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Perceptions of Students and Teachers in Three Settings

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The University as a Community of Learning: Perceptions of Students and Teachers in Three Settings

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Abstract: More than two decades ago, Ernest Boyer, then President of the Carnegie Foundation, argued it was imperative that, if institutions of higher education were to fully meet their educational mandates, they must become Communities of Learning which were educationally purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative. His ideas were widely embraced and institutions sought to emulate these principles. How do students and teachers perceive their campuses in regard to these attributes today? How do their responses differ depending upon the nature of the institutional setting? Comparison data obtained from online surveys of undergraduate students and teachers at Penn State carried out in 2011-2013 provided information for addressing these questions. A total of 1,837 students and 1,537 teachers at Penn State's "main" University Park campus, 1,566 students and 921 teachers at the University's nineteen smaller satellite campuses, and 644 students and 125 instructors in online degree programs through Penn State's World Campus participated in the surveys. Although some differences among locations and between students and instructors were found, most students and teachers in all three settings felt the descriptions of the six attributes of a Community of Learning "fit" their campuses.

Keywords: Community of Learning, Ernest Boyer, Student/Faculty Perceptions, Campus Community

Among major social institutions, our universities have been viewed as unique in the extent to which they provide life altering learning experiences for the individual. Traditionally, the academy provided personal, professional, and intellectual pursuits that combined purpose, discipline, and fairness, while fostering social engagement, caring, and the celebration of traditions (Boyer 1990). These characteristics were seen to contribute to the emergence of an interconnected community of learning which, beyond academic and skill training, prepared participants to be contributing members of the wider society -- active, passionate, altruistic, and purposeful individuals trained to push the human condition forward.

However, concerns have been raised in recent decades that higher education has lost its way. Specifically that it has lost touch with these essential characteristics that distinguish the academy from other less inclusive environments (Smith 1990). Academic programs have been seen as drifting away from intellectual expansion and scholarship, toward student placements and the filling of employment opportunities, with intellectual development sacrificed for narrowly defined skill sets, rather than emphasizing expanding student potentials. Similarly, the focus of the professorship has been viewed as evolving away from in-depth scholarship and student-focused teaching, to the procurement of large-scale research funding and journal article production (publish or perish) (Smith 1990; McGrail et al. 2006). This level of disaffection has also resonated at the societal level, where concern over the 'loss of community' has been echoed (Stein 1960; Warren 1963; Luloff and Krannich 2002). A wide range of literature suggests that we as citizens have become increasingly disconnected from each other and have abandoned the core values on which civil society and the academy are founded. It is argued that we are less engaged, less celebrative of our traditions, less caring and less disciplined. As a result our communities are less resilient, more reliant on outside support, and substantially lacking in mutual social supports. It is an environment where a re-commitment to the goals and mission of the academy are perhaps needed more than ever.

It was in the context of similar debates more than two decades ago that Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, challenged institutions

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of higher education to become communities of learning and to return to the cornerstones of the academy (Boyer 1990). To Boyer, such communities would embody the elements of being educationally purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative of traditions and rituals. His call to action resonated with educators across the nation and found expression in a variety of activities and programs developed to foster campus communities (McDonald et al. 2002). Now, twenty years since the movement spurred on by Boyer's work, educators still assert the importance of "community" in higher education. But how relevant are his ideas today? What does "community" mean in the current context?

The term "community" is commonly used to reference patterns of social interaction, cultural norms, shared goals, and social values held in common by a group of people (Wilkinson 1991; Brennan, Bridger, and Alter 2013). The current popularity of the idea of "learning communities" includes those attributes (Gabelnick 1990; Lenning and Ebbers 1999; Wenger 1999) but, to Boyer, "communities" were clearly viewed as more permanent, with enduring cultures in which members shared a sense of unity, coherence, commitment, and personal identification. Boyer's "communities" also involved geographic space and physical settings with buildings, classrooms and traditional landscapes. The notion of satellite campuses where Universities support and serve distant locales was never addressed. And "virtual communalities" connecting students with one another and with their teachers via electronic means were absent from the lexicon of his day. In exploring the application of Boyer's ideas to the modern University, it is necessary to recognize that today, the image of the cloistered academy of the past has been replaced by a multitude of institutional structures, offering a dizzying array of specialized courses and programs, attended by students who vary in gender, age, ethnicity, and personal backgrounds, and who pursue education for diverse reasons. Can these various settings be expected to engender a sense of coherent social unity at all, let alone embody the historic characteristics of a community of learning?

