A Learning Paradigm College Aligns All of Its Activities Around the Mission of Producing Student Learning

INTTEGRITY: HONESTY, WHOOLENESS, SOUNDNESS

On September 2, 1994, most of the faculty of Olivet College met at the home of their president, Michael Bassis, for the Labor Day barbecue. Since his arrival a year and a half earlier, Bassis had guided the faculty through the process of developing a new vision of Education for Personal and Social Responsibility. A faculty group had formed teams that had traveled to several other colleges to study innovative practices that seemed relevant to that vision. The first day of the faculty forum that ended with the barbecue had been designed to sort out and select some approaches to put flesh on the bones of the Olivet vision. The day had gone badly. After hours of sometimes impassioned debate, the faculty had split in several different directions and seemed no closer to a meaningful consensus than ever. An air of failure hung over the group. As one participant commented, “People were milling around the yard... and everyone was very sullen-faced. It was just a depressing atmosphere .. very depressing” (McLendon, n.d.). The next session of the faculty forum was scheduled to begin the following morning.

After dinner, Bassis called together the leaders of the faculty work groups and a few other faculty leaders, along with the vice president, and asked them to remain behind after the others left. He ushered the group into his study. According to one participant, he “basically... locked the doors, and said ‘No one’s getting out. Nobody’s going home until this thing is done. We have come too far for this to fall apart. We’re going to

stay here until we reach some agreement.’” Taped to the walls of the study were the poster-sized pages describing the alternative models of college education that they had discussed all day. While some present expressed surprise at being, in effect, detained, they overcame their astonishment and settled into the task. They argued the virtues of the alternative approaches for three more hours, with the leaders of the different faculty working groups tending to support the plans they had proposed and to criticize the others, selecting and advocating the ideas on one or the other of the posted sheets of paper. Bassis said little. But after the deadlock had persisted for some time, he stood up. He took a pen and approached the sheets posted on the wall and began to circle the ideas on each sheet that had received the most favorable faculty response, as indicated by gold stars pasted next to them. According to one of the participants:
[He] then said, “Why can’t we do all of these things simultaneously? Why can’t we have a first-year experience and a senior experience ««/learning communities dWservice learning? It seems to me that this would give us a very powerful and truly unique curriculum that could drive the whole thing forward.” ... And [we] looked at it, all the items that were circled, and [our] mouths dropped open.

Thus began what became the Olivet Plan, a comprehensive reorganization of the college and its curriculum that did and does include learning communities, and a first-year seminar, a portfolio developed through the entire college program that culminates in a capstone senior experience, and more. Indeed, the Olivet Plan, and today’s Olivet College curriculum, contains much more than the items that were circled on those sheets taped to the walls in Michael Bassis’s study the night of the Labor Day barbecue. The plan grew in the planning. The whole became more than the sum of the parts, and hence the parts became different through their membership in the whole. But the key step, the transformative moment, was to see in a particular list of parts the potential for a new whole. And once it was seen, once the outline of something integral and meaningful began to come together, well, everything began to come together. Here a community of practice that had been vigorously negotiating the meaning of their own institution saw the meaning of all that they had done become new before their eyes, reified in an integral framework that as yet existed only in their shared understanding. One participant described that moment as magical.

I have no doubt that it was. To find the integrity hidden in the fragments is to be inspired, and empowered. For many who work in colleges and universities, a vision of the whole is so distant from our daily experience that the very idea seems magical, in the sense of impossible, beyond and outside the world we live in. But to see it, to watch the haze clear and the parts form themselves into an image of integrity and purpose, would leave us transfixed, spellbound. The power of the epiphany comes from the sudden and utterly persuasive vision of many become one.

What has happened at Olivet, and several of the other colleges we have discussed in the preceding chapters, is indeed magical—wonderful—but hardly impossible. Indeed, contrasted with the task of carrying the burdens of incoherence and waste that drag us down daily, it is not even difficult. What it requires is a certain kind of vision, held in common: a vision of an undergraduate college as a whole, as a coherent community acting from a consistent and unifying purpose. A vision of integrity.

The Random House Dictionary offers three definitions, very closely related, for the word “integrity”: “1) adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty; 2) the state of being whole, entire, or undiminished; and 3) a sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition----” Honesty, wholeness, soundness. Perhaps the most fundamental critique we can make of the Instruction Paradigm college is that it lacks integrity, in all three senses. It is not a whole; in many cases it is hardly even a sum. It is a basket of parts, often disconnected parts. The life sciences instructor does not know what the sociology instructor is doing, and neither knows what the counselors are telling their students. Faculty members, isolated in the solitary cells of their classrooms, learn only through hearsay and complaint what their students experience in the rest of their academic lives.

Because it is not a whole, the college lacks soundness. If the Instruction Paradigm college is a knowledge factory, it is not a very efficient or effective one. It is not a well-oiled machine, but a creaking assemblage of unsynchronized units, as likely to be working against as with each other, a Rube Goldberg contraption that produces a good deal more heat than light.

