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*After 40 years studying how college affects students, and after reviewing more than 7,000 studies published since 1970, a deceptively simple question still nagged: “So, what did you learn?”*

## 1818 Rethinking Effective Student Learning Experiences



Folks:

The posting below describes six characteristics that, based on decades of research, have been found to cultivate and promote student learning. It is by [Patrick T. Terenzini](#), distinguished professor of higher education, emeritus, at Pennsylvania State University, and it appeared in the July 29, 2020 issue of *Inside Higher Ed*, an excellent - and free - online source for news, opinion, and jobs for all of higher education. You can subscribe by going to: <http://insidehighered.com/>. Also, for a free daily update from *Inside Higher Ed*, e-mail <[scott.jaschik@insidehighered.com](mailto:scott.jaschik@insidehighered.com)>. Copyright ©2020 *Inside Higher Ed*. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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UP NEXT: How to be a Good Boss in Trying Times

### Rethinking Effective Student Learning Experiences

After 40 years studying how college affects students, and after reviewing more than 7,000 studies published since 1970, a deceptively simple question still nagged: “So, what did you learn?” The answer is lots, of course, but a more precise question has also lingered: “What day-to-day, actionable nuggets are buried in that mountain of evidence to help administrators and faculty members better educate students?” This article offers some answers.

Virtually all of the 7,000-plus studies examined activities, programs or services that administrators or faculty members provide for students in academic, co-curricular or out-of-class venues with the goal of improving student learning or development. (Here, those terms include verbal and quantitative competence; cognitive development; social, civic, religious and political attitude formation; and other outcomes.) Our books actually identified *too many* experiences that shape those various outcomes. Something pithier, definitely briefer, was needed.

I began wondering whether those shown-to-be-effective activities, programs or services shared features that might have contributed to their effectiveness. What are the *characteristics* of those widely varying experiences -- residence, faculty-peer interactions, instructional approaches, co-curricular experiences and so on -- that studies consistently show are effective in shaping so many different outcomes?

Fifty years of research indicate that educationally effective student experiences:

**Involve encounters with challenging ideas or people.** Basically, this is Newton’s First Law of Motion in action in the academic, cognitive, psychosocial, attitudinal and career-preparation dimensions of students’ postsecondary education: a body will remain at rest, or in motion in a straight line, unless compelled to change its state or direction by an outside force. In a student’s educational life, the outside force challenging the student presents ideas, beliefs, perspectives or educational environments different from those the student holds or can accept. The outside force may also be people who differ from the student in significant ways. Whatever its nature or source -- in or beyond the classroom -- if the challenge is not so minor it is barely noticed, or so overwhelming it is quickly rejected, it opens the door to broader or

deeper knowledge, to the reformation of ideas or beliefs, to the adoption of more differentiated and complex understanding.

**Require students' active engagement with the challenge.** The learner must engage with the challenge, investing energy in resolving the tension between new and old that the challenge has introduced. Over the past half century of research on college effects, the most persistent finding has been that learning is not a spectator sport. As a colleague put it: "For the turtle to advance, it must first stick its neck out." For learning to occur, students must engage the challenge meaningfully. The higher the level of engagement, the greater the educational benefit.

**Occur in supportive environments.** Educationally effective experiences are more likely in environments that stimulate exploration, examination, experimentation and risk-taking, where "failure" is acceptable, even expected. Supportive environments provide encouragement and appropriate guidance to help learners persist and succeed. Support mechanisms mediate the learner's response to a challenge, channeling that response in constructive, educationally effective ways. Whatever its forms or origins, support facilitates continuation of the learning or developmental momentum a challenge has sparked.

"Support" does not, however, mean coddling students or dumbing down what is to be learned. Support provides whatever the learner needs to engage the challenge and benefit educationally from resolving the tension the challenge created. Together, a challenge and support make an educationally effective experience possible.

**Encourage active, real-world learning.** Socrates notwithstanding, the most common teaching approaches today still involve an instructor lecturing and group discussions, often led by teaching assistants. For the most part, students play a passive role, learning primarily through memorization and recall. Beginning in the 1990s, active pedagogies began to emerge, capitalizing on students' interests and motivations for learning to involve them in their own and others' learning (e.g., working in teams and learning from one another). With active learning, students often work on real-world (or simulated) problems for which no correct answer or solution exists. Experiential approaches are more effective over all and promote such skills as problem identification, critical thinking, evaluating evidence and alternative ideas, and tolerance for ambiguity.

