DESIGNING INQUIRY THAT LEADS TO CHANGE

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For more than two decades, "building a culture of inquiry" has been a familiar refrain across community colleges. It appears in strategic plans, accreditation narratives, and institutional effectiveness playbooks, and many of us have lived through multiple waves of support intended to strengthen evidence use, whether that support arrives as dashboards, facilitated retreats, or workshops aimed at improving how decisions get made.

These efforts can produce genuine momentum, especially early on, when leadership attention is focused and new routines are fresh. Still, seasoned leaders know how often the gains fade or stall, because inquiry becomes most difficult after the initial push loses momentum. That is when the findings are less convenient, when performance differences require direct, careful conversation, and when acting on what we learn depends on cross-unit coordination, decision rights, and follow-through that cannot be solved by isolated improvements within a single area.

A culture of inquiry is easy to endorse but difficult to build. Most institutions can produce reports, convene around dashboards, and describe themselves as evidence-driven. Yet, far fewer can sustain the habits that translate into an enduring culture of inquiry.

This essay focuses on what it takes to develop and nurture inquiry as a professional norm. The goal is not more analysis for its own sake, but sustained institutional capacity to ask better questions, interpret evidence with discipline, and translate what is learned into new or updated practices that hold under pressure.

In a recent companion essay, *Culture Is the Hidden Architecture of Change*, I argued that culture and operations operate as interacting forces. Culture shapes what people feel safe doing when stakes rise, while operational design determines whether work has clear ownership, clear handoffs, and clear feedback when processes strain. That same interaction governs inquiry, because inquiry depends on both. It depends on a culture that can tolerate truth without defensiveness, and it depends on operations that can convert insight into coordinated action.

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Inquiry is widely treated as a professional standard, and in many respects it earns that status, since it signals seriousness about outcomes, respect for students' time, and a willingness to learn rather than defend. Still, inquiry can become a label that travels easily across plans and presentations while rarely changing how work is actually done week to week, because the routines that determine what information gets surfaced, what questions are safe to ask, and what changes get carried through are often left under-designed.

An authentic culture of inquiry is present when evidence reliably produces learning and learning reliably produces operational adjustment, even when the results challenge assumptions and capacity is tight. That outcome depends on a small set of conditions that

have to be deliberately built, including a predictable review cadence, clear decision rights, shared definitions, and leadership behaviors that make honest examination both safe and useful.

What inquiry promises and what it quietly requires

The attraction of inquiry is not abstract. Professionals value it because it offers a disciplined way to reduce guesswork in environments where stakes are high and capacity is limited. Inquiry replaces isolated experience with patterns that can be tested, and it helps teams distinguish between a local exception and a system level issue. It also supports fairness, since disaggregated outcomes and consistent measures make it harder for uneven results to hide behind reassuring averages.

It supports stewardship, since evidence can clarify which investments produce measurable lift and which persist mainly because they are familiar. It supports trust, since shared measures can anchor difficult conversations in something more stable than interpretation and impression.

These benefits, however, are not produced by data availability alone. They depend on enabling conditions that are easy to assume and easy to under-build.

Middle managers, especially deans and directors, are the primary carriers of an inquiry culture because they sit closest to the work while still having authority to adjust it. They can make review routine by setting a predictable cadence, make evidence interpretable by enforcing shared definitions and comparisons, and make action possible by clarifying who owns which levers. They also shape whether inquiry feels safe or risky, since they are the people most staff experience as "leadership" in daily life. When deans treat evidence as a tool for improvement and follow through with practical adjustments, inquiry becomes a professional norm. When they lack time, authority, or support to act, inquiry stays on the surface as reporting rather than becoming a dependable way of working.

Middle managers determine whether inquiry becomes standard practice or performance.

One enabling condition is interpretability. Evidence helps only when people share enough definition and context to read it similarly, which means agreement on what the metric represents, the time window to use, the comparison that counts, and the level of variation that should trigger action. Without shared analytic norms, people read the same dashboard in different ways and reach different conclusions. A simple way to test interpretability is to ask several teams to state the story the metric is telling and the action it implies, then see whether their answers converge.

