How Universities are Changing . . . for the Better
Provost Carl R. Lovitt, Central Connecticut State University

Universities have a reputation for being resistant to change. A frustrated administrator once remarked that it was “easier to move a cemetery than it was to change a university.” But that image of universities as stodgy and out of touch with the “real world” is itself outdated. In today’s dynamic culture of ever-changing technologies, globalization, workforce demands for independent and innovative thinkers, and public calls for accountability, universities have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to better meet the needs of students and society.

A key indicator of the profound change that is taking place in universities is the revitalized attention to student learning. Of course, universities have always been dedicated to educating students, but they have not traditionally sought to document what graduates have learned. Whereas universities could certify that their graduates had completed a prescribed curriculum, few had evidence of what students specifically knew or could do. Could their graduates communicate effectively? Solve problems or think critically? Understand other cultures? Contribute to society as responsible citizens? These are the kinds of questions that employers, legislators, and parents were increasingly asking but that few colleges and universities could confidently answer.

Yet in relatively few years, these questions have moved from being an embarrassment to higher education to being at the center of important conversations within universities about what we want our graduates to know and be able to do. Increasingly, universities are focusing on the core competencies that will help students be successful when they graduate. For example, to ensure that all of our students can write effectively, CCSU is instituting a writing-across-the-curriculum program to encourage all teachers to integrate writing assignments in their courses. CCSU’s commitment to cultivating our students’ “global literacy” has also led to greater emphasis on internationalizing the curriculum and supporting study abroad. Similar conversations are underway about how to prepare our students for a technological society and how to foster community engagement.

Knowing what we want students to learn, universities now focus much more on how to accomplish these outcomes. Supported by a growing body of research about how people learn, faculty have increasingly involved students more actively in their learning, incorporated technology in their teaching, and engaged students in projects beyond the classroom. At CCSU, interest in the kind of experiences that produce lasting learning has also led several teachers to publish their own classroom-based research about how different teaching methods and assignments affect student learning.

Finally, as universities have focused more on what they want students to learn, they have revolutionized their assessment of how well students are achieving those learning outcomes. Every department at CCSU has an assessment plan that spells out its intended learning outcomes and how it will assess whether students are achieving them. Assessment helps departments better understand how to promote student learning.
As a result of these changes, CCSU has joined a growing number of universities in becoming both more responsive to the needs of students and society and more accountable to its many stakeholders. The university’s ability to reinvent itself also shows that it has the flexibility and commitment to remain relevant in a world in which change is the only constant.