

AAUP NEWSLETTER

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PRESIDENTS CORNER

Rose Sachs

Over the past six months, the Learning College Initiative has been “rolled out” via Learning College Conversations with selected groups of faculty and staff. And yet, it appears that, despite the conversations, beneath the pillars and the paint, beyond the placemats and the platitudes, no one seems to understand our College’s interpretation of the Learning College: How will the initiative be operationalized; how will we be different from the way we were before; how are policies and practices that impede learning being examined; how much of a commitment to change at any substantive level; and, most importantly, how will this initiative enrich the experience of our students? At these meetings and through individual encounters with faculty, staff, and administrators, we have found that puzzlement, frustration, and anger continue to escalate.

We have given a forum for the following piece because we believe that free expression is a cornerstone of education, regardless of guiding philosophy; because it is our experience that the views stated reflect and represent those that we have found to be prevalent College-wide; and because we find that the message is one of major importance that needs not only to be voiced, but to be heard.

TO THE EDITOR

MANNAKEE’S NEW CLOTHES

Mannakee has decided to try a new look on Montgomery College – the Learning College. The tailors of this colorful new garment promise that it will increase student learning, revitalize teaching strategies, improve student retention, and inspire the community. This elaborate new robe has been constantly paraded over the last several months; at every meeting, people can be heard exclaiming how the pillars can “inspire and ignite the community,” how color-charged team meetings “sharply focus on student achievement and learning outcomes,” how the learning college will bring about “substantive change.” All the while, many members of the faculty find themselves whispering that they can’t see anything new. Although it is wonderful that the administration is trying to highlight that every facet of the College should be part of a unified effort to improve student learning, it’s time someone stood up and said it out loud so that all can hear it: When it comes to the Learning College Initiative, Montgomery College isn’t wearing any new clothes.

While the Learning College concept surely began as a sincere attempt at making Montgomery College a better place to learn, it is clear that rather than creating substantial change and introducing dynamic new ways of interaction, this goal has become derailed and replaced with empty rhetoric. Nothing illustrates this more than the glossy, full-color handout distributed at the recent collegewide opening meeting. Rather than being inspired by this earnest document, we were first amused, then embarrassed, and finally outraged. Rather than providing us with support for or detailed principles of more effective learning and concrete strategies for improving pedagogy and relationships with students, we have been given platitudes like “The Learning College at MC is evolutionary not revolutionary . . . is a journey, not a destination . . . offers learning anywhere, anyway, anytime,” and let’s not overlook “Montgomery College extends the magic of the uniqueness of MC in as many ways as possible.” In what way is the magical uniqueness of MC going to improve student retention and learning? It is clear that in creating this top-down initiative, the administration forgot to consult the experts in student learning – the faculty. As a consequence, the information with which the administration has presented us is loaded down with nonsense phrases, and they make the concept of the Learning College confusing at best and offensive at worst.

We do not have “state –of –the- art, world class professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators.” In fact, many of us have had our professional development limited to the immediate area because we have not had funds to travel to conferences outside of our backyards. While we are fortunate to be located in an area with singular opportunities for professional development, this limitation has nonetheless proved detrimental. We can’t truly offer learning “anywhere, anyway, anytime” – we

can't even seem to get smartstations for the Humanities Building in Germantown – what good is training in teaching through technology if the technology isn't available? Even our ability to adapt to student learning styles by incorporating more visual elements into our classes has been hampered by the fact that classrooms have VCRs in them while new video material is in DVD format. Teachers in Takoma Park/Silver Spring can't require their students to work individually with tutors or learning software programs because their writing center isn't equipped to handle the volume of students. If students are the “center of our universe,” why is it that so many faculty members are instructed to cancel classes or dismiss students early in order to attend committee meetings? Why do we cancel classes for a day – halting student learning -- in order to have a meeting that could easily be held during a time before students return? Why does the College clearly place more emphasis on enrollment than on learning, encouraging students to enroll for classes after they have begun even though these students will already be at a disadvantage from having missed key information and assignments? Why do the caps on maximum numbers of students in classes seem to keep creeping up when we all know that more individual interaction is essential to student learning and success?

What seems to have been buried in this avalanche of catchphrases is the fact that MC faculty truly do want to improve student learning. Despite a critical lack of resources and time, we are eager to take on new professional development opportunities and work with our colleagues and administration to design innovative teaching strategies that will revitalize the classroom for both teachers and students. The real pillars of the Learning College are already hard at work: They stand upright in the example of professors who have been nurturing learning communities for years. They stand guard over the community as professors incorporate service learning into their classrooms. Dynamic, interactive teaching strategies and collaborative techniques are already incorporated into the classrooms of professors in disciplines from Anthropology and Astronomy, to Economics and English, to Marketing and Math. The “culture of caring” has been constantly evident in the actions of counselors and staff members who have not only given their time listening and helping troubled students, but have even given them money out of their own pockets to help abandoned students get out of dangerous situations and into environments where they actually can learn. Some professors have literally gone the extra mile to provide learning opportunities, personally driving students to potential transfer schools and writing countless letters of recommendations for scholarships. Dedicated groups of faculty from each campus have worked together on Outcomes Assessment, developing cogent evaluations of student learning and assignment effectiveness and implementing meaningful changes to programs as a result. Every professor and staff member who spends hours mentoring, tutoring, sponsoring clubs, participating in student activities, writing letters of recommendation, and providing support to troubled students is contributing to student retention and improved learning. These are the people and examples that “inspire and ignite the community,” and they have been crying out for more support and recognition for their efforts. These efforts did not begin or improve with the Learning College initiative; the real Learning College has been here all along. Unfortunately, apparently no one bothered to notice or ask the faculty, the people who actually interact daily with students, about it.

The goal seems to have become merely branding MC as a Learning College, rather than actually adhering to the worthwhile principles of the concept. The College has spent an enormous amount of money, time, and energy developing rhetoric-driven, glossy handouts, promotional buttons, and even custom refreshments to promote the Learning College Brand. Imagine if all of that were instead invested in hiring and training more faculty and staff, providing support for new technologies, recognizing the efforts of innovative teachers, and providing new scholarship, internship, and even extracurricular opportunities for our students. Faculty members who are fiercely dedicated to student learning want no more handouts; we want no more magical uniqueness. We can't be told to offer learning “anywhere, anyway, and anytime”; this is impossible and is even detrimental to good pedagogy. Nonetheless, we can work to become better teachers and provide more opportunities for students. We need to stand up and make it clear that we do support a Learning College initiative – one of substance, not semantics. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Student learning is something that matters; it's time faculty speak up and tell the administration that Montgomery College isn't wearing any new clothes, and we are embarrassed. Once we speak up, loudly and clearly enough that we must be listened to, perhaps the administration, faculty, and staff can begin to work together to generate meaningful dialogue about how to dress the college in genuine student-centered clothing and parade the results for all to see.

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MONTGOMERY COLLEGE CHAPTER

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