

## Out of Crisis, Opportunity

What is it that students cannot afford to miss in your field of study? This is the very thought-provoking question that the president of Alverno College, S. Joel Read, asked the faculty to consider in department discussions in 1970. Alverno was at an important crossroads in its mission and purpose. For many years previously, it was responsible for educating the School Sisters of Saint Francis, the religious order that founded the college. When the order decided that they would admit members to the order only after they had graduated from college, one of the primary missions of the college disappeared, and enrollment declined precipitously. If the college were to survive and thrive it needed a new reason for being—and a basis of inspiration for reform drawn from both within the institution and from the best developments in contemporary higher education. In this context, Read thought it important that faculty seriously consider the educational purposes of the institution and the latest thinking in their disciplines.

The discussions that ensued led to a significant curriculum change that affected the nature of both general education and learning in the majors. A very compelling aspect of this reform is that it is still thriving today and has contributed a great deal to the discourse on student learning in higher education around the world. The specific initial reform involved instituting a curriculum that required all students to demonstrate a set of learning outcomes in order to graduate from the college, but the bigger story is the culture of learning that has emerged from that initial reform. This chapter, then, is as much about sustaining and growing a reform as it is about starting one.

It is also as much about the nature and role of the faculty as it is about curriculum itself. Alverno took up the challenge of forging a new working definition of faculty roles and rewards. The image, the profile, of what we thought was essential to being an effective educator, evolved over time to be sure, but certain seeds were there, that grew into more full blooming visions of an educator and more systematic frameworks for intentional faculty development.

## Our Ultimate Goal? “Learning That Lasts”

In taking up, amplifying, and broadening President Read’s original questions over the last three decades, Alverno faculty and staff have regularly stepped back from their daily work to reflectively examine the dynamics of our culture, with the ultimate goal of improving our teaching practice in the service of fostering what is often called “lifelong learning.” This has occurred in three ways. The more local study and evaluation of teaching and learning, particularly at the course and department level, that are part of any ongoing educational enterprise in a

particular place. The periodic program and institutional evaluations that are part of both formal accreditation and special larger evaluative projects, in which outside or external information begin to inform practice. And finally, and perhaps most significantly, a more comprehensive scholarship of teaching and learning in relationship to institutional culture in general, where we learn from our own studies and those of colleagues at other institutions and bring those findings back to inform analyses of questions on our campus.

In our most recent comprehensive published synthesis of this culture of self-evaluation, *Learning That Lasts* (Mentkowski & Associates, 2000), we called these three standpoints or postures *standing in*, *standing beside*, and *standing aside* our educational practice. We developed an empirical analysis of how and when our campus and others successfully transform themselves in an ongoing way to foster high levels of students learning, and effectively document quite specifically how and when students' learning is most strongly a product of their curricula. We based this on our own experience plus that of the many other institutions with whom we have collaborated over the years in project teams and as consultants. We repeatedly found that successful campuses—those that teach well and produce student learning connected explicitly to the curriculum offered—have reflected on their educational practices from these three sorts of standpoints, regardless of what they called them, and used what they learned to improve their overall campus performance.

Here are some more specific definitions of these standpoints:

*Standing in:* Developing an integrated understanding of what kinds of learning frameworks, strategies, and structures work at one's own campus, arrived at through analyses of practice and campus documentation.

*Standing beside:* A continuing analysis of practice in partnership with other institutions that can shape one's own transformational acts and guidelines of institutional transformation.

*Standing aside:* Tailoring literature and practice review to specific campus issues (Mentkowski et al., p.366).

As we describe below some of the main features of Alverno's culture that evolved in response to Read's initial challenge, features that enable us to sustain a transformative project over time, you will see evidence of us talking from these three standpoints, shifting back and forth between what we learned locally to what we learned from others to what we learned from the scholarship of higher education, to make decisions about how to be more effective at what we do.