

# U On Research and Leadership P D A T E

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## Learning Colleges and Educational Change: An Interview with Terry O'Banion

*The following interview of Dr. Terry O'Banion, President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College, was conducted in April 2003 by Doug Gardner and Elisabeth Barnett of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at UIUC.*

**UPDATE:** Could you tell us something about your background.

**Dr. O'Banion:** I started out as a high school English teacher in a small, rural school in South Florida. I then became a dean of students at Central Florida Jr. College in 1960. This was a time when community colleges were just taking off. As you know, the '60s was our great boom period, and we were establishing community colleges at the rate of one every week around the country. I was a very fortunate person, having just come out of a Masters degree program in counseling at the University of Florida. I had a chance to become the dean of students of this small community college in central Florida at the age of 25; that's how desperate colleges were then for administrators! I was a green kid from the sticks who had not even driven a car out of my county when I went off to college. I really had little background or understanding of the larger world and found myself in a wonderful position to learn at a very rapid rate, which I did.

I had an extraordinarily good mentor in the college president, Joe Fordyce, who was a friend of mine. I had worked with him as an undergraduate student at the University of Florida. He took me under his tutelage and really gave me lots of opportunities to grow and expand. We were at Central Florida for about three years. At the same time I was working on my doctorate in higher education at Florida State University at Tallahassee. Then Joe and I moved to Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida in 1964 and used it as a laboratory for trying out some of our key ideas about education. We had some very strong ideas about how education ought to be, and we created a "learning college for the 20th century."

Santa Fe became an extraordinary institution that received a lot of national acclaim. Just to give you an idea, we never organized the faculty into departments. They were always organized into units, and they still are today. There are 16 faculty members in each unit, representing every discipline and every vocational area working as a team to achieve the goals of the college. We had a strong statement, "The Santa Fe Commitment," that defined our core values regarding human nature and educational processes, and we used that statement of values as the basis for selecting all faculty and staff. We wanted people with a strong commitment to these core values that are reflected today in the principles of the learning college.

### **Editor's Note:**

*This issue of UPDATE focuses on student learning in community colleges. We especially want to highlight the Learning College movement and its important contributions to the way we frame our thinking about education in general, as well as the ways we assess student achievement.*

*This issue and back issues of UPDATE can be found on the web at:  
<http://ocrl.ed.uiuc.edu>.*

### **This issue features:**

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So these ideas were established a long time ago. The learning college idea is actually a continuation of a set of long-standing ideas that surface every decade or so. They certainly surfaced in John Dewey's progressive education. They surfaced again in the humanistic education movement of the '60s, and that's the movement that Joe Fordyce and I were grounded in. I was schooled in that philosophy at the University of Florida. My professorial mentor was Arthur Combs who introduced me personally to Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Can you imagine a hick like me having dinner at Combs's home with just Combs and Maslow, and then on another occasion with Combs and Rogers? These were the people who formed my perspectives on the educational process, and we utilized their theories to create Santa Fe Community College. It is no surprise that my first book was "The Shared Journey: An Introduction to Encounter" and that one of the first courses I taught at Illinois was on Humanistic Education.

We had no 'Fs' at Santa Fe. We had an A, B, C grading system, and if students weren't successful, they continued until they were successful. We had learning communities which are very popular today. All our courses were designed around behavioral objectives, and we urged all faculty to create opportunities for active and collaborative learning. The interest in learning-centered education today reflects, in part, what occurred at Santa Fe and similar colleges in the '60s

While helping Joe Fordyce to found Santa Fe I was completing a dissertation that involved a national study of an ideal program to prepare college student personnel administrators. One of the key people on my committee was Miriam Sheldon, famous dean of women at the University of Illinois. During that process Miriam became fascinated by this Florida "Cracker" and urged me to come to Illinois to join a new higher education program.

Around 1967 the state of Illinois had finally made a commitment to create a statewide system of community colleges. As I recall, part of that commitment involved a higher education program at the University of Illinois with a specialization in the community college. Miriam Sheldon was connected with the program that included Joanne Fley in student personnel and Ernie Anderson in community colleges. I went for an interview with the Dean of the College of Education, Rupert Evans. I was fascinated by the possibility of becoming a professor because I thought I could have more influence as a professor than as a dean of a community college. I was also warmly welcomed by the fac-

ulty in the Counseling Department because of my background in Humanistic Education and counseling. So in 1967 I came to the U of I as an assistant professor of higher education whose special interest was the community college and Humanistic Education.

