total change you can get yourself into if you take seriously the notion of involved, active learning.



## Set high expectations

This second recommendation from NIE rolls easily off the tongue; everyone is in favor of high expectations. But like the first, it is potentially transformative, as a look at Alverno over the last two decades suggests.

High expectations may be like apple pie, but the fact is that most campuses have not dealt in any collective, public way with expectations — high or low. One finds in the catalog the obligatory, often windy statement of aims, and better course syllabi may list "learning objectives." But chances are that students have only the fuzziest sense of what is expected of them. Faculty themselves may not be much clearer.

The situation is quite otherwise at Alverno, and what I've come to call "the Friday afternoon phenomenon" helps explain why. Someone way back when, before my days at the college, had the good sense to see that high-stakes questions would take collective, ongoing conversation among all the educators on campus. Friday afternoons have been set aside precisely for that purpose.

The result? What students hear about in new-student orientation at Alverno is not just the map of the campus and the scuttlebutt on Dr. Riordan's "Introduction to Philosophy" course. They also hear about what they will be expected to be able to do upon graduation, *and how well*.

In the area of "aesthetic response," for example, students at the first level are required to be able to identify, say, the formal elements of plot and point of view in a short story. From this fairly rudimentary ability, they are expected to move to a much more sophisticated ability to analyze and evaluate the story, using a relevant framework from literary criticism. These and parallel statements in each of the other seven outcomes, or abilities, are laid out in the college catalog, explained in New Student Seminar, reiterated in course syllabi and, eventually, internalized by students.

They are also, as I have said, the subject of regularly scheduled Friday afternoon sessions, in which the faculty as a whole continue their work on how best to teach and assess and hold themselves to those standards.

Over the last few years, many colleges have undertaken "quality initiatives." All too often, these consist of hiring star faculty with six-figure salaries, building fancy new facilities and jacking up admissions standards. Few colleges have approached quality in the terms called for by the NIE report: "Clearly and publicly articulated standards of excellence." Alverno started down that route two decades ago.

# Alverno as an educational Mecca

When Alverno adopted an ability-based education in 1973, faculty and administrators were simply looking for a way to do the best job of teaching students that they could do. They were not prepared for the flood of visitors who wanted to observe teaching and learning at the college, and see first-hand how it worked.

Right away, Alverno started institutionalizing ways to handle this constant flow of campus visitors. Twice a year, the college sponsors a Visitation Day. Each summer, longer, more complex workshops are held to explore various aspects of ability-based learning and assessment.

In the past 20 years, Alverno has hosted almost 3,000 participants in these programs, representing about 600 institutions.

*People eager to learn have come from 48 states (including Hawaii and Alaska) and over a dozen different countries:*

England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland;  
Switzerland, Holland and Norway;  
Australia and New Zealand;  
Japan, Singapore, India and Colombia;  
Every province in Canada;  
Four different universities in Puerto Rico.

*So many people wanted to attend this spring's Visitation Day on April 11 that a second program had to be scheduled for 35 Iowa educators on April 5. Although participants in the Visitation Day held April 11 hailed from as far away as Honolulu, Hawaii, and Providence, Rhode Island, the program was dominated by neighbors:*

43 - Kent Intermediate School District, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
35 - Various school districts, colleges and universities in Illinois  
29 - Various school districts, colleges and universities in Minnesota  
10 - University of Wisconsin School of Medicine,  
Madison, Wisconsin.

*Some visitors are not involved with schools at all, but simply represent organizations that are interested in learning:*

Aid Association for Lutherans  
American Red Cross  
Educational Testing Service  
Ebenezer Child Care  
Jewish Vocational Service  
London Times  
Milwaukee Public Museum  
National Institute of Education  
North Central Association  
North Dakota State Hospital  
Sandoz Pharmaceutical Corporation  
U.S. Department of State  
William C. Brown Publishing Company  
Xerox Corporation.

Photo by Frank Miller



*Still, although they vary widely and sometimes wildly, most visitors are from educational institutions in this country:*

From Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Flaming Rainbow University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma;  
From the University of California at Berkeley to Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts;  
From the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to The Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture in Scottsdale, Arizona;  
From Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, to Northwest Community College in Powell, Wyoming;  
From Notre Dame University in Notre Dame, Indiana, to Appalachian Bible College in Bradley, West Virginia;  
From Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, to New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire.



## Assess and give feedback

A radically different way of teaching and learning demanded a new and different way of measuring success. To gauge how a student is developing abilities, Alverno faculty adapted techniques used by AT&T to assess leadership qualities in prospective managers. Each assessment is designed to allow a student to demonstrate, not only what she has learned, but what she can do with what she has learned.

