



It's a Cultural Thing: Helping College Students Successfully Navigate the Higher Education Landscape

Jenny Wells¹, Linda Oshita¹

Abstract

In the future, American higher education will likely face a paradigm shift. The singular focus on teaching discipline-specific knowledge and skills may broaden to include a model that also incorporates teaching higher education cultural expectations that enable students to be successful. The impetus for this shift is, in part, due to the changing college student demographics. Students who were from historically under-represented backgrounds (e.g., first-generation college students, women, ethnic minorities) now constitute a large segment of students enrolled in higher education [13]. In addition, research indicates many students; particularly those from under-represented and under-served populations who enter higher education are unprepared for the academic and social demands [12]. This change in demographics, in addition to feedback from business and professional communities concerned about the lack of preparedness of college graduates upon hire, is necessitating this shift. The development and implementation of institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) – the knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind - that students are expected to acquire at institutions of higher education can make the cultural expectations of higher education more explicit. All higher education institutional levels play a critical role in moving ILOs from paper to practice. Acknowledgement of the importance of ILOs on the part of administration, departments, and individual faculty serves an important function to ensure that students are acquiring these necessary skills. A coordinated effort of developing and establishing an institutional culture that embodies the ILOs is attainable. Implementation ideas to make the process manageable are presented for consideration.

1. Introduction

Higher education administrators in the United States have been concerned with the low graduation rates of their institutions. In 2013, the graduation rate for students who obtained their first four-year degree at American institutions of higher education (IHEs) was 59% [15]. In other words, only a little over half of students who started a four-year degree program actually graduated.

Research suggests academic ability is just one factor in college success. Clearly, a certain level of academic ability (e.g., reading, writing) is critical to successfully completing college courses. However, extant literature also suggests that one must also understand and successfully navigate the culture of higher education. For those who lack this understanding, developing these cultural knowledge and behaviors is also important for their college success.

2. The culture of higher education

Culture is defined as “shared attitudes or patterns of behaviors characteristic of a particular group or collective that distinguishes it from another” [13]. To be successful, students must understand the distinct cultural expectations of higher education [8] [9] [12] [11]. Although professors and other higher education faculty have specific expectations for student behavior, these expectations are not always directly communicated to students [8].

One cultural expectation in higher education is student independence. For example, professors expect students will independently seek help if they experience difficulty. This seemingly simple action of help seeking is underscored by knowing culturally appropriate ways of going about the task. Students must know how to approach the professor and how to appropriately communicate their difficulty. Students who do not know or understand the cultural expectations may experience difficulty that can erode their self-confidence and impede their progress toward college completion [2]. Alternatively, students who understand and demonstrate appropriate higher education cultural behaviors are more likely to experience success and complete their degrees.

¹ University of Hawai'i at Manoa, United States of America



The recognition of these cultural attributes and the capacity to assess them has become a global concern [4]. If IHEs develop the requisite cultural skills and behaviors required for college success in their students, they are providing them with the opportunity to learn and develop skills that can be applied across many contexts. Increasingly, higher education cultural competencies are remarkably similar to those required for employability and success beyond college. There is indication that these generic attitudes, skills and behaviors that students require could be classified as critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understandings, and written communication [3]. However, this leaves IHEs faced with the challenge of not only preparing their students with discipline-specific knowledge; but also, with the development of these generic, transferable skills [4].

IHEs that persist with a continued focus on academic prowess as the only indicator of college success may put many students, particularly those lacking in higher education cultural acumen, at a disadvantage [11]. In an effort to better support the student community, IHEs may need to look past the antiquated practice of looking at academic performance as the only indicator of success and instead, re-examine institution-wide policies to better support students in learning the culture of higher education. the recognition of these cultural attributes and the capacity to assess them.

3. Institutional learning outcomes for higher education

In 2005, the American Council of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) organized Liberal Education America's Promise (LEAP), a committee made up of leaders in education, business, and policy. LEAP was tasked to examine ways to make higher education better at preparing students for living and working in the 21st century. LEAP identified four institutional outcomes – the knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind - that students are expected to acquire at IHEs. These four outcomes are: (a) Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural and Physical World; (b) Intellectual and Practical Skills; (c) Personal and Social Responsibility and; (d) Integrative Learning [1].