The program included some great professors, but it never quite got off the ground. The program was never very well supported by the university. I worked diligently across the state of Illinois. Three community college presidents in Illinois were doctoral students of mine: Terry Ludwig at Shawnee is still working, Chuck Novak has retired from Richland, and Larry Huffman has retired from Kankakee. They were wonderful young men and had as much influence on me as I had on them. I addressed all kinds of state conventions in Illinois. I probably consulted at half of the community colleges in the state. When I first came to Illinois I had published one article. In five years I became a full professor, so you can imagine what I did in those five years. I published lots of articles, I got grants, I did research, and I wrote a book or two. I had a wonderful group of graduate students.

After five years, Berkeley asked me to be a visiting professor for a year to create a college student personnel program. I fell in love with California and decided I could not die in a cornfield. I wrote an infamous poem called *God Don't Let me Die in a Cornfield*, and some friends in Illinois still pass that poem around. It's a statement of the difficulty of living in the flat lands of Illinois—sandwiched between the cold black earth and the cold gray sky. I decided I was going to leave Illinois, even though I had become a full professor with lifetime tenure at a Big 10 university, and loved the work. I sat down with my wife and we looked at places we wanted to live and California was one of them. Very shortly thereafter, I was selected as the President of the League for Innovation in the Community College and in 1975 moved to LA. After 23 years with the League, I retired in December 1999, in time to start a new millennium. These days, I'm working more than I ever did. I have four contracts with four different national firms. It's very exciting stuff and I greatly enjoy it.

**UPDATE:** Can you tell us more about how you drew from all your experiences to develop the Learning College concept.

**Dr. O'Banion:** I think there are three basic skills or driving forces in my life that have guided everything that I have accomplished:

1. First, education for me was my religion. Humanistic education in particular was a secular religion for me. Very early I had established a strong value-base in terms of what I thought education should be and that has stayed with me for my entire life.
2. Secondly, I think I have pretty good conceptual skills and am able to pull disjointed ideas together to create new, practical, and simple constructs that help explain things. I don't know where that skill comes from, probably from my early training in English and writing. If you're a pretty good writer, you have to have good conceptual skills. I think I know how to connect the dots. One of my friends says that I am a good "mesher."
3. Finally, I think I have good entrepreneurial skills. I dream big dreams and I can get support for making them happen. I have a pretty good vision of the possibilities in education, and I think I have the practical and entrepreneurial skills to put them into practice. One of the reasons I've been so successful in the League is that I know how to design projects, and I know how to create the political climate to get funding for them. During my time in the League, I garnered over \$50 million dollars in support for projects. Another friend calls me a Scholar-Entrepreneur.

**UPDATE: What led you to believe that a learning-focused college was needed?**

**Dr. O'Banion:** I was really impressed with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. That was one of the most substantive national expressions recognizing that we were in real trouble with education in this country. The National Commission on Excellence, as you remember, talked about "a rising tide of mediocrity." This was 1983. I was at the League for Innovation—very involved in national activities and reform efforts—and I was very impressed with the recommendations in that report. I stayed tuned to what followed.

After ten years of reform efforts, from 1983 to 1993, the critics concluded that we were worse off after years of education reform than we were in the beginning. That really caught my attention. Then there was another report in 1993 called *The American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*. That higher education report said the same thing—we are in deep trouble as a society—we are not sure what to do about all this failure. We had tried a variety of reforms—we actually spent 50% more on education between 1983 and 1993 than we had the previous decade—and after

ten years we were worse off than we were at the beginning. That made me begin to think, as many others were saying, that we needed a re-conceptualization of the educational enterprise. I began looking at the community college and realized that we were focused almost entirely on teaching rather than learning. I had read in the *American Imperative* that if we were going to reform education we would have to overhaul the curricular, organizational, and social architecture of education and place learning first. Now that really rang a bell with me—one of those "ah-hah" moments. I began talking and writing about placing learning first in policy, program, practice, and in the way we use our personnel. And I discovered that a handful of community colleges already embraced these ideas. *A Learning College for the 21st Century* became a blueprint for the ideas I had struggled with for decades and that a small group of community colleges had been trying to implement more recently. One of the last grants I got at the League was one for \$1.4 million to work with twelve Vanguard Learning Colleges to create models of learning-centered education.

