

Published monthly
with support from

A decorative banner with a dark grey background and a red curved bottom edge. The text "LEARNING ABSTRACTS" is centered in white, uppercase, sans-serif font.

LEARNING ABSTRACTS

April 2004 Volume 7, Number 4

The Courage to Learn

Mark David Milliron

Your courage astounds us. We probably don't tell you this enough. You see, we too are pushed and pulled by classes, calendars, and the constant press of our work in education. But when we slow down, look around, and soak in all of your stories, we are humbled.

Many of you will be the first in your family to set foot on a college campus. At times it can feel as though there is no one who really understands how strange and awkward your first steps feel. You fill out our forms, meet our advisors, take our placement tests, piece together a schedule, step into our classrooms – whether they're online or on campus – and enter a new world. Sometimes it's hard for us to remember how overwhelming our rules and procedures seem to you. And we should remember. What you may not realize is that many of us started our higher education journey at a community or technical college. We've just been in this world so long that we sometimes lose touch with how we felt *our* first day. Be patient with us.

Some family and friends don't know much about the journey you're on. Their ideas about college are shaped by movies and TV. Nonetheless, they truly want you to succeed. Some of them have fought, struggled, begged, and borrowed to give you this opportunity. While you are so happy to have their support, you sometimes feel pressured by the weight of their expectations.

You may have different pressures. We've seen some of you suffer through unsupportive, angry, or abusive parents, spouses, or friends. This inner circle plays out their fears or insecurities by discouraging you at every turn, trying to convince you that you too will fail. Some are afraid that your success will take you away from them, so they subtly sabotage your journey. Many of you struggle with uncooperative supervisors or job schedules that make attending class difficult or impossible. Weekend or night courses are a must, even though you're mentally tired and physically worn out. Some of you have major family responsibilities. You search to find good child care and wrestle with the guilt of being away from your kids even though you're going to college to better *their* lives as well; and others must strive to care for parents, nieces, nephews, cousins, grandchildren, and other family. We know that at times it feels as though a higher power is working to keep you from taking this new path. But have faith, because nothing could be further from the truth.

"Will there be people who look like me?" You worry you won't see familiar faces when you look at the students, teachers, and leaders on campus. Or you are

differently abled and wonder whether we'll understand your needs. While we may not be perfect, we work hard to serve and connect with you and your communities. More than almost anywhere in higher education, the diversity that strengthens us and inspires you will be there.

For many of you, beginning with us fresh out of high school makes perfect sense because of where we're located, our cost, our size, or a host of other reasons. You hit the ground running in our honors programs or jump into our student activities. Some of you share your strengths as peer tutors, student leaders, or community volunteers. You are models of service and learning for us all.

Many of you, however, come through our open doors later in life. You may have reached a turning point in your life – the kids are getting older, your job is getting colder, or your dreams are getting further away. It's time for a radical shift. But you wonder what to expect and what will be expected of you as you move into this new world. You're going from waiting tables to mastering computer networking, or from working in a factory to spending sleepless nights pursuing a nursing degree. Others are simply right sizing, training for a job closer to home or one that will allow you to slow down and enjoy life in a different way. More and more of you are coming back for short courses, certifications, or degrees after already achieving a bachelor's degree or higher. For you, it's about staying up to speed and giving yourself new options.

But no matter where you start, you can finish well. Some of you start with us in programs to learn to read and move on to complete a GED; you move through math, reading, and pre-college writing; you complete certifications and degrees on your way to jobs or a university. Along the way, you strive with each passing day, month, and year to get better; and "better" is not about how you compare to others. Better is about how *you* compare to how *you* were yesterday.

Your persistence in getting better teaches us that the time it takes to complete a course or program isn't really the issue. That time will pass either way. What matters is whether you remain at a dead end or move to a place where new learning opens up different pathways for your career and life. With each passing day, you continue on, riding with the ebbs and flows. Obstacles of all sorts flood your way from semester to semester or quarter to quarter: births, deaths, marriages, divorces, getting jobs, losing jobs, and just about every other kind of life experience you can imagine. Some of you need to step out for a time to take care of these situations; but you dive back in, and we welcome you with open arms.

What do you do when it's all said and done? What happens after you move on to work or other education? Some of you go on to run multinational corporations, fly through space, star in movies, run statehouses, and map the human genome. Others target your talents closer to home: raising families, serving communities, creating new businesses, fighting fires, saving lives, or teaching children. In short, you throw yourself into the pool of humanity and the positive ripples cascade out.

And it all begins with a choice – an incredibly courageous choice. You choose to try, to walk through the open doors of our college and begin. You make this choice again and again as you take each step along the journey. You choose to stay, to engage, to give it your best. This choice can and will change your life forever. All because you have the courage to learn.

Mark David Milliron is President and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College. He can be reached at milliron@league.org.