When I left Alverno in 1987, it was to go to Washington, DC, to direct a national project on assessment. Assessment was just then taking on the proportions of a national movement. Still, like every other faculty member at Alverno, I knew assessment like a fish knows water. Once again, Alverno was ahead of the game.

The recommendations for assessment in *Involvement in Learning* mystified much of higher education at the time. But they were everyday life at Alverno, where each student's progress toward identified (and, yes, *high*) expectations is assessed over and over from entrance to graduation. Indeed, it was in part Alverno's pioneering work in assessment that fueled the national assessment movement. The National Governors' Association Task Force on College Quality, in its tellingly entitled 1986 report, *A Time for Results*, cited assessment at Alverno as a model for other campuses to heed.

The irony is that only now — six years after the governors' report, and with 82 percent of campuses reporting "assessment activity underway" — only now is higher education finally beginning to understand what Alverno meant by assessment in the first place. Assessment at Alverno was not something we did to redress public discontent with undergraduate education; it was not a fix for falling GRE scores; it did not come in response to declines in US competitiveness on the international market. These were

all, according to the governors, reasons for instituting assessment.

Assessment at Alverno was and is an enactment of the belief that learning is the measure of educational quality, and that the college has the responsibility to foster, monitor and ensure the learning of each and every student. Assessment is, as one Alverno faculty put it to me when I returned to visit the campus a couple of years ago, "our accountability to students and to each other as professionals."



## A question of culture

Russell Edgerton, president of the American Association for Higher Education, has been an observer and friend of Alverno for years now. Recently, he put his finger on a key point.

"When other places were making statements about what they were against, Alverno was turning a corner, getting clear what it was for," Edgerton said. That's hard to beat as a statement of where Alverno stands on the national scene and what makes it special.

My own version of Edgerton's observation is this: While many colleges call themselves "teaching institutions," what they often mean by that is that faculty don't do research. They define the "teaching institution" by the absence of research, rather than by the presence of what Alverno so palpably possesses: *A culture of learning*, a culture in which students are the heart of the matter; where teaching and learning are topics of ongoing public conversation and collective inquiry; where everyone aims for a shared goal and purpose; where high expectations and constant improvement are the order of the day.



## In Puerto Rico and elsewhere

Alverno's unique culture is a difficult thing to communicate to those who necessarily see the institution piecemeal and from a distance. So, when I said to the skeptical-looking man in Puerto Rico: "Let me tell you about Alverno College," I was prepared to be less than fully understood. But I proceeded to be as concrete as I could about Alverno's practice of assessment.

I told him that a crucial part of assessment at Alverno is what is called "self-assessment." Students routinely are called upon to assess their own strengths and weaknesses in each of the eight abilities. I told him that, in teaching writing, for example, faculty ask students to attach to each paper a "feedback sheet" that indicates the exact criteria and standards by which the work will be evaluated. I told him that professionals come to campus to observe and assess students' ability to apply and integrate the abilities they have been learning in their first two years of work.

These are, I think, the suggestive practices, and I was congratulating myself on giving a particularly clear rendition of them as I watched lights going on in the faces before me.

And then the buzz began. Pretty soon I was, frankly, having a hard time talking over the buzz.

"What's going on?" I asked. It turned out that people were remembering a visit by Georgine Loacker, one of my colleagues from the English department and chair of Alverno's Assessment Council. Georgine had been to Inter American and had talked about some of the same principles and practices I was describing.

You might think this is quite a coincidence. But what's remarkable is how often things like this happen. Alverno faculty have visited hun-

dreds of campuses to talk about their work.

Faculty members from Alverno and various institutions in Puerto Rico, for example, have been shuttling back and forth for almost a decade. Angel Villarini, director of the Project for the Development of Thinking Skills at the University of Puerto Rico, first visited Alverno for a summer workshop in the early 1980s. Since then, he has sent many Puerto Rican faculty members to Alverno workshops, invited several Alverno faculty members there, and distilled many of the ideas gained into a course for faculty on integrating critical thinking into the curriculum. He does not plan to stop until every faculty member at his university has taken the course.

You may look at Puerto Rico and think it is a fun place to go, and it is. Alverno faculty have enjoyed their trips there. But one thing that rarely is recognized outside the college is that those visits are managed by faculty in between the pieces of an already very crowded schedule of teaching, committee work and scholarship. The number of visits made represents not only hard-won reward for good work done by the college, but a commitment (one might even say a sacrifice) by individual faculty to take the time to listen to and talk with other campuses struggling with the same challenges and issues that Alverno has faced.

Having followed in the track of people like Georgine Loacker, I can testify to the good effects of those visits. But on those visits, Alverno not only gives; it also receives. When Alverno's faculty take to the road, they bring back good ideas and a sense of larger context that informs their work at home. The ambassadorial role is also a learning role.

Learning: that is Alverno's strongest suit. ▲