Purpose of the Study

Boyer (1990) defined Six principles that formed the cornerstones of a Community of Learning:

- It is an *educationally purposeful* community where members work together to strengthen teaching and learning.
- It is an *open* community where freedom of expression is protected and affirmed.
- It is a *just* community where the sacredness of the person is honored and diversity is pursued.
- It is a *disciplined* community where individuals accept their responsibilities to the group and well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good
- It is a *caring* community where the well-being of each member is supported and where service to others is encouraged.
- It is a *celebrative* community where heritage and rituals affirming both tradition and change are shared.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the extent to which these attributes of a Community of Learning defined by Boyer represent the current situation by drawing upon recent surveys of students and teachers at The Pennsylvania State University. Because our analysis utilizes data from a single institution, the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other colleges and universities may be problematic. However, Penn State presents a variety of settings in which the study was carried out – the "main" University campus; satellite, community-based campuses; and online instruction. As a result, the current analysis provides at least a glimpse into the possible relevance of Boyer's ideas in a variety of contemporary contexts.

The Settings

Penn State is a large, multifaceted institution, with historic roots in the Land Grant Act of 1863. The current study focuses on three differing setting which are parts of the Penn State system and engaged in teaching undergraduate students pursuing their baccalaureate degrees: the "main" campus at University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, and the World Campus. Although all are parts of the Penn State system, these campuses differ markedly in the nature of their settings and the numbers and types of the students they enroll.

- The campus at University Park (UP), situated in a largely rural area in central Pennsylvania far from major metropolitan centers, serves as the administrative and research hub of the University. The campus employs approximately 3,000 faculty and during the years of the study, enrolled more than 45,000 graduate and undergraduate students from throughout the world. While some students from the surrounding area commute to campus, most live on campus or in rental housing in the adjacent boroughs and townships. Administratively, there are seventeen individual colleges located at University Park, with literally hundreds of majors and thousands of course offerings. The UP campus serves as the center of student life, with classrooms, recreational facilities, libraries, dormitories, eating facilities, a student union, and administrative offices.

- Nineteen separate Commonwealth Campuses located throughout the state are administratively and academically part of the Penn State system. Five of these offer full baccalaureate programs and some master's degrees. Each of these colleges enrolls between 2900 and 4000 students per year. The other fourteen Commonwealth Campuses are smaller (ranging between 600 and 1700 students a year). Some teach only the first two years of a curriculum and some upper-division classes, with many students relocating to University Park or another Penn State campus to complete their degrees (Willits, et al. 2013b). These campuses enroll a disproportionate number of students from their surrounding areas and serve as a type of "community college" extension of the University, which is integrated with the Penn State system in regard to student admission, transfer, and degree offering.

- The World Campus is the online arm of Penn State. Beginning in 1998 Penn State replaced and expanded its once limited "correspondence courses" to online classes designed to supplement ongoing degree programs. More than 100 accredited graduate degrees, undergraduate degrees, certificates, and minors are offered. These online programs are often taught by the same faculty who teach in the academic colleges at Penn State. When the current survey was undertaken, approximately 8500 students across the nation and around the world were enrolled in online courses. The World Campus is a virtual community. Having no specific shared physical location, its students are linked with one another solely through the shared experience of enrollment in an online offering.

For the current study, information on the views of both students and instructors in each of these three settings – University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, and the World Campus are considered. In doing so, it addresses the extent to which Boyer's principles of a community of learning are applicable to these various types of institutional settings today.