A second condition is consequence and decision rights. Inquiry produces improvement only when someone is authorized to act on what is learned, when the levers are clear, and when the work is not forced to travel through ambiguous approval chains that dilute urgency. If evidence reveals a problem but ownership is unclear, inquiry becomes an exercise in diagnosis without treatment.

A third condition is a learning frame that is credible in practice. People will bring forward real signals only when they believe the organization can hold them responsibly. If review is experienced as judgment, evidence will be managed, softened, or avoided. If review is experienced as improvement, people will surface what is true, including what is messy,

because they can see a path from honesty to better work rather than from honesty to exposure.

A fourth condition is a review cadence that is regular enough to support course correction. Inquiry depends on repetition because learning accumulates over time. When review happens only in crises or at irregular intervals, findings feel like high stakes judgment and people shift into explanation and self-protection. When review is scheduled and routine, findings are more likely to be treated as information the team can use to adjust practice.

Without these conditions, inquiry often collapses into familiar failure modes. It becomes decorative, where measures are displayed to signal seriousness while decisions remain largely unchanged. It becomes adversarial, where metrics are used to win arguments rather than to improve systems. It becomes paralyzing, where the search for perfect evidence delays action and quietly protects existing habits. In each case, the institution learns the wrong lesson, which is that evidence is either dangerous or irrelevant, and that lesson is difficult to unteach once it becomes part of organizational memory.

Why inquiry breaks down in practice

Inquiry rarely fails because people dislike evidence. It fails because the organization has not built the cultural and operational supports that allow evidence to do its intended work, especially when the findings create discomfort, require coordination, or imply that a valued practice is not performing as believed.

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One predictable friction is identity protection, where strong narratives about purpose and care (often well-earned) can make uncomfortable findings feel like an accusation rather than a tool. When evidence exposes gaps between intent and effect, the response is rarely outright rejection. More often, it materializes as a set of moves that slow commitment, including extended debates over definitions, requests for ever finer cuts of the data, or a quiet pivot to a different metric that feels less destabilizing. Another version is symbolic acceptance, in which results are acknowledged in principle while responsibility for change remains diffuse, preserving harmony while leaving practice largely unchanged.

A second friction shows up as weak ownership at the seams between units, since inquiry frequently reveals problems that are easy to diagnose and hard to fix when no one owns the handoff. When advising transitions are informal, scheduling is set without a pathway lens, program maps vary across departments, and student support relies on personal relationships rather than defined processes. Evidence can produce agreement *without* a practical mechanism for action. Over time, the experience becomes corrosive, with staff learning that transparency brings requests, scrutiny, and more meetings without authority, resources, or a clear route to change. Managers learn that naming reality creates heat without coordination and thus rewards careful presentation over honest diagnosis.

A third friction comes from the institution's time structure, because inquiry depends on feedback cycles short enough to adjust before outcomes harden. Many colleges operate on a cadence shaped by launches, compliance deadlines, and end-of-term reporting, so evidence is reviewed only after outcomes have hardened and therefore arrives as a verdict. Verdicts invite defensiveness and retrospective explanation, while earlier signals invite adjustment, which is why inquiry is far more likely to take hold when review is frequent enough for

midcourse correction and supported by routines that translate what is seen into the next practical change.

A fourth friction comes from the way some colleges equate seriousness with measurement volume –adding dashboards, metrics, and targets faster than they build shared interpretation and decision rules. Abundance can be useful, yet abundance without a shared narrative and agreed decision rules creates noise, and noise produces inconsistent interpretations that prevent alignment. When interpretation is unconstrained, teams can gravitate toward whichever metric best supports the story they already prefer, and that dynamic turns evidence into a contest. Inquiry becomes durable only when the organization chooses a limited set of questions that matter, defines them well, and returns to them consistently enough that learning accumulates and results become comparable over time.

