A COLLEGE DESIGNED FOR LEARNING

Why student learning improves when institutions learn from their own evidence

From the Office of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness
Cuyahoga Community College

For many years, colleges have said that learning stands at the center of their purpose. In one sense, that claim is plainly true. Teaching exists for learning, assessment is meant to clarify learning, and the broader promise of higher education rests on the belief that students leave with stronger abilities than they had when they entered. Yet once one moves from aspiration to the ordinary life of the institution, the picture becomes less defined. Many colleges are organized more clearly around offering courses, managing academic processes, and reporting results than around the sustained study of how students actually build knowledge and skill, where that development weakens, and what the institution should change when it sees that learning is not taking hold.

That tension is not new. Three decades ago, Robert Barr and John Tagg gave it durable language when they distinguished between a teaching paradigm and a learning paradigm. Their point still matters because many institutions continue to speak fluently about learning without being fully organized around it. The language of learning is now widespread across higher education. The harder question is whether colleges have built habits, structures, and forms of inquiry that allow them to learn from what students are actually experiencing and achieving.

Recent writing by Jarek Janio, an associate professor of English as a Second Language at Santa Ana College and a frequent contributor to *Psychology Today* on questions of student learning, engagement, and classroom behavior, helps sharpen that question. In a series of essays on observable behavior, engagement, and the illusion of learning, Janio argues that visible engagement can be mistaken for learning when it reflects compliance with instruction, familiarity with a teacher's cues, or success within a highly supported environment rather than durable growth in ability. That distinction matters in the classroom, and it also matters at the level of the institution. Colleges can name problems, discuss them intelligently, and surround them with planning language while changing very little in the routines that produced them. The result is an uncomfortable but important possibility. A college may care deeply about learning and still be organized in ways that make learning harder to see, harder to support, and harder to strengthen over time.

What learning looks like in a student

Learning in a student cannot be reduced to visible participation, confidence, timely submission of work, or even acceptable performance under strong guidance. Those things may accompany learning, but they do not settle the matter. Learning becomes more convincing when students can explain an idea in a different setting, apply a skill to an unfamiliar problem, recover after error, and proceed with less dependence on hints, templates, and instructor direction. In that sense, learning involves a change in capability that extends beyond the narrow conditions in which it first appeared.

This is why ordinary classroom signals can be misleading. A lively discussion, a polished assignment, or an energetic class session may reflect genuine development, but it may also reflect close alignment with the teacher's expectations or successful imitation of a model. Students can

appear fluent when the environment has done much of the work for them. Learning becomes easier to recognize when ability holds under somewhat changed conditions and with greater independence.

That point carries institutional significance because colleges often rely on measures and routines that capture performance inside existing arrangements more readily than they capture the durability of learning itself.

What learning looks like in an institution

The same distinction applies to the college. An institution has not learned simply because it has identified a problem, described it well, or incorporated it into planning documents. Dashboards may be detailed. Retreat conversations may be thoughtful. Assessment reports may be earnest and well-intentioned. None of those, on their own, show that the college has learned.

Institutional learning becomes visible when understanding changes practice. A college shows that it has learned when it becomes better able to detect important problems earlier, interpret them more clearly, respond more coherently, and alter its routines in ways that make different outcomes more likely. In that sense, institutional learning is not merely a matter of awareness. It is a matter of changed capacity.

The organization appears attentive and reflective. It can name the challenge, circulate the evidence, and discuss the diagnosis. Yet that does not necessarily mean that it has become more capable of responding. Just as visible participation can be mistaken for student learning, visible seriousness can be mistaken for institutional learning.

Where common measures fall short

One reason this problem persists is that colleges often rely on measures only loosely connected to learning itself. The most familiar example is the course success rate, usually defined as the share of students earning a C or better. That measure has administrative value, and passing a course plainly matters. Yet it remains only a rough indicator of learning. A grade of C or higher shows that a student met the standard set for that course as it was taught and graded. It tells us much less about whether the student developed durable ability, whether that ability can be used under changed conditions, or whether the student is truly prepared for what comes next.

Colleges have often tried to move closer to learning through student learning outcomes. In principle, that is a more serious effort because it asks faculty and programs to identify what students should know or be able to do. Yet here too the evidence often remains less clear than the language suggests. Outcome statements may be broad. Assignments used to assess them may vary widely. Judgments about student work may differ too much across sections, instructors, or programs to support strong institutional interpretation. This does not mean that faculty are careless or that assessment lacks value. It means that colleges often acquire a vocabulary for discussing learning without acquiring evidence strong enough to reduce uncertainty about what students can actually do.

The same limitation appears in broad collegewide learning outcomes. Community colleges often identify aims such as critical thinking, communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, civic responsibility, or cultural awareness. These are worthy aspirations, and no serious observer would object to them. The difficulty is that they are often so broad and abstract that they

do little practical work in guiding how the college operates. They do not, by themselves, clarify where those abilities should become visible, what stronger or weaker performance would look like in practice, or what the institution should change when evidence suggests those capacities are not developing as intended. AAC&U's VALUE rubrics were, in part, an effort to bring greater clarity and shared judgment to such aims, which itself suggests that broad statements of intention are not enough.