**UPDATE: What do you think is the best way to evaluate Learning College outcomes and determine whether a college is on-track to becoming a Learning College?**

**Dr. O'Banion:** There are two key issues here:

1. It's very difficult for an institution to become a Learning College unless there is an institution-wide commitment to values related to placing learning first, along with strong leadership from presidents and key leaders, including unions. It's very hard for colleges to transform themselves into Learning Colleges because colleges are used to looking at every new innovation or idea that comes along and adapting a portion of it. They don't change very much. We saw that with TQM. We saw that with humanistic education, with accountability measures, with assessment measures, with technology. Colleges have an uncanny ability to ingest a new idea, like an amoeba, without changing themselves very much. The Learning College requires a commitment to total transformation of the institution in which programs, practices, policies, and personnel responsibilities are about placing learning first. We're talking about major institutional change, and that is a very long row to hoe for institutions.
2. The second issue relates to the best way to evaluate whether a college has become successful at placing learning first. We may be

able to improve upon this in the future, but for the moment, the best way to evaluate that is to create learning outcomes for every course, every program, and for the entire institution. These learning outcomes then provide a template by which the institution evaluates the learning of every student in every learning experience in which students are involved. These can then be extrapolated upward to evaluate the success of the institution. We've got to replace the old institutional effectiveness indicators with new indicators of success related to learning outcomes for every course, and we have to measure what this student has learned and what this student can do as a result of that learning. That has not been the focus in the past, and we have these primitive mechanisms called grades which we use as indicators of student learning. That just won't cut it for the 21st century.

**UPDATE: Going back to whole college or whole system reform—what does it take to carry out a whole system reform?**

**Dr. O'Banion:** It takes a strong commitment from the college president, the board of trustees, and key faculty leaders. It takes an understanding of what learning can be. It takes an understanding of how to change an institution that was designed for an agricultural and industrial economy. It takes a lot of understanding on the part of leaders about the change process. It requires a commitment to a "culture of evidence" rather than, as Kay McClenney says, a "culture of anecdote." It requires a ten year commitment to even become grounded in the process. Frankly most community college leaders don't have the ability or the time or the interest to make that transformation become a reality. College leaders are so engaged in so many complex problems these days that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to focus on the idea of transforming their institutions into more learning-centered enterprises. I think there's a great deal of interest. There are probably 100 or maybe even 200 community colleges working toward that end, but it's a long haul.

**UPDATE: Looking to the future, what is it going to take to sustain the Learning College reform, to carry the momentum into the next decade and further?**

**Dr. O'Banion:** Two things. First, it will take some real examples of success in the colleges that have made a deep commitment to this idea. We're beginning to see some of those examples. Take a look at the community college of Denver which

has one of the longest commitments—about 15 years—to the Learning College idea. They have made extraordinarily significant changes in the success of their at-risk students. A book by John and Suanne Roueche has been written about the Community College of Denver and its success with at-risk students. In short, over a ten-year period, the at-risk student population at the College doubled so that over 50% of their students are at risk. During that same period of time, the graduation rate of that at-risk student population tripled. That's an absolute miracle. No college in the country has ever accomplished what they have done. They have done that because they are committed to the Learning College principles. These kinds of outstanding success stories will help to drive continued interest in the Learning College.

Second, I expect that we will continue to get a lot of information about the failure of traditional education. That may prompt colleges to look at new models of education. Publications and studies are going to continue to emerge over the next decade or so telling us that education is a failing enterprise. Sometimes that will prompt transformation.

**UPDATE: What do you feel are the most significant challenges facing the community college and how do you think that community colleges will evolve?**

**Dr. O'Banion:** Community colleges are going through mission creep, and over the next ten years they are going to have to deal with questions about what the mission really is. A major aspect of this is the new addition of bachelor's degrees in community colleges. That will probably change the nature of the community college as substantively as any other factor.

The community college has already become the premier purveyor of workforce training in the U.S. and is likely to continue to develop in this direction. The League recently received a \$12.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create national models of college and career transition between high schools and community colleges. I'm involved as one of the evaluators of the project. Community colleges will continue to evolve in their roles in workforce training. I have no idea what forms this will take, but it will be exciting and major.