The implementation of institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) is a step in the right direction to supporting students. Clearly stated ILOs make the general knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences, and habits of mind expected of students visible for the IHE community. ILOs can help make the cultural expectations of higher education more explicit. Clearly operationalized ILOs state specific and observable behaviors students should practice and demonstrate to increase their chances of succeeding in college and beyond. All institutional levels play a critical role in moving ILOs from paper to practice. It requires acknowledgement on the part of administration, departments, and individual faculty that ILOs can serve an important function. It also requires action at all levels to ensure that students are acquiring these necessary skills.

At the institutional administrative level, engaging the IHE community in the development and acceptance of ILOs is an important first step [7]. At this level, dissemination of ILOs across all units with a continued focus on outcomes is of primary importance to instituting a change in practice at the department and faculty level. ILOs establish the importance of the generic skills required for success; however, enculturation will only occur through coordinated efforts at the department and faculty levels [14]. For generic skill development, teaching and learning activities need to be purposefully designed [3]. In addition, a curriculum that explicitly incorporates the ILOs is warranted as the extant literature indicates that curriculum is pivotal in development of student skill acquisition [5]. A coordinated effort of developing and establishing a culture that embodies the ILOs is attainable. Implementation ideas to make the process manageable are presented for consideration.

3.1 Department level implementation

Developing the generic behaviors indicated by the ILOs, can be accomplished when faculty are provided the opportunity to discuss and creatively embrace their role in this enculturation process. Transmitting the ILOs through program documents and course syllabi are helpful, but will not necessarily result in students internalizing the desired behaviors. Department chairs should consider providing time for faculty to review how the ILOs relate to the discipline and program of study. Continued emphasis on the importance of the ILOS in developing the future professional helps faculty identify their role in the enculturation of their students.



3.2 Individual faculty level implementation

For enculturation, students must be (a) exposed to exemplars, (b) provided opportunities for faculty-student and student-student interactions to practice the behaviors, and (c) directly taught the desired behaviors [14]. Both student affairs faculty and academic teaching faculty have the opportunity to foster the behaviors or attributes designated in the ILOs. In fact, it is a partnership between both types of faculty that help achieve the desired outcomes.

3.3 Student affairs faculty. The goal of student affairs faculty is to engage students in activities designed to enhance and support student learning and personal development; thus, designing specific activities for enculturation also falls within their purview. This faculty share responsibility with the academic teaching faculty for the development of the cultural skills and competencies that enable students to complete college and be successful after graduation [10]. Academic advisors are in a prime position to teach these skills. Advisors should consider operationalizing ILOs to teach and model use of the cultural behaviors that will enable students to be successful in dealing with their concerns. Student affairs faculty are ideally situated for designing activities and events to incorporate discussion and specific instruction to make explicit the cultural behaviors that will lead to student success. Enculturation can begin by engaging new students in orientation activities that introduce and actively engage them in interacting with the faculty and other students around cultural behaviors of that discipline. These discussions might revolve around the ethical practice standards of the particular field.

3.4 Academic teaching faculty. For enculturation, the professor's role is more than merely providing information on the ILOs and checking for understanding. The professor's role is to actively create a class culture based on the ILOs that incorporates the cultural behaviors within the context of the course. To do this, higher education faculty may need to consider their own expectations for their students and how these expectations are related to the institutional ILOs. Faculty can then make explicit to students the behaviors that are expected, such as those necessary for independence and appropriate interpersonal interactions within their discipline. Operationalization of the ILOs by faculty across disciplines, contextualized for their individual courses, creates a culture that surrounds students. Furthermore, faculty can weave these cultural expectations across assignments and activities providing practice and motivation to engage in the expected behaviors.

4. Conclusion

A comprehensive cultural context is useful to ensure that cultural behavioral exemplars and interactions requiring these behaviors are provided and reinforced. For the cultural behaviors contextualized within a course, faculty may consider how and when they will model them within their course. Additional verbal and visual exemplars of when and how these behaviors are useful may also be provided orally during instruction or visually within course materials. Providing students a specific time and context for employing these behaviors in and out of class also emphasizes the importance and utility of the desired behaviors. Employing these practices, enculturation becomes an aim of the course, in addition to the acquisition of the discipline specific knowledge and skills.

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