Assessing Penn State as a Community of Learning

In 2011-12, to assess the extent to which these three types of Penn State settings were seen as providing learning environments that were educationally purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative, samples of students and instructors were asked how well Boyer's descriptions of these six characteristics "fit" their campuses. The use of both student and instructor views provided information for assessing whether these evaluations differed depending upon the respondent's status/role within the social system. Comparable data from University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, and the World Campus allowed for analysis of differences among these three settings in the degree to which they manifest the attributes of a Community of Learning.

It should be noted that these data deal with the *perceptions* of random samples of students and instructors in each of the three settings. It could be argued that objective indicators should have been obtained for each campus characteristic. However, we would argue that participants' views are most relevant here. The perceptions that students and instructors hold of their campus communities are not only indicators of the phenomenon, but are critical components in defining the existence of community. Sociologists have repeatedly documented that if people define situations as real, they are in fact real in their consequences (Merton 1995).

The Data

University Park

During spring semester 2011, undergraduates enrolled at University Park during both fall semester 2010 and spring semester 2011 were chosen at random, contacted by e-mail, and invited to complete an online survey. Of these, 1,837 completed the survey – a 24% response rate. Also during spring semester 2011, a listing of all instructors who had taught one or more course at University Park during the previous fall semester were invited to participate in a similar online survey. Of the 3,953 instructors contacted, 1,537 did so – a 39% response rate. (Willits et al. 2013a).

Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 how well each of six descriptors of a Community of Learning characterized the University Park Campus. A score of 1 meant the description did not fit at all; a score of 5 indicated it was a perfect fit. Codes 4 and 5 were combined for this analysis to mean the descriptions "fit" the campus community; codes 1 and 2 were combined as meaning the descriptions did not apply well to the campus, or represented a "poor fit" to the campus. Code 3 responses were taken to mean the description was neither "a good fit" nor "a poor fit." The specific items were as follows:

1. Penn State is an educationally purposeful community where faculty and students work together and share academic goals.
2. Penn State is an open community where freedom of expression is protected and civility is embraced.
3. Penn State is a just community where each person is honored and diversity is pursued.
4. Penn State is a disciplined community where obligations and behaviors are regulated for the good of the group.
5. Penn State is a caring community where service to others is encouraged and the well-being of each individual is important.
6. Penn State is a community whose history is remembered and whose traditions and rituals are celebrated

Commonwealth Campus

Using the same protocols, students and instructors at the nineteen Commonwealth Campuses of Penn State were contacted and asked to complete an online survey similar to that used on the University Park Campus. A total of 1,566 students and 921 faculty members responded (Willits, et al. 2013b). The survey included identical questions concerning the extent to which each respondent felt the attributes of a Community of Learning "fit" "your campus."

World Campus

All students enrolled in a formal online degree program and in one or more World Campus courses during fall semester 2011, and all instructors in those courses were asked to participate in online surveys similar to those used for the students and faculty at University Park and at the Commonwealth Campus. Each respondent was asked: "How well do you believe each of the following statements characterizes Penn State World Campus?" A total of 644 students and 125 instructors from the World Campus responded to the surveys (Ragan et al. 2013).

Analysis

Student Views

A majority of the students at all three settings reported that each of the six characteristics of a Community of Learning described their campuses. That is, regardless of whether they were students at University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, or the World Campus, more than half reported that they perceived their campus community as *educationally purposeful*, *open*, *just*, *disciplined*, *caring*, *celebrative*, and *engaged.* . However, there were some significant differences among the three locations in the percentages of students indicating that these attribute applied.