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These frictions reinforce each other. Identity protection leaves seams unowned, unowned seams make review exhausting, and exhausted review tends to trigger metric expansion as a compensatory move that increases noise and makes learning harder. The practical work of nurturing inquiry therefore begins with breaking this cycle through design choices that make truth safer, ownership clearer, and review more useful.

What changes when inquiry is real

When a culture of inquiry is functioning at a healthy level, the effects are not confined to reports or retreats. They show up in the texture of daily work, in how problems are named, in how decisions are made, and in whether the organization can improve without exhausting itself.

One consequence is that performance becomes less dependent on individual rescue. In many colleges, outcomes are held together by a small set of highly capable people who compensate for weak handoffs, unclear expectations, and inconsistent processes. Inquiry changes that dynamic because it makes variance visible and treatable. Teams begin to see where results differ by section, site, modality, or subgroup, and they learn to ask what conditions produced the difference. As variance is reduced through redesign, student success depends less on luck, persistence, or finding the right person, and more on the ordinary reliability of the system.

A second consequence is that adaptation becomes steadier and less theatrical. When inquiry is routine and tied to stable measures, change no longer requires a crisis narrative to create permission. Adjustments can be framed as normal maintenance of a system that is meant to learn, which reduces change fatigue because the organization experiences improvement as refinement rather than as constant reinvention. Over time, leaders spend less energy convincing people that change is necessary and more energy clarifying what will be tried, how it will be supported, and how the results will be reviewed.

A third consequence is improved coherence across units. The most consequential obstacles to student momentum often sit between departments and functions, and a functioning inquiry culture makes those seams visible without letting them remain ownerless. Evidence is paired with clear responsibility, clear coordination, and clear follow-through, which changes cross-unit work from negotiation to shared problem solving. As coherence increases, students

experience fewer contradictory messages, fewer dead ends, and fewer avoidable delays, and the system becomes easier to navigate for people who have the least time and the least slack.

A fourth consequence is trust that is grounded in behavior rather than rhetoric. Trust grows when staff see that evidence is used to improve practice rather than to assign blame, and when they see that follow-through is as disciplined as diagnosis. That trust changes what people are willing to surface. It increases candor, it reduces performance management of information, and it makes it more likely that problems are discussed early, while they can still be addressed. In that way, trust is not an outcome separate from inquiry. It becomes one of the enabling conditions that inquiry continuously replenishes.

What it looks like when inquiry is built into the work

A culture of inquiry becomes durable when it is expressed through a small set of routines that connect evidence to action and action to review, and when those routines are designed to preserve professional dignity while still confronting reality. This is where the earlier point about culture and operations becomes practical, because culture determines whether people will surface what is true, and operations determines whether what is surfaced can be converted into coordinated change.

It starts with disciplined questions that are few enough to be held consistently and sharp enough to matter. The best questions are anchored in student moments where friction and momentum are decisive, and they are framed so that teams can influence the answer through identifiable levers rather than through broad exhortation. Measures are defined in plain terms, with agreed inclusion rules and comparisons, so that discussion stays focused on what the pattern implies rather than on what the metric means. Stability matters here. If the scoreboard changes each cycle, the organization cannot learn cumulatively, and inquiry becomes an endless restart.

The next requirement is a predictable cadence of review that is frequent enough to allow course correction and structured enough to make preparation and follow-through normal. Review becomes productive when everyone understands what will be examined, what context will be brought, what decisions can be made in that forum, and what happens after the meeting. This cadence is also a cultural signal. When leaders treat review as a search for fault, people learn to manage perception and minimize exposure. When leaders treat review as a search for learning, and when they pair that learning with practical support and clear next steps, people bring forward the information that allows improvement to occur.

Coordination has to be treated as expected work rather than as a favor.