And, as an institution, the Instruction Paradigm college is not honest. I certainly do not mean to suggest that the people who work in the institution do not do their best to tell the truth. In my experience, most of them try to be honest, some making heroic efforts to do so. It is the institution...
learning, more supporting of incremental self-theories and mindful reflection on the learning experience. In other words, they tend to create a hot cognitive economy. But some institutions have gone farther than others in aligning institutional policies. The Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State and the Gemstone Program at the University of Maryland are both well-integrated programs; each has considerable integrity on its own terms. And each is at odds with the larger system on the large campus where it resides. At Inver Hills Community College, the Liberal Studies/Professional Skills Program expands along with professional development initiatives that are almost certainly changing the cognitive economy, but only intermittently for many students. Many fundamental structures still remain locked in inflexible Instruction Paradigm frameworks. Valencia Community College has articulated a vivid and inspiring vision, which it has made substantial first steps toward achieving in terms of advisement and support, while the future of the curriculum remains obscure.

Some institutions have advanced far toward achieving systemic integrity. CSU, Monterey Bay’s University Learning Requirements have shaped the curriculum there and freed the faculty from many of the constraints that inhibit change in the cognitive economy. The university now will test the effects of growing enrollment on a coherent framework for learning. At Wagner College, and longer at King’s College, a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum seeks to align the entire system in one direction. The University of Michigan in many ways offers an especially interesting example of the challenge of alignment. The UROP program and service learning can claim extraordinary success in changing the cognitive economy for many students. Yet Michigan is a large research university, and so the barriers to creating communities of practice and requiring connected performances across the curriculum are substantial. We heard the testimony of a Michigan graduate in the first chapter who found little coherence in the curriculum: “They don’t add up to anything. It’s just a bunch of courses. It doesn’t mean a thing” (Willimon & Naylor, 1995, p. 58). But many at the university seem to be aware of the problem and are consciously grappling with it. The President’s Commission on the Undergraduate Experience (2001) at Michigan characterizes the challenge with both candor and clarity:

Our concern is not simply with the anonymous classroom or the routinized instructor. Rather it is with the larger tendency of the undergraduate experience at the University of Michigan to become fragmented into disconnected pursuits, discrete subcultures, and generational enclaves. The proposals in this report are designed to undo that regime of separations, to braid together the academic, social, and residential strands of the undergraduate experience. Doing so means making the campus and the faculty role more permeable, creating new linkages between disciplines, teaching and research, academics and student life, between the university and the “outside world.” (p. 24)

Characterizing the challenge of alignment isn’t the same thing as meeting the challenge, but it is probably a useful first step. Indeed the beginning of systemic integrity is probably to explicitly address and acknowledge the misalignment of existing structures. Honesty comes before wholeness and soundness, because until we honestly acknowledge the atomization of our structures and the misalignment of our functions, we can hardly address them. And again, when I speak of honesty, I mean primarily being honest with ourselves, learning to see what is really there, so we can describe accurately the reality before us. If we can see our institutions through the lens of the Learning Paradigm, we can describe them as they are. The problem with seeing the nature of our policies clearly and whole is that the essential reality of our educational programs is hidden, obscured under layers of debris, the detritus of Instruction Paradigm processes that are largely circular and uninformative. Almost any college administrator could give you enrollment figures with considerable confidence: how many students, headcount or FTES, how many in various programs and in each class. Almost no college administrator can give you any information about how those programs affect students. We know a lot about the enrollment economy of the college, almost nothing about the cognitive economy. Most of the information gathered at Instruction Paradigm colleges is collected in order to feed the never-ending, self-referential processes that support the enrollment machine. The operations of most curriculum committees are a vivid example.

Josina Makau (personal communication, July 20, 2002)—a founding faculty member at CSU, Monterey Bay—describes her experience at a major research university where she taught earlier in her career in this way:

Faculty seeking to develop new courses were expected to wait up to two years before their proposals would be considered. The review process itself—mired in detail—often focussed primarily on issues of disciplinary turf, rather than issues of education. Notably, no mechanism was offered to insure alignment of the syllabus to what actually happened in class. A colleague of mine who served on a community college curriculum committee actually had the temerity to raise the
question: “But how do we know whether students are actually learning what’s prescribed in the syllabus?” The curriculum chair set him straight: “That’s not our job.” And, of course, it isn’t anybody’s job. Which is why it doesn’t get done.

To be honest with ourselves, we need not create a massive apparatus for measuring what we now ignore; we must simply recognize that we are ignoring it. If we can disenthrall ourselves from the trivia of the knowledge factory, then we can begin to move toward a vision of the whole. We begin by asking the right questions, then keep asking and answering them, and things will come together.

Most new colleges have years to plan their initial offerings and to hire staff and organize their operations. But it was different for CSU, Monterey Bay. When the Fort Ord military base was closed, the site came available to the state of California for a new state university. But the decision needed to be made and acted on very quickly. Makau was one of the 12 founding faculty members who came together in January 1995. She recalls:

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We were placed in what could have been construed—and by many was construed—as a highly untenable position: that in eight months, by that August, we would start a university at all four levels, with as yet undefined majors, and an as yet undeveloped general education program.

While the originating staff did not have the luxury of time, it did have something more important: they were asked the right questions.

The very first day that the founding faculty got together, the very first thing we were told was, “Just answer the question: What if the purpose of the university were learning?” And everything we did was in response to that question. . . .

Our first month we were told: “Don’t think about constraints. Think only about what it would mean to create a learning-centered university. What would you do? What kind of majors would you have? What kind of general education would you have?”

These are the questions that generate a vision of the whole, that make the integral possible.