I don't know when the breakthrough will come in our commitment to remedial education. We are the last institutions in higher education that are really serious about remedial and developmental educa-

tion. It is the toughest task in all of higher education and someone has to do it. I don't know whether or not the community colleges will have a breakthrough in which they figure out how to do it appropriately. Alternatively, they might shuck this mission off and hand it over to another institution because they have failed to accomplish it adequately. I don't know what will happen in that arena, but I think it will be one of the issues community colleges will struggle with as they continue to evolve over the next 10 to 20 years.

Finally, we are currently facing a major crisis in leadership. We do not have programs to prepare enough new doctoral students to become the future presidents, vice presidents, and program leaders that we need. Unless something is done to address that situation, we are going to be in great trouble. The issues are harder, the enterprise is more complex, and we are spending fewer resources

preparing leaders today than we did in 1960. I have just been appointed Director of the Community College Leadership Program for Walden University charged with creating a new and innovative program to address the leadership crisis. I thought I had retired, but I have discovered that I only retired from the League. The opportunity to work with good colleagues to create this new venture in leadership makes the juices flow, so I am off to my next great adventure in community college land. ♦

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## Assessment of Student Academic Achievement Using Student Learning Outcomes

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*by Jerrilyn Brewer and Jane Rada*

**W**estern Wisconsin Technical College (WWTC) uses the Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence Framework to guide its continuous quality improvement efforts. This framework is designed to help organizations set directions and create a student-focused, learning-oriented culture, clear and visible values, and high expectations. Learning-centered education places the focus of education on learning and on the real needs of students (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2003).

One characteristic of learning-centered education that also parallels the accreditation requirements set forth by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association (NCA) is a summative assessment of student learning to measure progress against key, relevant, external standards and norms regarding what students should know and be able to do upon the completion of their educational programs. In addition to using the Baldrige Education Criteria to guide its continuous quality improvement efforts, WWTC was one of the charter members of the HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).

AQIP infuses the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities by providing an alternative process through which an already-accredited institution can maintain its accreditation. A major focus of AQIP is its first criterion: *Helping Students Learn*. This criterion identifies student learning as the shared purpose of all higher education organizations and addresses the ways that the entire institution contributes to student learning and development (Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, 2002).

WWTC submitted its Assessment Plan to the HLC in June 1995. Essential to this plan was the college's Student Success Model that clearly identified students' learning as one of the key indicators of their success at the college. Components that were central to the plan included assessment of student attainment of general learning outcomes and occupation-specific outcomes upon program completion. This focus on documenting student achievement is at the core of the WWTC mission statement: *WWTC is committed to excellence in learning, continuous improvement, student success, employer satisfaction, and responsiveness to the Western District.*

## Exit Assessment of the Student Learning Outcomes

To address the AQIP criterion Helping Students Learn, WWTC measures student learning by assessing a set of student learning outcomes. These outcomes, validated by advisory committees, are comprised of program-specific and general learning outcomes. Six **general learning outcomes** reflect the skills and attitudes that all graduates are expected to achieve; these outcomes are integrated into courses and overall program curricula. **Program-specific outcomes** reflect mastery of knowledge appropriate to the program completed.

Program faculty currently use a web-based exit assessment process to maintain records of student learning outcomes for their program, report student learning results, and generate program reports. Data collection has evolved from a paper-based format including only faculty assessment of student academic achievement in 1999 to a computer-based compilation of faculty, student, and employer results beginning in Spring 2001. These data are obtained by assessing the attainment of both program-specific and general learning outcomes of graduates in associate degree programs, technical diploma programs, and certificate offerings. The three forms of feedback provide triangulated data that allow program faculty to perform gap analysis among faculty, student, and employer perceptions of student achievement at the program level. Faculty use this information for continuous improvement of program curricula and to provide input into short- and long-term program planning.

The Student Learning Outcomes are available on each program web page and can be accessed from the site <http://www.wwtc.edu/wwtcstudents/programsmenu.asp>.

### On-Line Assessment Process (Faculty, Student, and Employer Assessments)

The on-line process that was implemented in Spring 2003 to collect assessment results and maintain the student learning outcomes database is described below:

- Program faculty assess student achievement of the learning outcomes by reporting the number of students who do/do not demonstrate achievement of each outcome according to the criteria identified.
- Employers assess achievement by reporting the number of recently hired graduates who

do/do not demonstrate entry-level competence for each of the identified outcomes.

