

From the Editor

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From the beginning, founding editor Ernest Lynton articulated the mission of *Metropolitan Universities* journal as a venue for sharing “applied and useful” information among institutions that embrace the urban and metropolitan mission. In recent years, readership characteristics and responses suggest that the topics relevant to urban and metropolitan universities are also of wide interest to many types of postsecondary institutions. Rapid and sweeping changes in higher education’s challenges, priorities, and contexts are reflections of shifting societal needs and changing student characteristics. As a result of some of these trends, urban and metropolitan universities have become important and useful role models in some areas of evolving academic and administrative culture and operations. Our readers, mostly senior administrators, academic officers, and faculty, are becoming more representative of a diverse array of campus settings and missions as they discover this journal as a useful source of practical, experiential, and evidence-based reports on effective strategies for challenging environments. Occasionally, we who work on the journal hear wonderful examples of how the journal has been used to spark a conversation among an executive team or campus task force, and we are delighted to know the material presented is contributing to institutional actions.

One conspicuous example of change in higher education especially relevant to the role of this journal is the change in the nature of the student experience, especially in patterns of enrollment and in the composition of the student body. There has been a swift increase, across all types of colleges and universities, in the percentage of students who are part-time attenders, who commute to campus, and/or who work more than 15 hours per week while attending the university. These students, formerly described as “non-traditional,” are the new tradition across the nation and represent the majority of current undergraduates. Even though recent economic conditions have led to a decline in the average age of students and some increase in demand for on-campus housing, the attendance patterns and study/work lifestyles of students continues to be anything but traditional. So long as public policy continues to raise the proportion of educational costs passed onto students, we cannot and should not be surprised that they increasingly see a need to balance study and work, and that they think of their educational experience in very practical (even consumer-like) terms.

Such a student body is long familiar to urban and metropolitan universities who know well the challenges these students present. Our mission is to work continuously to create a coherent and high quality learning environment to support the learning needs of such students. We must ensure intellectual rigor in an environment characterized by practical convenience. More traditional institutions that have only recently begun to observe these traits among their students sometimes react with shock when they realize the likely impact of changing enrollment patterns and student expectations on their historic academic culture and operations. The longer experience of urban and

metropolitan universities may prove to be a useful resource for program ideas as other institutions work to adjust to these new conditions and expectations.

The challenges of the modern student are complex, and again, urban and metropolitan universities know this well from their own history. The retention rate for these students after their first term, or between the first and second year of study, is often abysmal. In addition, measures of “time to graduation” can soar to six, seven, eight years or more as these students “stop in and stop out” of the institution or move from one institution to another to pursue their educational goals. Policymakers and the public may view this lengthening of the degree timeline as an indication of poor institutional performance. Yet, we who work in urban and metropolitan universities know from serving these kinds of students for years that time to graduation is a poor measure of our service to these students or of the quality of their learning experience. For economic, career, and practical reasons, many of these students intentionally plan to take many years to finish, and we serve them well by supporting them flexibly as they progress along their complex pathway. However, there is no doubt that research on various intervention strategies are showing that we can do much more to enhance learning and retention for contemporary students. We all have much to learn from each other about effective strategies for engaging students in learning, bonding them to a supportive institutional context, and encouraging them to proceed steadily and efficiently toward their educational goal.

A sign of the extensive impact these student changes have had on the academy is the recent rise in institutional rhetoric around the concept of being “student-centered.” If the description above captures the essence of the new student body, their consumer-like attitudes and expectations, then the institutional response must necessarily focus on the student as the agent of change and the measure of our performance.

One of the most wide-spread strategies implemented across the nation over the last decade is the design of intentional and highly-engineered learning strategies for first-year students. Much to the credit of the leadership of John Gardner, a focus on first-year experiences quickly inspired action and changes in freshman programming across all types of institutions. In 1999, Gardner launched the Policy Center on the First Year of College, now based at Brevard College in North Carolina. In the years since, the Center’s sustained involvement in research, assessment, dissemination, consultation, and training institutes has promoted improvement and success in first-year programming all across the nation.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* draws on the Center’s wisdom and provides a set of new evidence-based reports on cutting edge first-year program strategies for serving the learning needs of the contemporary freshman student. Guest Editor for this issue is Michael J. Siegel, Research Fellow and Coordinator of Affiliate Institutions at the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Author of *Primer on Assessment of the First College Year*, published in 2003, he has drawn on some of the best scholars of learning strategies as well as good examples of institutions addressing first-year learning experiences in urban and metropolitan contexts. Written by individuals who

are both leading administrators and researchers on student learning, retention, and academic support, these articles document the most recent findings regarding academic and organizational approaches to becoming more student-centered while, in fact, enhancing learning outcomes. Embracing the notion that involving new students in specific, engaging and intentional learning and support activities will enhance retention and academic success, the authors report on innovative approaches to core issues of curricular design, active learning strategies, the role of technology, student advising, new views of diversity as an asset to learning, and even issues of how campuses can organize parking, housing, food services, extracurricular activities, and learning spaces to enhance student success.

Several authors in these papers highlight the centrality of the issue of time scarcity for these students. With busy, multi-dimensional, asynchronous lives divided among work, family, classroom, and studies, they expect us to adjust to their needs and patterns. Both academic and administrative leaders try to balance traditional expectations for how students move through a college experience with the new demands for convenience that students make of us. Because public policy and the economy have compelled such rapid increases in tuition, and in part because of the rise of competitive providers, it is not surprising that today's students behave as and think of themselves as consumers or customers buying an educational product. As a consequence, they expect us to assist them in making the most efficient use of their time. As the articles in this issue illustrate, one outcome of this change is that faculty and administrators have been motivated to make changes in curricula and operations that are not only efficient but, based on assessments, suggest greater impact on learning outcomes for students and in some cases, reduced instructional costs (See Twigg's findings from a national study of 30 institutions).

Also in this issue is an article recently submitted by Vice Provost Paul Reichardt, Northern Kentucky University, telling of the lessons learned from the collaboration between NKU and a new, emerging community college in the region. While many metropolitan universities accept thousands of transfer students from community colleges each year, collaboration and vibrant articulation between the two sectors can be difficult. Reichardt reports on a fascinating case where the partnership could be initiated from the very beginning of the new college, and thus helped to build a foundation of cooperation for the future. The lessons drawn from this experience, and the innovative program concepts they designed together will be useful to partnerships between more mature institutions. As more and more students attend multiple institutions to meet their learning goals, these models for interinstitutional collaboration will be essential in facilitating transitions and improve the student experience.

Almost every college and university in the nation is actively trying to operate as a more student-centered organization. Evolving student characteristics and their impact on learning strategies and campus culture require and inspire the academy to change. Thus, this issue on the theme of "first year experiences" is, to a great degree, about institutional change. Note that this extraordinary group of authors, who are top

scholars in the area of first-year experiences and student learning, often cite key works from the literature on organizational change and strategic planning to create a framework for the exploration and assessment of new learning environments and operational structures. In keeping with the culture of the learning organization, evidence-based decision-making is the hallmark of the program strategies described by these authors.

In the classic tradition of Lynton's vision for this journal, the articles are applied and useful, and based on extensive assessment of these innovative approaches to promoting effective learning for today's students. Within these pages are elements of a toolkit for enhancing our responsiveness to student expectations in ways that may further increase retention and learning outcomes for students and not coincidentally, enhance faculty and staff enthusiasm for teaching and supporting students. I look forward to hearing reports from the field about how these innovations are being adapted into other student-centered institutional contexts and hope this set of articles proves to be a useful resource.