

MAKING THE RHETORIC A REALITY

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Reinvention Center Conference

November 14, 2002

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University released its report four years ago. It was a time, as Ernie Boyer reminded us, when higher education had changed significantly: the American system had become less elite; students and parents had developed their own, often vigorously asserted, ideas about education and credentialing; a much greater range of undergraduate professional degrees had become available; and the freshman year had too often been reduced to remediation or repetition of high school rather than an introduction to a new and broader arena of learning.

We recommended ten ways to change higher education. Of the ten ways, six were pedagogical and the others operational. To emphasize research, focus on the freshman year, build the rest of the experience on that foundation, remove obstacles to interdisciplinary work and thought, provide a mind-expanding capstone experience, and make oral and written communications part of everything (for what is research without communication?)—these were recommendations that we believed universities needed to explore, commit to, introduce, and build. To make these happen, we would have to develop supportive faculty rewards systems, train graduate students well for their work as teachers, be creative in developing information technology, and build a sense of community between students and faculty.

The Boyer Commission recognized that our report would be controversial. We knew that some administrators and faculty would protest that the recommendations were unreachable or impractical while others would believe the goals could be achieved by minor adjustments of existing practice and still others would believe they were already serving undergraduates properly and didn't need to change. Our hope was that the report would stir new debate about the nature of undergraduate education, encourage exploration of the possibilities for newly energized pedagogies, and result in widespread reform, whether that reform took the direction of our 53 recommendations or led in other directions.

The report had an immediate and somewhat explosive response from the press, who chose to quote the most passionate prose, and from spokespersons from other institutions, who had not yet read the report but reacted to the press accounts. Once the furor died down, the report was not only of great interest to America's research universities, but to every segment of American higher education, to universities around the world (we have had requests for copies from every continent except Antarctica), and from government officials, boards of trustees, disciplinary associations, etc., here and abroad. Not everybody loved it, but everybody felt compelled to examine their own requirements and needs, to measure their own individual directions, and if they did not agree with it, they used the published recommendations for comparison and contrast. And that, of course, was as it should be.

And now? Well the Boyer Report does not seem controversial any more. What I have noticed over the last several years was that campus rhetoric has definitely changed, a step which I think always precedes real change. Undergraduate research, which the Commission considered the defining element of research universities, has become a byword in academic conversations. Every research university, and other sectors as well, at least claims to have it, whether it is available to large numbers of students or not. Focus on the freshman year is now a matter of great interest, even if it is still too often reserved for only the top students.

I think the greatest indication of the change in undergraduate education is the new section on "Programs that enhance learning" listing with top schools but not included in the general rankings of *U. S. News and World Report* this year. I was astonished at how closely they resembled the Boyer list:

1. First-year experiences "that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis," i.e. freshman seminars
2. Internships or practicums
3. Senior capstones
4. Undergraduate research/creative projects, either independently or in small teams, mentored by a faculty member
5. Learning communities
6. Study abroad
7. Service learning
8. Writing in the disciplines, making the writing process a priority at all levels of instruction, writing for different audiences in different disciplines

Sound familiar? These academic programs and principles have reached not only universities but our arbiters, the popular press.

Now I am not claiming that the Boyer Report changed views of undergraduate education; but I do believe that views of American undergraduate education, inside and beyond research universities, is very different from what it was four years ago. And that, whatever the cause, is good.

To go from rhetoric to reality is the next big step. To determine exactly what the current situation is, the Boyer group commissioned a survey for our reunion in 2001. We decided it would be useful to publish that survey, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: Three Years after the Boyer Report*; it is now in press, and we will send copies to all of you. The purpose was to measure how deeply research universities are now engaged in the recommended practices.

We contacted deans, vice provosts, or vice presidents working with undergraduate programs as representatives of the 123 Research I and II universities (using the old Carnegie classification), that offer baccalaureate degrees. Representatives from 91 institutions (74% of the total) responded. Follow-up telephone interviews with 40 academic administrators added to the data. The responses verify some of the trends that appear to me and I'm sure to you to be occurring now.

Undergraduate research is now a byword, whether or not the practice at a given university lives up to the prose. In fact, the institutionalization of undergraduate research is by no means complete. All research universities now offer opportunities for supervised undergraduate research or creative activities. About half of them provide opportunities for half or more of their students, including 16% with "all or most" students involved. The other half have about a quarter or fewer of their students participating. In most institutions, at least the most promising students have research opportunities, but those possibilities vary with the field of study. The laboratory sciences and engineering offer far greater possibilities than the social sciences and humanities. Sixty-two percent (62%) of the survey respondents reported half or more of their lab science students in research, and 44% reported half or more of their engineering students. On the other hand, 25% of the survey respondents reported that half or more of their social science students had research projects, and only 21% in the humanities. Arts students do better—36% responded their students have creative activities sponsored by faculty. An important task ahead of us is exploring how to increase undergraduate research in those fields. I think

humanities will be the toughest one of all—the model is not obvious as with lab sciences.