- Students assess achievement by self-reporting whether they believe they can demonstrate competence for each of the outcomes.
- Assessment Data Reports are generated at the Program, Division, and College level. Each program receives feedback specific to their program and each Instructional Division receives aggregated program results. In addition, an aggregate College report of student learning results is generated.
- Overall College Student Learning Results for 1999-2002 are available at the following website: [www.wwtc.edu/ess/assessmtslo.asp](http://www.wwtc.edu/ess/assessmtslo.asp).

The exit assessment process is decentralized and deployed at the division/program level. The database is designed to provide individual programs with access to their student learning outcomes to update information and collect and report program exit assessment results. Each Instructional Division has administrative access to each program's outcomes. Staff members in Educational Support Services have administrative access to all programs' student learning outcomes and can generate college-wide reports.

Beginning in Summer 2003, programs will be able to generate individual program reports showing faculty, student, and employer results including feedback comments and Instructional Divisions will be able to aggregate results to generate Divisional reports.

The on-line student outcomes assessment process provides a consistent framework for deployment of WWTC's Assessment Plan.

To learn more about Assessment of Student Academic Achievement at WWTC, access <http://www.wwtc.edu/ess/assessmt.asp> or contact the authors. ♦

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## The Voyage of the Seven “C’s”: Moraine Valley Community College at the Vanguard of Learning

by Joann Wright

**M**oraine Valley Community College set sail in 2000 on a voyage of the seven “C’s”, a journey that over the next three years would strengthen the college’s commitment to Learning College principles and promoting and supporting student success. Selected by the League for Innovation in the Community College as one of twelve Vanguard Learning Colleges in North America, and the only such college in Illinois, Moraine Valley worked to showcase and exchange leadership strategies, programs, and practices with the other members of the Vanguard College Consortium.

The Learning College Project was funded by the Pew Foundation to forge a network of community colleges committed to learning-centered concepts, which could model programs and practical applications for colleges around the world. Each college was guided by five Vanguard College themes—*Staff Recruitment and Development, Technology, Learning Outcomes, Underprepared Students, and Organizational Culture*. These were rooted in the philosophy of Learning College principles as authored by Dr. Terry O’Banion in 1997 to create, expand, improve, and assess student learning.

Moraine Valley Community College, the state’s fifth largest community college with nearly 15,000 credit students, is situated on 300 acres about 25 miles southwest of downtown Chicago. The district serves 26 culturally and economically diverse communities and offers credit and noncredit classes at two comprehensive off-campus centers as well as three other sites. Moraine’s evolution as a Learning College is expressed in its mission and promise statements, the strategic plan and institutional priorities, and manifested in the five core objectives defined by the Learning College Project. Moraine Valley promises “to provide a student-centered environment and to focus all college staff and resources in support of student learning, student development and student success.”

Well known as a student-centered college, Moraine has emphasized this philosophy through es-

sential elements known as the seven C’s: **Challenge, Collaboration, Collegiality, Commitment, Communication, Consensus, and Core Values – Respect, Integrity, Fairness, and Responsibility**. Each “C” represents an aspect of Moraine Valley’s effort to operate as a learning-centered institution to improve student success:

**Challenge:** The challenge to focus on the improvement of all aspects of instruction, programs, services and operations as a continuous effort has enriched the learning climate. Through an annual institutional effectiveness process, regular reports on student learning outcomes and program effectiveness have become the basis for continual improvement of teaching and learning efforts. Innovative teaching methods have become second nature and include asynchronous learning and web-assisted classes.

**Collaboration:** Collaboration has provided opportunities to better serve populations in every community within the college district. Through partnerships with local high schools, a fire district, United Parcel Service, CEDA/Robbins, and a local hospital, classes are offered during the morning and evening to support various learners’ needs, with adjustments made for location and time constraints, and academic or second language preparedness.

**Collegiality:** Faculty, staff and the community have embraced collegiality through participation in focus sessions to help create the college’s 2002-2005 Strategic Plan. Focusing on the improvement and expansion of student learning has helped the Human Resources staff in developing a management training and career development program for employees. This program helped staff understand and embrace the concepts and principles of the learning college.