Of course—as is clear from the examples of Olivet; CSU, Monterey Bay; Alverno; Evergreen; and several others—just having a vision of the whole is not the same as achieving it. Much hard work intervenes. But it is the vision of the whole, the framework that gives meaning to all of its constituent elements, that makes it possible to do the work well. This is not to imply that the vision is rigid and unchangeable. Quite to the contrary, it will probably be in a constant state of development. When we begin with the parts and screw or glue them together to make a machine that we hope will run, the best that we can hope for is that the mechanism will move in the prescribed ways and no parts will fall off. Perhaps, when we seek a vision of the whole, when we envision our hoped-for integrity, we should think of our work not as a machine but as an organism, a living thing. And living things grow; they actualize the design implicit in their origin, sometimes in surprising ways.

If we think of the institution as an organic unity rather than an extravagantly complex widget, we come to see that integrity does not imply rigidity or inflexibility. It is precisely the integral wholeness of the organism that gives it the wherewithal to grow, to develop into more and better.

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In fact, soundness—that third leg of integrity—in the organic world implies growth and development. This should not surprise us. Growth and development are supposed to be our stock in trade at colleges. But if we see our colleges, the institutions themselves, through the Instruction Paradigm lens, what we expect is growth without development. We expect our colleges to get bigger, to grow in size. We do not expect them to get better. We expect them to grow out without growing up. We are inured to the rhetoric of development when it is applied to our students; we hear it all the time. But that our colleges themselves might get smarter as well as bigger, that seems a stretch.

In the end, if we want to understand what integrity means for colleges, we had best set all of the analogies aside and see a college for what it literally is: a community of people. Integrity, in all three of its meanings, is a quality that we find only in persons and communities of people. A college is a community of practice seeking to negotiate the meaning of itself. To purposefully negotiate that meaning, the members of the community must participate—this is where the honesty comes in. We must be willing to speak the truth to one another, and to mutually recognize one another as bearers of meaning. We must test our ideas and beliefs together rather than withdrawing into the secret solace of isolated expertise and atomized opinion. Through this negotiation we come to reify shared meanings and especially the central meanings that become the touchstone and standard for future negotiations—this is where we shape a vision of the whole. And as we continue to negotiate those meanings, we revise and correct our vision, test it in practice, and negotiate the solutions to the problems our
vision has created. (A vision that doesn’t create problems is not worth having.) Achieving and maintaining the soundness of our work, revising the vision to keep it healthy, changing and adapting to circumstances, is part of integrity, too. Some readers may be thinking here, “Well, this sounds all well and good. But it doesn’t sound anything like the place where I work.” Precisely.

It is a rough outline of what happens at colleges, or even within programs in colleges, that are transforming themselves in a way that moves them toward institutional integrity. It is an iterative process, involving much back-and-forth. Once you have a vision of the whole, you must continuously be willing to revise it, to renegotiate it. Indeed, the real work of alignment is this ongoing renegotiation that aims at achieving a sound, a healthy embodiment of the vision. We can see this vividly in the ongoing

work of colleges that have been negotiating a coherent vision for many years. At Alverno and Evergreen, both of which have been moving toward a transformative vision for over 30 years, we see that the central vision of the whole survives, but maintaining the soundness of the institution as a healthy embodiment of that vision requires constant conversation and ongoing adjustment. At Portland State, the Curriculum Committee (that’s right, the Curriculum Committee!) requested a progress report on the effectiveness of the University Studies program. That report, Progress Report: University Studies (Portland State University, 2000), entails a thorough analysis of the program and an assessment of its effectiveness based on many kinds of evidence and specific recommendations for how the institution should continue to study the effects of the program on students and how it might experiment with modifications. In the spring of 2002 Olivet College modified its portfolio program to put more emphasis on fieldwork, especially in the major. Integrity, in other words, entails that we continuously maintain the vision by changing practices, by adjusting the work on the periphery so that it makes a good fit with the core.

Of course, this general outline of organizational integrity could apply to almost any organization, from a bowling league to a clothing store to a fire department. But a college, certainly a Learning Paradigm college, has a distinctive object. If a college exists to produce student learning, then the conversation of the college as it seeks to become integral and aligned must be about students. The vision of the whole must be a vision of and for students. And it must begin with a recognition of their integrity, as persons. Indeed, the vision of the whole purpose of a college needs to be a vision about the whole learning experience of students.

Honesty, wholeness, soundness. That is what makes up institutional integrity. It is not a static state; it is an ongoing process. You are not honest because you told the truth once; you are honest because you keep speaking the truth. Because maintaining the soundness of any system in a changing world requires constant maintenance and adjustment, integrity means an ongoing willingness to change. But integrity is more than efficiency; the soundness it calls for is soundness for a coherent and consistent purpose, movement toward a vision of the whole. That vision is what we move toward, and what we come from. A vision of the whole assures a long time horizon for a community because no such vision will ever be finished. We go to it to come back to it. It is the place where we live; it is the place where we are going. We are always where we belong, and we are always going there. Always journeying. Always coming home.