The Boyer Commission considered the freshman experience of crucial importance. It needs both to bridge the chasm between high school and college, and, more importantly, to excite students about the wealth, diversity, and scope of what lies beyond. Too often universities have concentrated on the former, to the detriment of the latter. Freshman seminars provide the best entry into the world of ideas, and universities are now increasingly responding to the needs for intellectual stimulation at the freshman level. Developing or expanding the number of freshman seminars, and creating learning communities or block scheduling for freshmen are two of the actions most frequently introduced recently. More than 80% of the universities in the survey sample have freshman seminars, and 42% of the respondents say their institutions enroll half or more of the freshmen. All of us know that to enlarge the attention paid to freshmen means making it respectable, even attractive, for our best professors to teach such seminars. If they do, the others will follow.

Let me mention one more recommendation, a critical goal on which I believe we are failing, that is, excellence in oral and written communication skills. The Boyer Report states bluntly that “The failure of research universities seems most serious in conferring degrees upon inarticulate students.” No one should graduate without understanding that no research is complete, no idea fully formed until it can be successfully communicated; the organizational skills required for communication are part of the thought process required to understand material fully, and dissemination is an essential part of research. And yet we are allowing students to graduate with poor communication skills; we do not emphasize writing as a final and essential step in research. Clear writing and speaking should be required for every course and particularly every course in the major.

Only 19% of the survey respondents reported that oral communication skills are taught in their introductory courses; 30% do not offer any courses or activities at all. Those that do require it tend to be professional programs, engineering, business, education, and agriculture.

Of course every campus has writing courses, 52% of those surveyed requiring it for two semesters and 43% for one. Thirty-two percent (32%) have upper-division writing requirements. But the fact is, students do not understand that writing and speaking are essential life skills, and their major professors—or their other professors—do not encourage that understanding by requiring written work and including an evaluation of the writing in their

grades. The message is, you have to pass your writing requirement, so get it done. It is important to graduating, but not to your future. After all, it is so unimportant that it is left up to graduate students to teach it (some of whom aren't such great writers or teachers of writing themselves, although some certainly are). Pass it and get finished with it so you can go on to important things. As far as we have come on undergraduate research, little has changed in terms of making writing and speaking important parts of the curriculum as they are important parts of life.

It is clear that undergraduate education is a topic solidly on the agenda at research universities. I think I have been most struck by the fact that it is no longer an almost embarrassing subject, to be avoided in conversations between serious faculty and administrators, to be entrusted to those who do not publish. In the past, we talked of research, of dollars, of graduate programs. But we didn't focus much on undergraduate education; as it seemed beneath the central concerns of research institutions, as though it could comfortably continue without new thought for new times, as though it didn't need fixing. That mind set has been supplanted by concern on the part of boards, presidents, and faculty, and that in itself is a great victory for universities.

Only fundamental campus buy-in of the importance of undergraduate education and the value of the new inquiry-based modes, strongly reinforced by the national and professional associations and funding agencies, will propel research campuses toward broad expansion of these initiatives to include large numbers of students.

The survey sharpens our understanding of where we are in our transition, what has been done, and what lies ahead. At every campus, the first task will be to decide what kind of financial commitment will be made—this seems easier at private institutions than public ones, but everyone will be having tough economic times for a while. Still budgets are a matter of priorities; if the undergraduate program is considered important enough, financial decisions will follow.

Then we must focus on the key elements first, putting our limited resources in areas that are most important and urgent. I would list those at this juncture as the freshman year, undergraduate research, and communication skills.

I am impressed by the developments of the last four years and convinced that the emphasis on improved undergraduate education will continue and perhaps even accelerate. That will happen if we—faculty, presidents, parents,

boards of trustees—insist on it. We owe it to our students and to the future to do just that.

So here we are. This conference is testimony to how much is happening now across the country. The wealth of ideas and the new inventiveness will be shared here for everyone's benefit, and indeed there is so much to share. I can remember no former time when undergraduate education was changing as creatively as now.

You are the people who will be most central to making the rhetoric a reality as you have moved us to this point. You will make it happen. So much has happened on your campuses—and there is so much that lies ahead.