**Commitment:** The commitment to student learning prompted the college to expand curriculum offerings by adding new courses and certificate programs, promoting quick turn-around times for individual employment needs, and including new

teaching and learning methodologies. Faculty and staff contributed prominently to freshman student success by providing the necessary tools to succeed in higher education through mandatory college placement testing, online new student orientation, and a freshman experience course called COL 101- Changes, Challenges, Choices.

**Communication:** Communication ensures that new students find the college friendly and welcoming. During the first two days of the fall and spring semester, faculty and staff set up information stations throughout the campus. Expansion of college communication for students, the community, and the college has occurred through the MVCC web site. The site provides all departments with a venue to share information about programs, new developments, and all college-related information.

**Consensus:** Consensus involves coming together as a learning community to consider issues that support learning such as a college-wide commitment to use Blackboard as the course management tool, and endorsing the budget, planning and evaluation system as part of the advancement of learning for all students.

**Core Values – Respect, Integrity, Fairness, and Responsibility:** Core values create a basic foundation for learning that recognizes and promotes civility, respect and responsibility for one's actions and behaviors as part of the life-long learning process.

By focusing on student success as expressed through the seven C's, the college faculty and staff became the creators and managers of a plan using the five Vanguard Project objectives as a guide to putting learning first.

*Learning Outcomes.* New students' integration into the college was enhanced by implementing structured experiences and developing or redesigning programs and services to meet their needs. For example, to support a successful transition to college for full-time freshman students, the college created a mandatory freshman experience course that helps students to develop the attitudes, behaviors and skills necessary for college success and provides ongoing instructor support throughout the critical first semester. In addition, the implementation of an Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment of Student Academic Achievement Plan ties the college's mission, strategic directions, and institutional priorities with the college's planning process, budget, and academic year objectives to foster student-centered learning.

*Organizational Culture.* Providing a learning community that fosters civility and respect for diverse views and cultures is embedded in every fiber of the culture at Moraine Valley. This philosophy is demonstrated in the increased efforts to foster an educational environment where all individuals are welcomed and accepted. Connectivity, a sense of community, and pride are enhanced among students and employees through college events and programs, ceremonies, and meetings.

*Underserved Students.* The college was committed to proactive efforts to meet learners at their current stage of development. This required the institutionalization of mandatory assessment and placement testing for all students registering for twelve or more credit hours and for any students enrolling in a composition or mathematics courses. To ensure that students would be able to take tests at their convenience, the college testing center moved to a computerized assessment lab with testing on a walk-in basis throughout the year. The creation of a faculty- and staff-to-student mentoring program called DREAM (Directing Results Through Educational and Academic Mentoring) helps students overcome obstacles, share experiences, and build relationships with the college community. Additionally, the college established a full-service off-campus center in a historically underserved minority community within the district.

*Selecting and Developing Staff.* The college's Faculty Expectation Statement was adopted in 2002 to underscore the role of the faculty in facilitating activities that promote student success and life-long learning. It states that, "Each faculty member will cultivate and engage in collaborative working relationships as an active partner in the shared governance of the college's learning community." The New Faculty Orientation Program helps to acculturate new faculty into the college environment. The three-year orientation process includes in-depth information about the college, a mentor for each new faculty member, and seminars and workshops devoted to the improvement of instructional skills and course delivery. The new Center for Teaching and Learning provides leadership for professional development programs for faculty.

*Technology.* Learning Challenge grants were created to assist faculty to enhance student learning through the use of technology and interactive experiences. The availability of Internet technologies on campus allowed the establishment of a Virtual College for online class delivery. It also opened the door for the development of online support services that include advisement, regis-



tration, textbook purchases, library resources, readiness assessment, tutoring, and the college's first online certificate in e-commerce. The Counseling and Academic Advising Centers developed a Career and Educational Planning Lab that assists students in the use of online career and educational planning resources. With the development of the Online Student Orientation and Registration web site, students have access to a self-paced, interactive, Internet-based module that supports learning about college programs, services, and registration processes.