Table 1: Percentages of STUDENTS Who Reported How Well the Characteristics of a Community of Learning "Fit" Their Campus, by Location

Characteristic	University Park (n=1837)[a]			Commonwealth Campus (n=1566)			World Campus (n=644)		
	Rating of "fit"			Rating of "fit"			Rating of "fit"		
	1 and 2	3	4 and 5	1 and 2	3	4 and 5	1 and 2	3	4 and 5
	%[b]								
Educationally purposeful	7.7	23.1	69.2	3.5	15.2	81.3	4.8	16.6	78.6
Open	4.9	16.8	78.3	2.6	15.6	81.8	3.4	18.9	77.7
Just	7.1	21.2	71.7	4.7	15.6	79.7	6.3	17.2	76.5
Disciplined	13.7	27.9	58.4	6.8	21.7	71.4	7.4	18.7	74.0
Caring	9.3	18.7	72.1	4.3	15.3	80.5	8.6	21.1	70.3
Celebrative	5.0	10.3	84.7	8.3	18.6	73.0	12.7	21.7	65.6

[a] Numbers of cases varies due to nonresponse to some items.

[b] Percentage rating the "fit" on a 5- point scale where 1=Not a Fit; 5=Perfect Fit..

- University Park students were the least likely (69%) to indicate they felt their campus community was *educationally purposeful*, i.e. that faculty and students worked together to share academic goals. Larger percentages of both the Commonwealth Campus (81%) and World Campus students (79%) saw their locations as *educationally purposeful*.

- University Park students were also the least likely to see their campus as *disciplined* with obligations and behaviors regulated for the good of the group (58%). Both Commonwealth Campus and World Campus students were more likely to report their campus was *disciplined* (71% and 74%, respectively).
- Students at University Park were the most likely of the three locations to report that the campus celebrated its traditions, rituals and history (85%); students at the World Campus were the least likely (66%) to describe their campus as celebrative, with those at the Commonwealth Campus intermediate (73%).
- Commonwealth Campus students were the most likely to see their campus as *caring* about the well-being or individuals and encouraging service (80%). This response was somewhat less likely among University Park (72%) and World Campus (70%) students.
- Commonwealth Campus students tended to be somewhat more likely to than those at the other locations to report their campus was *open* (82%) and *just* (80%), but the differences among the campus locations, while statistically significant, were relatively small.

Instructor Views

In all but two instances, instructors were less likely than students to report their campus "fit" the various characteristics of a Community of Learning. These two exceptions were the perceptions of *just* and *open* among World Campus participants, however these differences were small.

There were differences in the responses of instructors at the various campus settings in regard to their perceptions of the extent to which they felt the various characteristics of a Community of Learning applied to their campus, and these differences were somewhat more pronounced than those found among students at the same locations.

Table 2: Percentages of INSTRUCTORS Who Reported How Well the Characteristics of a Community of Learning "Fit" Their Campus, by Location.

Characteristic	University Park (n=1537)[a]			Commonwealth Campus (n=921)			World Campus (n=125)		
	Rating of "fit"			Rating of "fit"			Rating of "fit"		
	1 and 2	3	4 and 5	1 and 2	3	4 and 5	1 and 2	3	4 and 5
	%[b]								
Educationally purposeful	15.5	34.4	50.1	8.6	24.8	66.7	6.5	28.5	65.0
Open	8.1	25.6	66.4	6.1	16.5	77.4	2.4	17.9	79.7
Just	10.3	31.5	58.2	6.8	18.4	74.8	4.1	17.9	78.0
Disciplined	19.0	35.7	45.2	10.2	25.9	63.8	5.8	29.8	64.5
Caring	14.7	31.7	53.6	7.9	20.4	71.7	6.6	33.6	59.8
Celebrative	11.6	24.3	64.1	15.0	27.5	57.5	28.1	28.8	33.1

[a] Numbers of cases varies due to nonresponse to some items.

[b] Percentage rating the "fit" on a 5- point scale where 1=Not a Fit; 5=Perfect Fit..

- As was true for students, instructors at University Park were the least likely of the three locations to report their campus was *educationally purposeful* (50%), followed by the World Campus (65%) and the Commonwealth Campus (67%).