THE AFFORDANCES OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A TEST OF ALIGNMENT
Technologists and designers speak of the “affordances” of an object. Donald Norman (1993), founding chair of the Department of Cognitive Science at the University of California, San Diego, who has subsequently worked on technology design for Apple Computer and Hewlett-Packard, puts it this way: “The affordances’ of an object refers to its possible functions: A chair affords support, whether for standing, sitting, or the placement of objects. A pencil affords lifting, grasping, turning, poking, supporting, tapping, and of course, writing” (p. 106). Norman points out that the affordances that matter are those that users perceive easily, not those that are perhaps powerful, but hidden: “We tend to use objects in ways suggested by the most salient perceived affordances, not in ways that are difficult to discover...” (p. 107). Organizational structures also have affordances. When an institution adopts certain tools and processes, settles on a set of objects that it will use, it affords certain kinds of participation. The architecture and the furniture, the textbooks and the
syllabus, the calendar and the curriculum all afford certain kinds of learning experiences and impede others. In large measure, what I have attempted to describe in the last five chapters are the organizational practices that afford a deep orientation to learning rather than a surface orientation. To achieve alignment, we need to look at everything about the learning environment in terms of how it affects these five principles, and how they combine to affect the overall learning experience of the student.

To change the cognitive economy of the college we must change the affordances of the organization. Norman (1992) presents a photograph taken in the cafeteria of the University of California, San Diego (p. 24) that illustrates the power of affordances. It shows an ice cream freezer, a rectangular box sitting on the floor. The whole top of the freezer consists of two flat glass doors that open from the top. It stands by itself near a wall. The right-hand glass door has been cracked all the way across and has a piece of glass missing; the cracks are covered with wide tape. Just below the taped cracks is a printed sign that reads “PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR TRAY HERE!” Alas, too late. The design of the freezer affords only one place where the diner seeking dessert can put down a tray in order to open the freezer with one hand and pluck forth ice cream with the other: the glass top. But the glass top was not designed to hold weight. Hence the sign, explicitly contradicting the clear affordance of the device, saying in effect, “Don’t do the obvious! Refrain from taking the logical step! Before you do the only thing that makes sense, stop!” Instruction Paradigm colleges are like that freezer. They have signs all over telling students to study hard and long, not to cram, to think in the long term, to seek feedback, to form communities, to connect. Students don’t pay attention to the signs. They pay attention to the design. They follow the affordances of the organization, not the advice.

What, for example, are the perceived affordances of the conventional classroom? I mean the room itself. The chief affordance of a lecture hall is—no surprise here—lecturing. A raised platform before a black or white board defines itself as the front of the room. All the chairs face this focal point, probably tiered in rows to allow everyone to see the focal point. The chairs are usually bolted to the floor and immobile. A lecture hall affords sitting among a mass and listening. The overwhelming message sent by the room to the entering student is “sit down and watch what happens at the front of the room.” It affords observation, spectatorship, but not participation. It can be used for other things, of course. But to so use it is to resist the perceived affordances.

At a deeper level, one of the fundamental affordances that physical objects suggest is their availability to manipulation. When you enter the room, do you have the sense that you can move the furniture? How would the student react upon entering a classroom with no chairs? That would afford confusion leading to some kind of decision and active participation: sit on the floor, stand, or go looking for a chair. As multiple students entered the room, the absence of furniture would almost certainly lead to communication, and more than that, problem solving communication. It is inconceivable that the presence of chairs, conventionally arranged, could lead to communication. Students would come in and sit down quietly, unlikely to speak to anyone they didn’t already know. But the absence of chairs would lead to: “What’s this?” “Hey, where are the chairs?” “Are we supposed to sit on the floor?” I do not necessarily recommend the experiment, the logistics of which would be cumbersome at most institutions. And the location of

furniture, taken apart from the whole context, is a trivial matter. (Of course, anything taken apart from the whole context is a trivial matter.) The question I am suggesting with this example is an important one, however. Do the objects students encounter in the environment they enter afford participation, or do they afford passive observation? Contrast the conventional lecture hall with the Bailey Common of the Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State University, which we discussed in Chapter 11. The common is a large room with modular furniture, easily maneuvered. Often the tables are arranged in a rectangle, but they can be broken apart and configured differently. Strung around the top of the room, like an enormous ticker tape above the windows and just below the ceiling, is the Declaration of Bailey: “The Bailey Scholars Program seeks to be a community of scholars dedicated to lifelong learning. All members of the community work toward providing a respectful, trusting environment where we acknowledge our interdependence and encourage personal growth” (Bailey Scholars, 2001). The objects reified in the Bailey community of practice afford very different modes of participation than those of the conventional lecture hall.

The same principle applies to the tools students use—like textbooks, computers, and software—and to the rules that govern their behavior. These rules produce all the artifacts of the Instruction Paradigm college, all of which should be reexamined: the three-unit class, the dominant format of one teacher-one class, final exams, study sheets, and review sessions. It
seems to me beyond debate that the most powerful learning environments for promoting a deep orientation to learning will not be three-unit classes—perhaps especially three-unit classes taught by brilliant and entertaining lecturers, who largely preempt the negotiation of meaning.

We have seen many examples of institutions that have changed the affordances of their institutional structures. When Valencia puts the assessments it uses to guide students through LifeMap on the Internet, it affords access to the system for students who can’t make it in to campus easily or who are embarrassed to take such an assessment in a public place. When the Gemstone Program allows a full semester for students to select teams and topics, it affords reflection on goal setting and collaboration. When Evergreen offers year-long coordinated studies programs, it affords thinking in the long term and valuing collaborative communities. In each case we have discussed, changes in organizational structures afford changes in the modes of student engagement.

