

# The Power of the Co-Curriculum

Joe Cuseo  
(jcuseo@earthlink.net)

## Why the Co-curriculum is Essential for Student Success

The outcomes of a college education are magnified when students take advantage of the total college environment. In short, studies show students who become actively involved in co-curricular experiences are more likely to (a) be satisfied enjoy their college experience, (b) graduate from college, and acquire skills that enhance their career performance beyond college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). These results apply to all students, including both nontraditional and underrepresented students. Pascarella, et al. (2004) report that first-generation students' participation in co-curricular experiences is associated with such positive outcomes as: critical thinking, degree plans, sense of control over their own academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks.

Research also indicates that low-income, first-generation students remain at greater risk of attrition even when their levels of academic preparedness are comparable to students with a college-going tradition. This suggests that the experiences of first-generation students *during* college matters as much (or more) than their experiences *before* college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). One of those during-college experiences that matters is students' social integration into the campus community—the primary province and purpose of Student Affairs. In a study of 51 public institutions, it was discovered that students' social integration into the campus community better predicted their college success than their college-entry characteristics (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). For underrepresented and non-traditional students who may have doubts about whether they even belong in college—sometimes referred to as the “imposter syndrome” (Davis, 2010)—co-curricular experiences that foster feelings of “belongingness” can play a pivotal role in promoting their social integration into the college community and, ultimately, their college completion.

## Re-Defining the Curriculum & Co-Curriculum in the Context of Liberal (General) Education

“Curriculum” refers to formal, classroom-based learning experiences tied to credit-bearing courses. (The word “curriculum” derives from a Latin root, meaning “course”—as in running a course.) Research has repeatedly demonstrated that out-of-class learning experiences are *equally* important to students' personal development and professional success as the course curriculum (Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 1994; Kuh, et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Consequently, the term *co*-curriculum or *co*-curricular experiences have emerged to capture this equality and supplant the old term, “*extracurricular*”—which suggests something supplemental or peripheral.

Although the trend to recognize the power of co-curricular learning is a comparatively recent development, it should be forgotten that general (liberal) education has a long history of being considered a learning process that involves the whole person and capitalizes on the total college environment, including learning experiences taking place inside and outside the classroom—as evidenced by the quotes from the higher education literature:

“The comprehensiveness of general education does not relate simply to knowledge, but to the entire environment in which learning takes place. From the beginning, general education [has] been concerned with the student's total environment; the entire community is considered a resource for general education.”

—George Miller, *The Meaning of General Education*

“To educate liberally, learning experiences must be offered which facilitate maturity of the whole person. These are goals of student development and clearly they are consistent with the mission and goals of liberal education.”

—Theodore Berg, *Student Development and Liberal Arts Education*

“General education reform will go beyond questions of content and formal curriculum, important as they are; its goal will be to create an entire college culture that supports the purposes of general education, within the curriculum and beyond.”

—Jerry Gaff, author, *The Second Wave of General Education Reform*

General education includes both the curriculum *and* co-curriculum; it involves strategic use of the *total* college environment, both inside and outside the classroom. When students utilize the whole college to develop themselves as whole persons, the power of general (liberal) education is magnified, resulting in a comprehensive learning experience that develops all key components of the self.

### **Why Connecting Student Engagement and Learning Outside the Classroom is Important for Classroom-Based Learning**

Learning taking place in college courses is primarily *vicarious*—that is, students learn from or through somebody else (e.g., by listening to professors in class and by reading outside of class). While this type of academic learning is valuable, it’s not complete—it needs to be complemented and augmented by *experiential* learning—i.e., learning directly through first-hand experiences. For example, leadership cannot be developed solely by listening to lectures and reading books about leadership. In fact, research demonstrates that college graduates who participate in co-curricular experiences involving leadership consistently report that these were the learning experiences that contributed most to their leadership performance and career advancement (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

We need to remember that the terms “academic” and “education” are not synonymous. The latter is a broader, more complete learning process that includes both academic and experiential learning. Neither of these forms of learning alone is sufficient; both are necessary for learning to be deep, complete, and transformative.

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