



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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BECOMING AN ACADEMIC FARMER: CULTIVATING A CULTURE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

To educate and serve students better, we must know what services students desire, how to provide services in a timely and consistent manner throughout the institution, what barriers are affecting students we serve, and how and if we are helping students meet their educational goals.

Community college administrators, faculty, and staff should be “academic farmers”—preparing fields for planting by fertilizing and tilling the soil, watering properly, cultivating and stopping pest attacks, and then carefully harvesting the crop. As expectations for community colleges increase, we must be prepared to bring crops to harvest.

Preparing the Soil

How do we prepare the ground? We begin by ensuring that systems, processes, and procedures that contribute to student success are in place. We must provide an orientation where students become familiar with campus resources, such as financial aid (including scholarships), tutorial labs, computer labs, libraries, counseling services, advising resources, career services, campus jobs, disability services, student activities, academic support, and wellness or athletic centers. Students must learn about the important points of contact on our campuses.

Planting the Seed

Seeds that fall on good ground are sure to prosper. As students enroll each semester, we must connect them with the institution. Every employee has a stake in the success of every student. The job of retaining students does not fall upon a single entity or department—it must be a collaborative effort to provide effective services to ensure that each student is rooted in the institution. Facilities should be appealing and have amenities that are conducive to learning. Student resources and activities must be accessible, and processes must be seamless.

Tending

Just as farmers must tend their plants, we must let students know we care and have high expectations of

them. We may be the only faces of reason in their lives, the only encouraging voices they ever hear, the only people who believe in them, and, most important, the only voices of hope to inspire them to live a different life. We must listen to them and be prepared to guide their way to the sunshine that provides the nourishing resources they need to reach their potential.

Cultivating the Field

We must cultivate our institutions daily to ensure that processes are running as they should, buildings and grounds are well kept, and resources and information are flowing between institution and students.

It is important for faculty, staff, and administrators to leave their offices occasionally to meet students in the areas they frequent (increasing students’ comfort levels). We must show them we are accessible and available. We must serve as mentors and resource brokers, providing “just-in-time” information. Students should know who we are and understand our roles, they must know our faces, and we must appear open and approachable. This role is especially critical for faculty—they have more direct contact with students than anyone else in the institution. Faculty are the roots that will help ground the student to the institution—the more contact we have with students, the more likely they are to return and be successful.

Harvesting the Crop

Community colleges are criticized for low graduation rates. We should be more diligent in clarifying students’ educational goals and capturing this information to reflect more accurately the goals that they have set for themselves. We could demonstrate better that we are providing the services they need and want. We must provide information about graduation, the value of a community college education (financial basis, class size, and contact with faculty members), and available scholarships for transfer with associate degrees to all of our students. We should keep students informed about the diverse array of options and opportunities.

Conclusion

We are all academic farmers. We all have a stake in the students who enroll in our institutions; we are all responsible for their successes, as well as their failures.



We must have systems in place to help them make academic transitions, as well as prepare for life. So we must continue to plant, tend, cultivate, and harvest—helping students grow to their full potential.

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MALAPROPISM MADNESS

"I want to become an *electron*—like my father," wrote an earnest English Composition I freshman in his first essay. Instantly, I could picture the horrified student and his father, orbiting wildly around an atom's nucleus. While I have always enjoyed the comic misuse of words, this malapropism clearly reflects our students' overdependence on spell check, lack of auditory discrimination, and lack of reading.

If you require your students to write, you may have noticed increasing usage errors, including malapropisms, even in spell-checked papers. As instructors from all disciplines, we need to approach this communication issue with deep concern, but also with humor.

In my English classes, I like to present malapropisms that former students have "created." To prevent a mean-spirited tone, I explain that the anonymous examples come from students who agreed to share the humor. One writing student, in fact, was hysterical when she realized what she had written: "Since my mother is deaf, I would like to help the *earring-impaired*." She had mistyped "hearing" and accepted spell-check's first suggestion.

Nursing students are not immune to spell-check and usage problems. "I *defiantly* want to be accepted into the nursing program," wrote one. She, too, accepted spell-check's first suggestion and confirmed my suspicion that most students cannot spell *definitely*. In one semester, two students provided similar examples of their empathy: "I want to *relive* my patients' pain" and "I hope to *elevate* elderly patients' needless suffering." While the *relieve* humor could have been a simple typo, the *alleviate* humor might suggest an auditory discrimination problem. I was relieved that they avoided the *patients/patience* confusion! Occasionally, the humor is more subtle: "Excessive alcohol intake will *effect* a patient's recovery." Excessive alcohol intake will *bring about* a recovery? Admittedly, *effect* and *affect* can be usage devils.

Sometimes malapropisms have innuendos. A handsome young man once wrote, "I hope to be successful in college by *studding* hard." Enough said! Another young

man wrote, "My *fiancé* is the most intelligent woman I know." Whoops! Is she a *fiancé* or a *fiancée*?

Students in the human services field also have made contributions. One future social worker wrote, "I hope to *debilitate* my clients." A criminal justice student wanted to "rid inner cities of *violins* and gang *mascaras*." If only inner-city problems were as simple as stringed instruments and eye make-up. One altruist wanted to help "*miners* under the age of eighteen." Were child labor laws the issue? Another student was concerned that "funding for our social services is in *parallel*." I could not visualize this concept, but understood the *peril* of students unable to read spell-check alternatives.

Of course, I remember the résumé with this unnecessary detail: *Martial* Status: Divorced. Considering the nature of divorce, "warlike" may have been more descriptive than *marital*.

What can we do to help our students with these communication issues? In addition to discussing humorous examples with my classes, I have illustrated some of the more extreme examples in animated PowerPoint images, including the young man orbiting as an electron, a nurse elevating a patient's pain, and an "earring-impaired" woman. Many students enjoy the word play and *Malaprop Man* humor from this comic strip site: frankandernest.com. In addition, I have created spell-check exercises, designed to emphasize spell-check's limitations and teach basic usage. Such exercises may improve students' abilities to proofread and detect usage errors:

Keith A. Campbell cloned Dolly after years of unsuccessful *trails*. According to textbooks, cloning from an adult mammal was an impossible *feet*. But Campbell found that if an adult *sell* was inactive, it could express all *it's jeans*. Arriving in July 1996, this lamb was the first mammal cloned *form* an adult *sell*. Alas, we can no longer *sign* "Their Will Never Be Another *Ewe*."

By starting with humor and implementing problem-solving exercises, I hope to create greater student awareness and less mindless dependence on spell-check. Of course, communication is an issue for all of us, not just for English instructors. Remember, *untied* we stand! Or was that *united*?

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