The problem of alignment consists of shaping the affordances of all organizational structures and policies in light of an integral vision of the whole, so that they consistently encourage a deep orientation to learning. Consider the case of problem-based learning (PBL), certainly one of the most promising of pedagogies we have discussed. It was first developed in medical schools, where there is a kind of inherent connection among the parts of the curriculum. The human body is interdisciplinary. When PBL was translated to the undergraduate context, a number of problems arose. One of those is that the design of the conventional three-credit class—meeting three hours per week—does not afford thorough and extensive exploration of a problem. It is limiting. It fragments student attention rather than focusing it. It denies students the time and space to engage in shared reflection. In other words, the affordances of the class conflict with the affordances of the pedagogy. Posing students a problem to resolve collaboratively affords a certain kind of student behavior; asking them to do the work from 9:00 a.m. to 9:50 a.m. on MWF affords quite another kind of behavior.

Two of the institutions we discussed in previous chapters have joined with a third to seek funding to explore the potential of combining two powerful pedagogical techniques. The Evergreen State College pioneered learning communities, and the University of Delaware and Stamford University have developed an extensive program of problem-based learning. The three institutions would like to investigate how learning communities work with PBL. The environment of collaboration, rich feedback, and time to explore that learning communities offer should help student to meet the demands of PBL. In other words, the affordances of these two designs complement one another. Barbara Leigh Smith of Evergreen puts it this way:

We think that it’s a marriage waiting to happen because the undergraduate schools that have implemented PBL have found that the three-credit course is a big issue. It not only limits the problems, the depth and scope and interdisciplinarity of the problems, you have a real culture problem, because the students are getting just a little snippet of it embedded in a whole set of courses that are completely different. Its like incompatible cultures.

Every college should examine the affordances of its system for consistency and alignment around its learning objectives. By doing so, they can change the cognitive economy for all students.

THE CHALLENGE TO ALIGNMENT IN THE LARGER SYSTEM

One of the challenges institutions face in trying to achieve organizational integrity around a mission of producing student learning is that no college or university exists in isolation. Most college students today complete their college education somewhere other than where they started it. One of the purposes and rationales of the standardized formal processes of the Instruction Paradigm is that they facilitate transfer between institutions. Transfer, in many ways, is a good thing. The possibility of transferring from one college to another increases access to higher education in a highly mobile society. But there is a price to pay for the formal, standardized structures that facilitate transfer: They reify form and ignore substance; they facilitate credentialing at the price of educational value.

The one structure of the Instruction Paradigm that is perhaps more influential than any other, especially in terms of efforts to create institutional alignment, is the student credit hour. The student credit hour first came into use at the end of the 19th century in an effort to provide some standard measure of the high school experience. It was only after the Second World
War, however, that the credit hour came to be used for budgeting, accreditation, and regulation. In the 1970s, the federal government began to use the credit hour as a device to measure and account for financial aid and has increasingly relied upon it since. The rapid growth of transfer in the post-war period also increased reliance on the credit hour as a common metric that different colleges could use to translate courses into a standardized code (Wellman & Ehrlich, 2001). Indeed, we can fairly say that the increased use of the credit hour as a metric of educational accomplishment has been one of the main indices of the growth and pervasiveness of the Instruction Paradigm. Peter Ewell (n.d.), senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)—and one of the most acute observers of the state of higher education—characterizes the role of the credit hour today:

For better or worse, the student credit hour... has become ubiquitous as a unit of measure in American higher education.

At this point, the credit hour is used for purposes as divergent as allocating costs, accounting learning gain, assigning workload and assuring quality. But, of course, the student credit hour is not a measure of learning; it is a measure of instruction. Actually, it is not even that. It is a measure of classroom time. The use of the credit hour as a measure of faculty workload, for example, has no foundation in research or logic. The credit hour has become the standard not because it means anything about educational value, but because it allows for the easy translation of instructional information within and between institutions. As Robert Shoenberg (2001), senior fellow at the AAC&U, notes, the credit hour has become “the standard unit of academic currency” (p. 2). The result has been to devalue measures of real value: “the convenience of the credit hour as common currency has driven out the better but far less fungible currency of intellectual purpose and curricular coherence.” Most institutions have made compacts with other institutions to recognize credit hours as evidence of educational attainment. However, as Shoenberg points out,

None of these transfer agreements addresses in any meaningful way the purposes of the general education curriculum, much less the purposes of a baccalaureate degree. Uniformly they assume a general education program consisting of a loose distribution requirement plus competence in writing, mathematics, and increasingly, computer use. They give some definition of the content of courses that meet the requirements, but they offer few details as to the goals to be reached through study of that content. As far as these transfer agreements are concerned, all social science or science or humanities courses are created equal. Never mind that the introductory political science course at one institution addresses a different set of purposes than the introductory course at another — they are identical in the eyes of the transfer agreement. Never mind that some schools offer a rigorous and integrated general education program while others do not. Any collection of courses from whatever source, no matter how lacking in coherence, must be accepted for transfer if they are in the same subject matter domain.