Inquiry then needs explicit ownership that bridges diagnosis and redesign. Evidence does not improve a system on its own. Someone must be responsible for translating a finding into a testable change, defining what success would look like, coordinating implementation, and monitoring whether the change produces the intended effect. That bridge role is often missing, and when it is missing, the organization becomes fluent in explanation and weak in modification. Conversation expands, while practice remains largely unchanged.

Coordination has to be treated as expected work rather than as a personal favor. Most of the issues that inquiry surfaces live across units, which means they will not be solved by a single department acting alone. Durable inquiry therefore requires named handoffs, visible

timelines, and legitimate escalation paths when the work stalls. Collegial goodwill helps, yet goodwill cannot be the operating system. When coordination is under-designed, inquiry generates insight that cannot travel, and people learn to lower their expectations of what evidence can produce.

Finally, inquiry requires a shared professional language that separates accountability from blame. People must be able to say, without fear, that a process is failing students, that a policy is producing unintended effects, or that a valued practice is not scaling, and they must be able to say those things while still feeling respected. The goal is not to soften reality. The goal is to build a mature professional environment where honesty is interpreted as contribution, where responsibility is clear, and where the institution is capable of changing the work without turning every finding into a referendum on the people doing it.

A companion conclusion

The earlier essay argued that culture decides what happens when the process gets hard, while operations decides whether the process is clear enough to hold under pressure. A culture of inquiry is the place where that interaction becomes especially visible, because inquiry asks people to face reality, reality introduces risk, and risk activates the habits an organization uses to protect itself.

This is why inquiry so often collapses precisely when it is most needed. When results disappoint, when equity gaps persist, when a program is cherished but underperforming, or when a change effort stalls, the institution enters a higher stakes emotional terrain. In that terrain, culture determines whether people lean toward candor or defensiveness, toward shared problem solving or protective explanation, toward learning or blame. Operations determines whether the organization has a workable path from insight to action, or whether the only available response is another meeting, another report, and another round of informal negotiation across unclear boundaries.

The path forward is therefore neither a call for more data nor a call for more belief in evidence. Most colleges already have more information than they can metabolize, and most professionals already believe, at least in principle, that decisions should be informed by evidence. The limiting factor is design. Inquiry becomes authentic when leaders build the small number of routines that make learning repeatable, and when those routines are paired with decision rights and coordination mechanisms that allow the organization to act on what it learns without turning every finding into a political contest.

Design starts with clarity about what is being learned and why. It requires a stable set of measures that are trusted enough to return to and narrow enough to interpret without endless debate. It requires review rhythms that arrive early enough to support course correction, and often enough that improvement becomes cumulative rather than episodic. It requires roles that connect diagnosis to redesign, so that evidence does not remain suspended in discussion. It requires cross-unit agreements that are specific enough to guide handoffs when the term gets busy and when goodwill is not sufficient. It requires leadership behavior that consistently treats candor as professional contribution, and that distinguishes accountability from blame in ways that people can see, not just hear.

When those conditions are present, several quiet shifts follow. People begin to surface problems earlier, while solutions are still feasible. They spend less energy managing

perception and more energy refining practice. They become less dependent on crisis narratives to justify improvement because improvement has a place to live inside the regular operating rhythm. They stop treating adaptation as a threat to credibility, because learning and adjustment become part of credibility.

The deeper payoff is that the institution becomes more reliable. Reliability is rarely celebrated in higher education, yet it is one of the most powerful equity-producing qualities an institution can develop, because reliability reduces the hidden costs imposed on students who have limited margin for missteps. When inquiry is ordinary, students encounter clearer pathways, fewer contradictory signals, faster recovery from disruption, and more consistent support across people and offices. They experience an institution that converts effort into progress with fewer traps and fewer delays, and that experience is the practical meaning of a culture of inquiry.

Inquiry, at its best, is not an additional responsibility layered on top of already heavy work. It is the method by which the institution protects its mission from drift. It is the discipline that keeps good intentions tethered to outcomes, and it is the way a college earns the right to claim that it learns.

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