**Involve other people.** Student learning and development may be a solitary activity, like reading, studying, viewing art or witnessing an event. More often, however, the challenge occurs when the student engages it with others, such as peers or mentors. Some challenges may be more cumulative than catalytic, as when students adopt (or reject) peer group or other

values, attitudes and behaviors. A group may also provide support for resolving challenge-generated conflict.

**Invite or promote reflection.** This characteristic has drawn more theoretical than empirical attention, largely because of its multiple definitions, the heterogeneity of the forms and areas of its application, and the process it might entail. [Matthew J. Mayhew and other scholars](#) conclude, however, that providing “opportunities to reflect” is a vital, research-based characteristic of effective teaching and learning. Indeed, reflection is one of the specifications for service-learning courses, and one can reasonably argue it inheres in problem-based learning, living-learning communities, diversity experiences or assisting on a faculty member’s research project, all of which have a documented, positive effect on learning and development. The case for reflection’s centrality in learning and development, however, also rests on logical grounds: conceptual or behavioral change arguably requires consideration of what “new” means in the context of current knowledge.

### **A Wholly Different Perspective**

Shifting one’s focus -- from the effects of specific experiences on specific outcomes to the shared characteristics of demonstrably effective experiences -- is nontrivial, whatever the experience and whatever the outcome. The shift and the characteristics described above imply a wholly different way of thinking about how to enhance the educational impact of students’ experiences. The new perspective leads to the conclusion that whatever an administrator, faculty member or organizational unit does to promote student learning or development is likely to be effective provided it has one or more of the six characteristics described, and the more the better. Conversely, if a current or proposed activity, program or policy has none of the six characteristics, that lack casts doubt on its educational effectiveness and the strength of its claims on people’s time, energy and other resources.

The change in perspective also calls into question the value of best practices -- activities, programs or policies that may work well at one institution but be poorly suited to another institution and its students. Applying the six characteristics in thinking and decision making promotes flexibility and creativity, encouraging generation of numerous, perhaps novel, alternatives for enhancing a given educational outcome. By creating new pathways to potential solutions or enhancements, the new perspective replaces canonization of another institution’s approach with new ideas likely to be better suited to the institution where they are generated by administrators, faculty and staff members who understand the local history, culture, environment, personnel and resources. Homegrown ideas are also less likely to encounter organizational resistance to change.

This different perspective, combined with the six characteristics, has broad applicability. Assuming that educating undergraduates is the primary activity of all higher education institutions, it follows that every organizational division (academic affairs, student affairs, administration, finance and business, external relations, and so forth) and the units and people within them have some measure of direct or indirect responsibility for achieving the institution's core mission.

In the first of our two volumes of *How College Affects Students* (1991 and 2005), Ernie Pascarella and I suggested that educational effectiveness can be enhanced through "learning-centered management, a decision-making orientation that consistently and systematically takes into account the potential consequences of alternative courses of ... action for student learning." For institutions and individuals practicing "learning-centered management," the six characteristics provide a framework and criteria for operational, programmatic or policy decision making in any functional area, at any level, at any time.

The global pandemic of 2020 has transformed the multiple environments in which higher education institutions everywhere must now function, and the imperatives to adapt or wither are unlikely to go away. Pedagogies, learning venues and environments of *all* kinds (curricular, co-curricular or beyond), as well as the support units and functions on which they depend, must be reimagined and redesigned. Meaningful preservation or improvement of current levels of effectiveness in all functional areas and at all institutional levels require fundamental rethinking and creative adaptation.

For those in higher education confronting these challenges and other immediate and future institutional needs, the framework implies questions: Which of these reimagined alternatives is more likely to ensure that students will find challenges in new ideas and people? Will engage those challenges? Will receive the support necessary for learning or development? Will be actively involved in their own learning? Will work with and learn from others? Will have opportunities to reflect on what they are learning and how they are changing?

The bottom line is straightforward: *whatever* we do (whether as faculty members or academic and nonacademic administrators) to promote student learning and development promises to be effective provided it has one -- preferably all -- of the six characteristics.

Read more by

[Patrick T. Terenzini](#)

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