Because the credit hour is a measure only of time spent in a classroom, and because the information that the Instruction Paradigm values and preserves is largely self-referential, there is no agreed-upon standard of the meaning or significance of a credit hour. Indeed, it is used quite differently in different institutions and even within the same institution. Jane Wellman, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), and Thomas Ehrlich, senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2001), are directing a study of the student credit hour for the IHEP. As I write, their work is in progress. But they have reached some interesting, if tentative, conclusions. One of their first discoveries was that the credit hour is not easy to pin down:

The research into the uses and definitions for the [credit hour] has been akin to the inquiry of the myth of the blind men and the elephant: Each audience understands the measure to mean something slightly different, and the different audiences do not talk to one another. Like the laws in the Red Queen’s croquet court, the [credit hour] is often mandated but not defined, (p. 12)

This is what we should expect. Because the credit hour is an Instruction Paradigm form without educational substance, it can easily be used in the self-referential exercises that sustain the operations of the knowledge factory. But because the form has become independent of any educationally significant referent, it is nearly impossible to define it functionally. We would expect, then, that the credit hour would be a major barrier to institutional innovation and would impair the ability of institutions to make changes rooted in the needs of students and the nature of the cognitive economy rather than the credit economy. That, in fact, was the core hypothesis that Wellman and Ehrlich attempted to support. But in a review of many innovative colleges (which included several of those we have discussed in the previous chapters), they were unable to
confirm that hypothesis. They found:

Institutions that are committed to campus-wide innovations in teaching and learning are able to work around the measure. In reflecting on why this seems to be true, we concluded that those involved in leading innovative institutions had a clear idea of what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it.

They developed visions of the learning modes they sought to encourage, visions that had relative institutional cohesion and coherence. They faced numerous and troublesome hurdles in developing their programs because of the accounting metrics associated with the [credit hour], and some still face major problems. But they did not allow a particular metric of student and faculty workload to interfere with their broader visions for their institutions, (p. 13)

In other words, institutions that have a functional vision of the whole, that know what they want to achieve in terms of learning, can manipulate the facade of Instruction Paradigm requirements while doing real and important work. Institutional integrity gives institutions power over the formal barriers to alignment for learning.

Institutions still face the challenge of gaining recognition by conventional standards for programs that rise above the conventional. As we have seen in the case of Madison Area Technical College, when a two-year college actually begins to assess outcomes in a way that provides more substantive and important evidence of student learning than grades associated with credit hours, universities tend to ignore the substance and demand the hollow form. But that can change.

**THE POTENTIAL FOR SYSTEMIC ALIGNMENT**

There are signs on the horizon that not only individual colleges but higher education systems are recognizing the hollowness of Instruction Paradigm forms and seeking alignment on more substantive grounds.

We have already seen an example of how one university is addressing the transfer problem in Portland States Sophomore Inquiry program and the accompanying Transfer Transition course. It is an attempt to retain the integrity of the University Studies program even for students who come to Portland State from other institutions. But Portland State has taken this principle even further. It has supported community colleges and high schools in its region in preparing students for a learning-focused university education. Portland State has worked with Clackamas Community College just outside Portland to develop its own version of the Freshman Inquiry learning community. As Terrel L Rhodes (personal communication, June 5, 2002), vice provost for Curriculum and Undergraduate Studies at Portland State, describes the program:

The faculty at the community college who teach Freshman Inquiry meet with the faculty here who teach it on that theme. They meet as a team; they design the course together. There is now a peer mentor there at the community college who works with their students just as they do here. They’re doing portfolios, and we have a FIPSE project underway where their student portfolios and our student portfolios are being evaluated on the same criteria and the same rubrics to see what kind of experience there is and continuity.

This is hands-on alignment, extending the integrity of a purposeful plan of learning to other institutions.

The high school program is conducted somewhat differently. There the Freshman Inquiry learning community becomes Senior Inquiry. At four local high schools, Portland State faculty members actually join the teaching team: one Portland State instructor with two faculty members from the high school. Upper-division Portland State students serve as peer mentors. The program reaches about 250 high school students each year and is growing. This program is creating alignment between institutions in the most effective possible way: by actual collaboration with faculty, staff, and students at the other institutions. Portland State is expanding the purposeful community of practice outside the institution, to other schools and colleges.

Such experiments in local institutional alignment and cooperation perhaps offer the best hope for substantive curricular development across campus boundaries. Of course, alignment between institutions one at a time could take a while. Alignment between colleges and between systems can be achieved on a broad scale only by cooperation across systems and between colleges. Higher education systems in a number of states are exploring approaches to such improved alignment. The California State University is the largest campus-based system of four-year colleges in the United States. It has 23 campuses and 40,000 faculty members. It also resides in the state with the most heavy-handed regulation of higher education in the country. (I know; I live here.) One faculty member from a CSU campus told me, “Faculty in this system, basically they’re working as if they were on an assembly line. It is just a stunningly
bad system.” I am not endorsing this view nor disputing it. There are certainly many brilliant and talented teachers and scholars in the CSU system. And campuses have much independence. But it is a highly bureaucratized system in many respects. Historically, the bulk of its campuses have been locked quite firmly in the Instruction Paradigm. Today, there are signs of change, and they are worth noting because if CSU can change, anybody can change.

One sign of change is a system-wide project called Cornerstones. The process began in 1996 and produced a set of “general principles and supporting recommendations designed to guide CSU into the next century” (California State University System, n.d.). The first principle states that “The California State University will award the baccalaureate on the basis of demonstrated learning as determined by our faculty.” In order to implement this principle, the plan proposes, “Each university will have a faculty-determined, comprehensive set of general education outcomes that are sufficiently specific to support a public declaration of educational results ---- “ The plan recommends a comprehensive system of learning assessment, and calls upon the faculty to involve students as “active partners with faculty in the learning process” and to “provide opportunities for active learning throughout the curriculum.” The proposed completion date for developing comprehensive general-education outcomes is the fall of 2002.

