

## WHAT WORKS - AN ESSAY FROM THE COMMUNITY

# DRAWING THE THIN RED-LINE: LEARNING GOALS, LEARNING SURVEYS, LEARNING SPACES

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Over the past decade, colleges and universities across the country have built quite wonderful spaces for learning. But we need to keep asking if and how these spaces are serving our goals for student learning. Put another way, I pose two further questions:

- ♦ what can happen when we bring our concerns about learning outcomes and assessment to bear on space planning on undergraduate campuses?
- ♦ are there ways to construct 'performance tests' to determine whether a space demonstrably fosters learning behaviors that are known to be effective?

I propose one performance test: start with three observations from PKAL about *what works*, match those observations with what we are learning about effective learning practices from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and then ask how well our programs and/or learning spaces foster or can foster these effective learning practices.

In PKAL's first report, *What works: Building natural science communities* (1991), it is proposed that *what works* is when:

- ♦ learning takes place in a community where faculty see students as partners in learning
- ♦ learning is personally meaningful and steeped in investigation from the very first courses through capstone courses
- ♦ learning takes place in a community where students collaborate with one another.

Each of those dimensions of student learning can be examined through the lens of NSSE surveys to understand the impact on programs and space for learning. From this examination, we return to a final PKAL vision of what works, when there is visible institution-wide commitment to and support for ensuring student access to such learning environments.

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Adapted from a presentation by Scott Bennett at the 2006 CIC/NITLE/PKAL workshop on technology-enhanced learning spaces.



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### **Learning takes place in a community where faculty see students as partners in learning (PKAL 1991).**

Responses to NSSE survey questions asking about the frequency of faculty-student interaction outside of class suggest that “mostly it just doesn’t happen.”

About three-quarters of students, nation-wide, report that they never or only sometimes:

- ◆ discuss class material with faculty outside of class (however 47% of students in the top 5% institutions respond often/very often)
- ◆ work with faculty on activities other than coursework (however 43% of students in the top 5% institutions respond often/very often)
- ◆ pursue research with faculty that is not related to course or program requirements (however 47% of students in the top 5% institutions respond often/very often).

### **Classroom/lab designs can deny or signal that students and faculty are partners in learning.**

Questions to ask:

- ◆ is attention to faculty/student partnerships in learning a critical aspect in shaping programs and spaces on our campus?
- ◆ where on our campus do faculty and students associate outside the formal spaces for learning?



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### **Learning is personally meaningful and steeped in investigation from the very first courses through capstone courses.**

Responses to certain NSSE survey questions on behaviors that enrich education experiences (in particular three relevant, specific learning approaches— independent study, capstone courses, and learning communities) again are not encouraging:

- ♦ 73% of seniors nation-wide have not decided or do not plan to pursue independent study or a self-designed major (however, 51% of students at the top %5 institutions plan to do so or have done so)
- ♦ 73% of seniors nation-wide have not decided or do not plan to engage in a culminating senior experience such as a capstone course (however 93% of students at the top 5% of institutions plan to do so or have done so)
- ♦ 45% of seniors nation-wide have not engaged or do not plan to engage in a learning community or some other formal program where students take two or more classes together (however, 30% of students in the top 5% of institutions plan to do so or have done so).

### **Spaces for learning can make learning abstract and mindless or can give students opportunities to shape their own learning.**

Questions to ask:

- ♦ where on our campus do students pursue independent learning/ research in their major?
- ♦ where on our campus can students feel welcome in formal or informal natural science communities?



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### Learning takes place in a community where students collaborate with one another.

Here it is of value to note what NSSE responses report on the frequency of collaborative work outside of class.

- ◆ Of first-year students, nation-wide, 39% report engaging in collaborative learning often or very often.
- ◆ Of seniors, nation-wide, 57% of students report such learning behaviors, an impressive increase over four or so years of learning.
- ◆ It is of interest to note that among the top 5% of institutions, 63% of first-year students report they are engaged in collaborative work outside of class, with 70% of seniors from that group reporting such activity (a modest increase that may suggest some ceiling to the effectiveness of collaborative study).

### Programs, pedagogies and spaces reflect the vision for the future of an institution of learning.

Questions to ask:

- ◆ do we know where our students work collaboratively outside the formal classroom/lab setting?

- ◆ do we know how our curricula and pedagogies are designed to encourage and inspire collaborative learning both in and out of the formal classroom/lab setting?
- ◆ in what ways do goals for student learning affect the planning of our programs and spaces, and reflect our vision of the future? ■