Moraine's journey of the seven C's and its transformation into a learning-centered college has garnered several best practice awards from national organizations such as the National Council of Stu-

dent Development (NCSDE) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). In March 2003, Moraine Valley Community College and the other Vanguard colleges were recipients of the PBS O'Banion Prize, an award that is jointly sponsored by PBS Adult Learning Service and the League for Innovation in the Community College. The award acknowledged the visionary and transformational endeavors of all twelve colleges as they worked to make the Learning College a reality on their campuses. ♦

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## Supporting Student Learning at Joliet Junior College's Veterinary Medical Technician Program

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by Scott Keller

*Editor's note: The Office of Community College Research and Leadership at UIUC is a partner in the Exemplary Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs project of the National Dissemination Center for Career and Technical Education. The project's purpose is to identify outstanding secondary and postsecondary CTE programs around the country that can serve as models for others. In 2002, the Veterinary Technology Program at Joliet Junior College was the only one in the nation to receive the designation as "Promising" at the postsecondary level. We are proud to highlight this program's accomplishments related to ensuring student success!*

**J**oliet Junior College's (JJC) Veterinary Medical Technician program is new when compared to the college itself, which celebrated its centennial year in 2001. The program is the newer of two Illinois Veterinary Technician programs, while the College is the oldest public community college in the country. Despite its young age, the Veterinary Medical Technician program at JJC has received national recognition as a Promising Career and Technical Education Program by the National Dissemination Center for Career and Technical Education, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Rigorous criteria were used to select four programs from over 160 nominated programs from around the nation, with a particular interest in identifying replicable practices. Some of these are highlighted.

### The Veterinary Medical Technician Program

Animal ownership has been climbing since the mid 1980's and the demand for veterinary care is greater now than it has ever been. This growth has outpaced the supply of veterinarians and veterinary nurses, who are called Veterinary Technicians. Joliet Junior College developed its Veterinary Medical Technology Program in response to requests from local veterinarians. The program was established following criteria set forth by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and began serving students in August of 1999.

Many factors contributed to the success of our program right from the start. The program ben-

efited from key support from local and statewide veterinary associations. Colleagues from a seasoned and successful veterinary technician program at Parkland College provided assistance and guidance for a smooth start. The planning and preparation that went into the development of the program was long and thorough. Our advisory committee, consisting of veterinarians, technicians, and educators, shared their talents and experience to help design a veterinary technician facility, hire qualified faculty, and outline a curriculum. The college's Board of Trustees and administration provided support, not the least of which was \$2.7 million for equipment and facilities.

The result is a state of the art facility with two "smart" classrooms containing LCD projectors for presenting videos, digital presentations, and Internet access. Additionally, live video feeds from the operating room can be projected in one of the "smart" classrooms. The program's labs are designed to provide hands-on experience with equipment found currently in practice. Foreseeing the needs of currently working students, we scheduled both a day and an evening program. It is very unique for a veterinary technician program, and probably any allied health program, to offer both day and evening sections. The evening students take the same courses and loads as the day students, so that they complete the program in the same two-year time frame as the day students.

It has been our mission from the start to provide a quality education that is affordable and accessible to everyone. We combine classroom and on site clinical experience for a wide range of learning opportunities. Students enjoy the opportunity to attend laboratories in area barns and stables in one class, and then visit veterinary emergency clinics in another. Our curriculum emphasizes hands-on, real world applications of knowledge and skills covered in the classroom. That is why we have partnerships with animal clinics, universities, pharmaceutical companies, and laboratories where we place students for externships twice within our curriculum. This practical preparation usually results in positive survey results from employing veterinarians. The positive preparation is also reflected in the results of the student's national board exams. All of our graduates who have taken the national board exams to this point have been 100% successful in passing. The national average is about 80%.

### **Student Retention**

Retention of students is a big part of any program's—or college's—goals. Our program is

no exception. Our retention over the first three years has been approximately 50%. These completion rates may appear very low to most observers. A high attrition rate was predicted for this program by an experienced Veterinary Technician program director who believed that with an open enrollment policy, 50% attrition would be expected. Even though this attrition rate is predictable and even typical, we do not find it acceptable. We have instituted several changes to increase retention, while attempting not to sacrifice program content and quality.

It became apparent from the first day of classes in August 1999 that math would challenge many of our students. To assess the math abilities of our new students, a quiz of basic math was given on their very first day in the program. Nearly 25% of the students did not know where the tenths or hundredths decimal place was, and an even greater number of students could not add, subtract, or multiply fractions. We had not expected this because a proficiency level of at least elementary algebra was required in order for them to enroll. So, our Math for Vet Techs course, VET 130, began by teaching these basics and extra tutoring was also made available. In a further effort to retain students, the curriculum was re-arranged to place classes like Pharmacology, which requires a great deal of math for calculating dosages, in the second semester rather than in the first semester.