The difference between naming and changing

This distinction between naming and changing lies at the center of the matter. A college can name worthy outcomes, map courses to them, complete assessment cycles, and produce respectable reports while learning very little about how students are actually developing those abilities. The work can demonstrate that the institution has a process without showing that the process is generating insight strong enough to guide meaningful change.

A college designed for learning would expect more from the information it collects. It would still care about grades, course completion, retention, and credentials because those things matter. At the same time, it would treat them as incomplete summaries rather than as sufficient evidence of what students have developed. It would ask more often whether students can use what they learned in the next course, in a different setting, or without so much support from the instructor. It would look for signs that understanding is becoming more durable and more independent rather than merely sufficient for immediate task completion.

That shift sounds modest in language, but it is demanding in practice because it requires the institution to become less satisfied with familiar signals and more willing to examine where its own design is obscuring the problem.

What would be different in practice

In many colleges, meaningful information about student difficulty arrives late. It appears in a failing exam, a course withdrawal, a final grade, or a loss of momentum from one term to the next that is already well underway by the time it becomes visible in institutional data. A college designed for learning would try to shorten that interval. It would ask where misunderstanding, partial understanding, or declining momentum first become visible and whether the college has built ways to see those signals while recovery is still realistic.

This would affect classroom practice, though it would not stop there. In the classroom, a learning-centered design would create more opportunities for students to explain, adapt, revise, and continue after error. It would make it easier to distinguish between work that depends heavily on guidance and work that reflects more independent understanding. The aim would not be to impose another abstract reform agenda on faculty. It would be to shape assignments, sequences, and feedback so that the college can see more clearly whether students are building ability that will hold up beyond the immediate conditions of instruction. That might include earlier low-stakes demonstrations of understanding, assignments that ask students to transfer a concept into a new context, quicker feedback on partial understanding, and more intentional review of whether students who pass one course are prepared for the next course in sequence.

At the institutional level, the same logic would require a more serious examination of whether the college's own structures help or hinder learning. Students do not encounter learning in isolation

from advising transitions, scheduling constraints, registration barriers, financial uncertainty, delayed feedback, confusing communication, or the ordinary friction of navigating a complex institution. A college designed for learning would therefore treat pathway clarity, process reliability, and workable means of recovery after setbacks as part of the learning environment itself. If students must regularly spend large amounts of time deciphering how the college works, recovering from preventable confusion, or managing disjointed handoffs across offices, then the institution is making learning harder in ways that may never appear clearly in a course success rate or a broad learning outcome statement.

This is where the language of support can become misleading. Colleges often promise to support students, meet students where they are, or provide holistic services. Those intentions may be sincere and important. Yet when students routinely need exceptional effort from faculty or staff simply to remain on track, the issue cannot be understood only as a matter of whether supports exist. It also has to be understood as a question of design. The institution must ask how much of the difficulty students encounter has been built into its normal operations. If steady progress requires frequent rescue, then the college has reason to examine not only its support systems but also the ordinary conditions through which students are expected to learn and advance.

When repeated findings do not change the institution

One of the clearest tests of whether a college is designed for learning is what happens when recurring patterns become visible. Many institutions do not lack findings. They know that certain gateway courses remain persistent weak points. They know that some students who pass a course remain underprepared for the next one. They know that feedback often arrives after confidence has already eroded. They know that student confusion tends to intensify at the points where one office or process gives way to another. Yet the same patterns can remain in view for years while very little changes in the routines that produce them.

A college designed for learning would treat repeated findings as a challenge to its own capacity. The question would not end with whether the pattern has been documented. It would move toward what in the institution's way of operating has changed because the pattern kept appearing. That is where the difference between discussion and learning becomes clearest.

Committees, retreats, dashboards, plans, and assessment cycles may all be worthwhile, but they do not by themselves show that the institution has become more capable of changing the conditions the evidence keeps revealing. The organization may seem serious, engaged, and reflective while remaining slow to alter the design conditions that the evidence keeps bringing into view.

A stronger learning design would require clearer links between what the college learns, who is responsible for acting on it, and how changed practice is evaluated. When a pattern appears, it should be clear who is expected to examine it, who has authority to alter practice, how quickly that review should occur, and what follow-up would show whether the change helped. Institutional learning becomes visible when the college can respond more coherently the next time a similar problem appears or explain persuasively why the pattern has improved.

Why this remains so difficult

The obstacles to this kind of redesign are substantial. Colleges are not organized as unified learning systems. They are composed of departments, divisions, committees, offices, schedules,

policies, and inherited practices, each with its own history and forms of authority. That arrangement serves some purposes reasonably well, but it makes coordinated change difficult. A college may be able to see that students lose momentum at the boundary between advising and the classroom, or between financial aid and registration, or between one course and the next in sequence. Even then, no single part of the institution may fully own the problem, and no single leader may be positioned to change all of the conditions that produce it. A problem can therefore become widely recognized without becoming easy to solve.