- University Park instructors were also the least likely to characterize the campus a *disciplined* (45%). For the World Campus and the Commonwealth Campus, the corresponding percentages were both 64%.
- Instructors at University Park were the most likely to report the campus was *celebrative* (64%), followed by those in the Commonwealth Campus (58%), with the World Campus instructors least likely to feel it was *celebrative* of traditions and history (33%).
- The percentage of Commonwealth Campus instructors who judged their setting to be *caring* (72%) was much greater than the proportions of either University Park or World Campus instructors (54% and 60%, respectively).
- University Park instructors were the least likely to report the campus community was *open* (66%) and *just* (58%). Corresponding percentages for the Commonwealth Campus were 77% and 75%, and for the World Campus 80% and 78%.

Discussion

This study explored the extent to which the characteristics of a Community of Learning enumerated by Ernest Boyer more than a quarter of a century ago are relevant to higher education in the contemporary context. Do students and teachers view their campuses as educationally purposeful, open, just, caring, and celebrative? The current analysis compared the views of students and instructors in three different settings within a large University system (Penn State) using survey data obtained from the large and multifaceted "main" campus, smaller "satellite" Commonwealth Campuses scattered throughout the state, and online (World Campus) learners.

There were some differences among the campus settings in the responses of students in regard to the applicability of the attributes of a community of Learning to their campuses;

- Thus, University Park students and instructors were the least likely to describe their campus as *disciplined and the most* likely to emphasize the *celebrative* nature of the campus.
- Commonwealth Campus students were the most likely to report their campus was caring, open, and just.
- World Campus students were the least likely to report the campus was celebrative.
- In all three settings, instructors were less likely than students to view their campuses in positive terms.

However, the most striking and consistent finding was the extent to which students and teachers indicated that the characteristics of Boyer's Community of Learning described *their* campuses. In virtually every case, more than 65% of the students reported the attribute "fit" their campus. And, for all but two items, more than half of the instructors also reported the characteristic described their campus communities.

Analysis reported elsewhere (Willits and Brennan 2015) has documented that this widespread acceptance of Boyer's principles at Penn State has occurred over the last two decades spurred, by purposive action of the University to foster development of a civil community of learning following Boyer's lead, (McDonald 2002). These have included workshops for students and faculty, publicity given to justice, diversity, fairness and civility by not only the administration, but by student groups as well. The University has also worked to minimize the symbolic and structural distinctions among the various educational units and settings. The latter has occurred by placing the Commonwealth Campuses administratively under a single Vice President, coordinating course offerings so that courses taken at the main campus, on the Commonwealth Campuses, and on the World Campus are completely interchangeable in any University degree program, and the establishment of a single "Penn State Degree" granted to all

students who complete their required work through any combination of these settings. The result of these efforts has likely contributed to widespread student identification with the university as a whole. The publicity given to the 2011 child sex abuse scandal involving former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky (CNN 2015) may also have contributed to students and faculty closing ranks in the wake of outsider attacks on the institution. Whatever the reasons, data from the current surveys show that 76% of Commonwealth Campus students and 70% of those enrolled in World Campus agree that they have a sense of belonging to Penn State. The extent to which these "successes" in community building have occurred at other Universities/Colleges across the country is an empirical question and one in need of further research.

There is evidence that Boyer's ideas will continue to flourish as educators seek ways to enhance the learning experiences of their students. Recent calls for creating "the ethical academy" (Gallant 2011; Weeks 2011) and fostering institutional cultures of integrity (AACU 2015) echo Boyer's vision of communities of shared learning goals, openness and freedom of expression, justice and the affirmation of diversity, adherence to codes of conduct as well as to courtesy and private values, a sense of connection, caring, and service to others, and a celebration of heritage and traditions.

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The Journal of the World Universities Forum seeks to explore the meaning and purpose of the academy in a time of striking social transformation. The journal brings together university administrators, teachers and researchers to discuss the prospects of the academy and to exemplify or imagine ways in which the university can take a leading and constructive role in the transformations of our times.

Today, universities face significant challenges to their traditional position in society. Contemporary knowledge systems are becoming more distributed and learning ubiquitous. Where does this leave the university—as a historically specialized and privileged place for certain kinds of knowledge and learning, as an institutionally bounded space? What do these changes mean for the mission and structures of the renewed university? What are emerging as principal areas of the academic interest? These are some of the key questions addressed by the journal.

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