

## **Beliefs About Knowledge**

Tobin Quereau  
Professor, Human Development

When students enter college they bring with them an accumulation of ideas and beliefs about the process of learning that are based on their own experience in school. Generally, however, these beliefs are more unconscious and unclear than otherwise. You have completed a number of years of schooling to reach this level. If you were asked to describe your own assumptions about learning, could you say what they are?

Research by educational psychologists suggests that many students believe, for example, that knowledge is an accumulation of facts that are basically certain and consistent, either true or false. The trick to learning is to memorize the specific facts that the professor wants you to know so you can repeat them on tests and in papers and get good grades. In this view, knowledge should be fairly simple and clear and it is the responsibility of instructors to ensure that it is when they teach. Students also often believe that learning should happen fairly quickly if it is going to happen at all; if you are struggling to learn something new, there is something wrong with you or the way you are being taught. Finally, students tend to think of learning as something that is a fixed ability. You might naturally be good in one subject, but not that good in another and there is little likelihood of much change in that over time. You either get it or you won't!

Since these beliefs usually reflect the conditions and circumstances of their previous learning experiences in high school, students tend to rely on them when they begin college as well. And the beliefs that students hold directly impact the actions they take (or fail to take!). The evidence from research, however, is that these beliefs need to be changed. The most successful college students learn over time that knowledge is not fixed and permanent, but changeable and often uncertain; that knowledge is not just simple facts, but more complex interactions of concepts and theories; that the responsibility for learning lies with the student more than with the instructor; and that useful learning takes time and considerable effort, but that one can truly learn how to learn more effectively.

So how do you help that sort of change happen? Researchers such as Schommer, Perry, and others suggest that you pay attention to your own internal assumptions about how learning takes place, begin to expand your view of the complexities in what you are studying, be willing to explore uncertainties and new perspectives and question your own beliefs as well as those of others. As you begin to see how your personal beliefs are reflected in your actions, you may find yourself asking for help when you need it, learning from other students as well as the instructor, and persisting with more than the minimum effort when the going gets tough. These are all behaviors that will serve you not only in school, but also in your future careers. It won't happen overnight, remember, but the long term benefits will be worth it!