It became clear as early as the program's first semester that a significant number of students also leave the program for non-academic reasons. Some students leave for medical reasons, personal reasons like failure of a family business or a spouse losing a job. Attrition due to these factors is difficult to overcome. However, students have also left the program for reasons that stem from their expectations not being met. Many potential students view veterinary technology as a way to work the animals they "love." Television channels like *Animal Planet* present shows on animal care that glorify the veterinary medical field. Our students clearly needed a reality check.

We now have all of the students who have been accepted into the next year's class attend a group orientation several months prior to the start of fall classes. Of course, we cover the typical textbooks, supplies to buy, introduction of faculty, etc. We also use this time to explain the rigors of the program. I share two comments with them: "Veterinary medicine is not just puppies and kitten, but also blood and guts," and "Students may 'love' animals too much to be a veterinary technician." Sometimes for the greater good of the animals, it is

necessary to do unpleasant or difficult procedures like administering injections, rectal exams, surgery, or even euthanasia. This can be difficult for some students who have expectations without experience. I also say to the potential students that, while this program is intense, the rewards can be immense. Additionally, we have developed a vet tech club that involves the students outside of class and encourages continued participation in a more relaxed and social way.

At a meeting of our advisory committee in October 2002, we asked for some input on how to better prepare newly enrolled veterinary technician students. The consensus was to require veterinary experience before enrollment. They also recommended increasing the math proficiency and entry requirements before enrolling students in the program. Based on these recommendations, applicants must now have at least 100 hours of veterinary experience or complete a newly introduced class titled *Intro to Veterinary Technology*. We are currently reviewing our math options, and will determine what math level would be suitable for future incoming students. These modifications for enrollment should help applicants' expectations to be more in line with the reality of life as a veterinary technician student.

Another move we made to improve student completion rates deals with re-admitting students. Any student removed from the program can request re-admission. However, to help these students succeed the second time around, we encourage them to help themselves first. We require students to improve their study skills and also to gain a realistic view of the field of veterinary medicine through actual experience working with a veterinarian. We suggest that they take the College's GSD 100 course or document other study skills improvement activities. Verification of veterinary experience is also required.

### Assessment

In order to enhance student learning and success, we do a lot of assessment of current and past student outcomes. The assessment tools we use can be the standard quizzes, exams, presentations, and written assignments used by most classes. However, completely assessing a veterinary technician student's abilities also requires skills tests, evaluation of externship site performance, and employer feedback. The best indicator of success is good

student performance on the expected skills and tasks of an entry-level veterinary technician. We have practical exams or skills tests associated with nearly every laboratory course to assess students while they are currently enrolled. At externship sites, visiting faculty members assess the student and garner feedback from the on site supervisor every 2-3 weeks. Each externship ends with written evaluations by the student and the supervisor of the experience.

Upon graduation, students are sent surveys that evaluate the program, class-by-class and instructor-by-instructor. The perspectives of former students on their readiness for real world work are very helpful to us in improving the program. By learning the strengths and weaknesses of the program in light of students' and employers' expectations, we can provide Veterinary Technician graduates who can become part of a valued health care team right away.

Another very valuable assessment tool is the National Board exam for veterinary technicians. Whenever you can compare your outcomes with a national exam or survey you will have a better understanding of where changes can be made. However, we remind ourselves all of the time that, despite the importance of the board exam, we are not preparing the students just to take an exam. We are preparing them to succeed in the workplace. Sometimes students do not see beyond the exam at the end of the program. The two required externships help focus students on what is really important—their ability to care for their patients.

### Conclusion

By utilizing the above resources we have progressively made improvements in the quality of the education we offer. The results can be seen in the success of our students and the national recognition we have received. Yet, this is no time to rest on our laurels. We are looking into other ways to track retention, assess student outcomes, and incorporate innovative teaching methods. Someone once told me that the truly educated never stop learning. We are having a great time learning. ♦

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**UPDATE is moving to an electronic-only format beginning with the Fall 2003 issue! To be absolutely sure that you continue to receive your copy, please send the following to [liliff@uiuc.edu](mailto:liliff@uiuc.edu).**

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