The Cornerstones process would not achieve instant alignment among different institutions. It would, however, focus attention on the learning outcomes of programs and thus give institutions something to align. It would move institutions toward giving functional meaning to the formal processes of curriculum and instruction. It would therefore reveal, for the first time, where institutional activities are aligned in terms of learning outcomes and where they are not. It would provide a vocabulary that not only the CSU system but community colleges and high schools could use to meaningfully discuss and plan for their own alignment with the universities.

It is difficult to see just what the outcome of this process will be. According to Gary Hammerstrom (personal communication, February 18, 2002), associate vice chancellor for academic affairs of the CSU system, campuses have been submitting accountability reports every two years, and the systems board of trustees has been actively monitoring progress. Josina Makau of CSU, Monterey Bay receives the email on the department chairs listservs in several disciplines. She reports:

Department chairs are aware [of Cornerstones] . Understandably, there’s a combination of responsiveness and resistance. Some cadres are making efforts to develop learning outcomes and assessment mechanisms. Most, however, are resisting. We experienced similar responses at CSUMB. In the absence of a thoughtful pedagogical framework within which to develop learning outcomes, most faculty who care deeply about student learning and academic freedom resisted the mandate. It was only after we were able to demonstrate a commitment to development of a learning-centered model with academic integrity that faculty came to embrace the process.

How much will happen how fast is hard to tell, but what we see in Cornerstones is a substantial, sustained effort at the system level of a very large system to realign fundamental processes in the interest of learning. If the theory-in-use displayed by institutional practice were to lag far behind the espoused theory expressed in the Cornerstones plan—-well, it wouldn’t be the first time. But if this initiative can create and sustain substantial pockets of innovation and initiate broad-based conversations on many campuses about how well the system serves learning — that would be news worth reporting.

An even more interesting approach to alignment among colleges and universities within a system is being discussed in Minnesota. We have already seen an example of the basic framework for alignment proposed for Minnesota in the Liberal Studies/Professional Skills program at Inver Hills Community College. Inver Hills is a part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities {MnSCU — pronounced “MIN-skew”), which includes state universities, community colleges, and technical colleges — but not the University of Minnesota. David Shupe is director for Academic Accountability for the system. He notes that while faculty members often assess student learning in a sophisticated and meaningful way, no record of those assessments survives in the transcript; “even when faculty can assess students well, there is no good way to gather and display evidence of that” (Shupe, 200 la, p. 9). This is more than a problem of external accountability: It is learning — the personal, professional, and intellectual development of individuals — that is the primary process for
organizations have little or no data. Most learning is invisible, because our institutions do not have the means to capture or retain the crucial information: what a student has learned—that is, has demonstrated that he or she knows and can do—while being one of our students. (Shupe, 2002, p. 1)

Data about actual student learning provide the benefits of an improved feedback system to students that we have already discussed. But they would also provide much better evidence for institutions, departments, and faculties to use in planning: “Instead of indirect indicators of an otherwise invisible process, each college and university would have real data that can be usefully aggregated” (Shupe, 2001a, p. 10). In the past, Shupe points out, “Many assessment efforts have been caught in an either/or decision, either creating data for institutional purposes that has little or no meaning for students or facilitating student evidence that provides little or no data for the institution” (2001b, p. 7). As I indicated in Chapter 13, the priority of these two objectives should be clear: Feedback to students is more important than feedback to institutions. However, these alternatives are not mutually exclusive, which is good news if we want to achieve institutional alignment: “Both are needed and can be simultaneously achieved if a college or university chooses to organize its outcomes data carefully enough.” In the Inver Hills system we see the principle applied: Evidence of student accomplishment once entered in the skills template can be aggregated for a variety of purposes and is also used to produce an ongoing Skills Profile for each student.

Shupe has developed a template for learning outcomes that individual institutions can adapt to their own purposes and that could also be used to translate information about learning outcomes from one institution to another in a coherent way. If many institutions in a system implemented such a template of outcomes, it would help to achieve alignment both within and between institutions.

Shupe’s template is based on a framework for categorizing learning outcomes that facilitates identifying and clarifying the kind of outcomes a course or program aims for and also assists in differentiating outcomes that should be expected from the general education program and those that are more appropriate to the major. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the template, but the basic framework is worth considering. Shupe makes two basic distinctions among student proficiencies:

One is between what a student has demonstrated that he or she knows and what a student has demonstrated he or she can do. The other is between an outcome that is specific to a particular context (e.g., discipline or profession) and one that transcends that context and can be brought to bear on (or transferred to) others. Taken together, these yield four types of learning outcomes:

- Understanding: a student’s demonstration of what he or she knows and understands within a specific context (discipline of or profession)
- Performance: a student’s demonstration of what he or she can do that is specific to a context (discipline or profession)
- Perspective: a student’s demonstration of what he or she knows and understands that can be carried from one context to another
- Capability: a student’s demonstration of what he or she can do that can be carried from one context to another.

