

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD: Transformational change in higher education



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It's a wise saying — doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is a definition of insanity. Yet we want different results in higher education — better preparation of graduates in writing, speaking, and problem-solving; more graduates prepared for high-level careers in our knowledge economy; and more students attaining not just college degrees, but the learning represented by those degrees. Achieving those goals requires transformational change.

Let's take the freshman year as an example. Students in their first year are vulnerable, prone to doubts and misgivings about whether they belong in college. They are also particularly open to change. That there are three times in life that a person is most ready for growth and development: the first year of life, first grade and freshman year in college.

It would make sense then to assign our most dedicated and experienced faculty to teach freshmen in small classes. Yet most universities assign first-year classes to teaching assistants or underpaid part-timers. I can say from personal experience that sometimes these part-timers go above and beyond to address student needs. And when full-time professionals in education, health and business are willing to teach part-time, they bring extraordinary benefits to upper-level and graduate courses. But freshmen, who are newcomers to the intellectual life of a university community, need full-time members of that community as their mentors and guides.

Higher education has been resistant to assigning full-time, experienced faculty members to first-year courses. One reason is what I call the Maimon Hierarchical Fallacy, which assigns prestige on the false assumption that those teaching graduate courses must be smarter than those teaching freshman courses.

Another reason for this situation has to do with higher education finances. Most budget changes, even in hard times, are made around the edges. Moving full-time faculty to introductory courses necessitates a major reallocation of resources — something particularly unsettling in the academy.

I am proud to say Governors State University has embraced transformational change. Our freshman classes are limited to a maximum of 30 students, with only 15 in sections of freshman composition. Our most dedicated, experienced, full-time faculty members will teach our first-year students. Even though our student costs are the lowest in Illinois — and we are not raising tuition or fees for next year — we have made the budget reallocations to make this transformation possible.

Students will follow a core curriculum of general education courses, organized during daytime hours in a block schedule. Every student will take at least three classes with the same group of classmates to promote cross-disciplinary conversations and friendships. All students will be full-time, i.e., they will take 15 credits each semester. Since we understand our students must work, we are making every effort to provide on-campus jobs with increasing responsibilities through the four years of study. Students who need extra help in writing and math will take Early Start, a fun boot-camp starting two weeks before the regular semester, with supplementary instruction during the fall — all at no extra charge.

Connectivity is our byword. The block scheduling will promote interactions among students, among faculty, and between students and faculty members. The themes for the freshman groups will carry over to Prairie Place, our first student residence hall, where upper classmen and graduate students will join freshmen, led by faculty members living on site, in exploring our selected themes: civic engagement, global citizenship and sustainability. A symbol of this connectivity is the notebook/laptop computer, which will be provided free of charge to each freshman.

By changing the way we undertake our responsibilities in higher education, we hope to transform students' lives and be a model for other universities in transforming the future of our nation.