The challenge is also cultural. Colleges are filled with people who care deeply about students and often think seriously about teaching and support. That seriousness deserves respect because it is one of the sector's strengths. At the same time, it can create a kind of false reassurance. Institutions may assume that because people are committed, reflective, and experienced, the college is learning more than it is. Yet it is entirely possible for a college to be full of thoughtful people and still have weak institutional learning. Good intentions do not automatically create strong feedback loops. Professional dedication does not automatically produce better coordination, quicker adaptation, or clearer routines.

In some cases, committed people make weak design easier to live with because they compensate for weak design through individual effort. An advisor clarifies what a process failed to explain. A faculty member notices early signs of trouble before the system does. A staff member makes a quiet exception so that a student does not disappear into an avoidable gap. These acts matter. Colleges depend on them more than they often acknowledge. Yet they can also conceal how much the institution still relies on rescue rather than routine. A college designed for learning would still benefit from caring and capable people, but it would depend less on exceptional improvisation and more on structures that make strong outcomes more likely under ordinary conditions.

There is also the problem of evidentiary comfort. Measures such as course success, retention, completion, and periodic assessment reports fit neatly into existing reporting structures. They are familiar, sortable, and legible to accreditors and senior leaders. More detailed evidence about how learning is taking shape, where it weakens, or how the institution itself is complicating student progress is harder to gather, harder to interpret, and harder to act on. It does not sit easily within annual reporting cycles. It raises more demanding questions about teaching, support design, sequencing, timing, and authority. In that sense, colleges often rely on weaker evidence not because they are indifferent to learning, but because evidence that would bring them closer to learning asks more of them.

Brian Rosenberg's writing on resistance to change in higher education helps explain why this gap persists. His broader argument is that the structures and culture of higher education make meaningful redesign difficult even when the need for change is visible. His argument helps explain why colleges can recognize the need for redesign while still defaulting to the familiar processes, roles, approval structures, and cultural habits that make redesign difficult.

What the question finally requires

The deeper challenge, then, is not the absence of worthy language. Higher education has no shortage of language about learning, improvement, support, and success. The deeper challenge is whether colleges are willing to examine their own operations with the seriousness they ask students to bring to intellectual work. A college designed for learning would not simply teach

students and assess them. It would also learn from its own evidence, revise its own assumptions, and alter its own routines when those routines no longer serve the work well.

Such a college would still care about instruction, credentials, persistence, and completion. Those remain important. It would also understand that none of them, on their own, settles the question of learning. It would be less comforted by measures that change little and explain less. It would be less satisfied with familiar language that sounds serious while leaving daily practice largely untouched. It would pay closer attention to whether students can use what they have learned with growing independence, whether confusion and weakness are becoming visible in time to matter, and whether recurring problems are leading to changes in how the institution actually works.

In that sense, student learning and institutional learning are closely joined. A college that does not learn well about its own design will have difficulty supporting student learning well over time. When the institution relies on weak signals, tolerates late feedback, treats broad aspirations as sufficient guidance, and leaves structural friction largely undisturbed, even very good teaching and very dedicated people are left to compensate for conditions they did not create. The result is a college that cares deeply about learning while organizing too much of its daily life around other priorities.

To imagine a college designed for learning is therefore to imagine one that has become more disciplined about what learning requires and more honest about what its current evidence can and cannot show. It is to imagine a college that arranges teaching, support, pathway design, and institutional inquiry around the real conditions under which students build durable ability. That aspiration is demanding, though it is not vague. It asks whether the college is becoming the kind of place that can help both students and the institution learn more effectively.

The old distinction between providing instruction and producing learning still retains its force. The deeper challenge now is whether colleges are willing to apply that distinction to themselves. A college designed for learning would do more than deliver courses, assess students, and report outcomes. It would become better at learning from its own evidence, its own limitations, and its own repeated patterns. Until that happens, many institutions will continue to speak in the language of learning while remaining organized around something thinner, more familiar, and easier to maintain.

Sources

Association of American Colleges and Universities, & Lumina Foundation. (2017). *On solid ground: VALUE report 2017*. https://www.aacu.org/research/value/value-report-2017

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *Critical thinking VALUE rubric*. https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/critical-thinking

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *VALUE rubrics*. https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics

Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 27*(6), 12–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544672

Janio, J. (2025, March 4). Observable behavior: The essential key to assessing student learning. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/student-learning/202503/observable-behavior-the-essential-key-to-assessing-student-learning

Janio, J. (2026, April 9). Student engagement: Identifying the illusion of learning. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/student-learning/202604/student-engagement-identifying-the-illusion-of-learning

Janio, J. (2026, March 6). The feeling of learning can be a psychological illusion. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/student-learning/202603/the-feeling-of-learning-can-be-a-psychological-illusion

Rosenberg, B. (2023). *Whatever it is, I'm against it: Resistance to change in higher education*. Harvard Education Press. https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/whatever-it-is-im-against-it