



Finding the Why: Personalizing Learning in Higher Education (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 145)

Watts, Margit Misangyi, ed.
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Book Review

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Whenever I'm asked, "How are your classes going?" my answer traditionally has been, "Ask the students." As more faculty members shift their pedagogy to a student-centered learning, their focus must include not only delivering the content but also inviting students to explore the why of education. The articles in *Finding the Why: Personalizing Learning in Higher Education* edited by Margit Misangyi Watts (sic), identify key ways to encourage students to discover the purpose of higher education as more than training for a career. While many of the articles describe institutional changes that have been developed to address the student success beyond the university, the principles behind such designs can be incorporated by individual faculty members in approaching how to present their courses' content.

One of the key principles is to encourage students to identify the applicability of a liberal-arts education to professional courses. One means by which this can be accomplished is described in "Integrative Learning: Making Liberal Education Purposeful, Personal, and Practical." Ann Ferren and Chad Anderson describe several examples from various colleges that integrate learning across curricula and are adaptable even for larger institutions, such as designing opportunities for students to integrate curricula using collaborative projects, partnerships with the local community for service-learning, and making connections among disciplines. Furthermore, in "Project-Based Learning in Colleges of Business: Is It Enough to Develop Educated Graduates?" Penny Smith and Lindsey Gibbon note that business leaders are seeking qualities such as critical thinking skills, identifying and using creative problem solving, and communicating effectively. They note that "for business schools to graduate 'well-educated' students, they must forge and engage entire academic villages" (43) in preparing business

students for their careers.

Another important component of finding the why requires understanding the challenges in culture that affect the attitudes impacting student-centered education. Several of the chapters incorporate strategies to change the culture at institutions themselves to meet the ongoing challenges to student success. Among such recommendations are faculty “talking to students in a way that is supportive and encouraging” (29) or engaging in the six “P’s” of place, preparation, pathways, plan, purpose, and personal connection as explained by Sanford Shugart in “Why Higher Education: Lessons Learned in a Learner-Centered College.”

While many of the articles describe specific activities involving changes within the entire institution, such as integrative classes or designing a community college’s plan from its inception, the authors do challenge individual faculty to incorporate helping students find the why within their particular courses. The key to student success in many of the articles involves engaging students individually, not just collectively. Therefore, some of the strategies discussed can be applied by individual faculty on a smaller scale. While my answer to “How are your classes going?” may be the same, my intentionality within my course itself should have students answering in the positive.

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