Some seven colleges and universities in the MnSCU system are working on trial implementation of the template, or parts of it. If faculty from different colleges and universities can use a common framework for defining the sometimes distinctive learning outcomes that they want their curricula to produce, they achieve, of course, all of the advantages of creating a system that provides more meaningful feedback to students and extends the time horizon for learning. But they also create the possibility of informing other institutions what their degrees and programs mean. Credit hours and grades are now counters in a system that is fairly well sealed against meaning: They are formal mechanisms and processes that refer to other formal mechanisms and processes. A shared template for defining the outcomes of courses and programs has the potential to give substance to the forms, to point to the value added in an education rather than just the hours accumulated. This means that colleges could be accountable, but not by the vague and ill-defined standards of those who do not understand their work. They could be accountable for what they aim to do, and for what they do well, and could at the same time do it better. As Shupe puts it, they could achieve “a thoroughly academic accountability and a thoroughly accountable academy” (2002):
The future to be imagined is one in which a college or university can more completely develop and demonstrate its distinctiveness, more fully reward individual strengths in both faculty and students, more rigorously maintain academic standards across the curriculum and offer a creative and more dynamic curriculum—and do all of these not in spite of but precisely because of systematically and continuously produced data on student achievement. (2002, p. 2)

Both institutions and systems are working with the formal Instruction Paradigm processes to try to find or create more meaningful standards and processes that truly reflect information about learning. One of the most pervasive processes for peer review in the academy is institutional accreditation. Increasingly, the regional accrediting organizations are moving to a model of institutional excellence that owes more to the integral vision of institutions that have taken learning seriously than to the formal processes of the Instruction Paradigm college. Perhaps the clearest example to date of this movement is to be found in the newly revised standards of the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Under the leadership of Ralph Wolff, executive director, the commission has engaged in several years of intense collaborative effort among faculty and administrators from the whole range of colleges and universities in the region. The product of this effort, the WASC 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, envisions nothing less than a complete redesign of the accreditation process, giving individual institutions much more freedom and autonomy to define their own purposes and goals. The new standards, however, call upon institutions to focus on learning outcomes rather than simply describe institutional processes, to define the terms of institutional integrity for themselves. The accreditation process, they propose, has the aim of “[promoting deep institutional engagement with issues of educational effectiveness and student learning...]” (p. 8). In the past, institutional accreditation has been a process largely driven by the need to comply with bureaucratic requirements. Accreditation self-studies have often consisted of masses of data that present a static snapshot of institutional processes, proof that the atomized organization has all the appropriate parts. The new WASC standards propose to radically change the process by shifting the focus from formal compliance to “educational effectiveness.” The process of self-development the standards propose for institutions entails three stages or “lenses” for viewing institutional processes: “Articulating a Collective Vision of Educational Attainment,” “Organizing for Learning,” and “Becoming a Learning Organization” (pp. 6-7). At the core of this process is the development of an institutional vision that is about students and their learning, that focuses on “the degree to which the institution sets goals and obtains results for student learning both at the institutional and program levels...” (p. 6).

The new standards propose to promote the creation of “a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly developed...” (p. 8). To support institutions in this process, the commission has developed and distributed an evidence guide that outlines the process and standards for seeking, evaluating, at using evidence about student learning (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2002). (Peter Ewell, who has worked with WASC throughout the development process, is the primary author.) The guide proposes that “The process of accreditation... should result in more than an external validation of ‘quality’; it should ‘add value’ to an institution by providing an important opportunity to inquire deeply into student learning...” (p. 6). Indeed, the standards and the evidence guide taken together constitute a forceful invitation to institutions to define and describe that vision of the whole purpose of the institution, rooted in a coherent vision of student learning, that is the foundation for institutional integrity.

Individual colleges can move toward their own visions of integral alignment more rapidly and more effectively if the systemic framework of interaction between colleges can advance beyond hollow formal categories and become a medium for the exchange of educational meaning. There are many ways this can happen. As more institutions come to define what they want an education to mean, the pressure for educationally meaningful standards among and between institutions will mount.

PROCESS FRONTIER: ALIGNMENT

The colleges and universities we have seen that have made real progress toward alignment for learning have approached the task from different directions. In some cases, like Evergreen and CSU, Monterey Bay, they have started a new college and designed it from scratch with a coherent vision. In other cases a college was in crisis, or at least discomfort, and had reached consensus on the need for a dramatic break with the old ways. This was the case with Olivet and Wagner—and even Alverno back in the 1970s. In some cases, an individual leader emerged who shaped the conversation: Donald Farmer at King’s and Michael Bassis at Olivet come to mind. Places like the University of Delaware and Chandler-Gilbert exhibit substantial movement.
over a period of years. And in both cases, the movement began with the faculty. At Delaware, a small faculty development program in problem-based learning grew consistently for years and created a substantial constituency among the faculty. At Chandler-Gilbert, likewise, a small group of faculty interested in experiential learning began an approach that grew over a period of years with the support of an effective and well-executed professional development program. Some institutions, of course, have created innovative programs that change the cognitive economy for some students and then simply stop. These programs may persist for years and become integrated into the fabric of institutional life, become reified both in terms of their advantages and their limitations. And it is certainly better to warm up the cognitive economy for some students than for none. Yet, in the final analysis, an institution must move toward integrity as a whole—or away from it. Transformative change will always be movement toward a coherent vision of the whole. And systems like colleges must begin movement toward becoming integral wholes by meeting the first condition of integrity: honesty. The road to alignment with integrity begins by seeing what we are doing, and then saying it.