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Interrogating Integrative Learning

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In light of economic and political pressures—cited by practically every media source covering higher education—the nation is deeply engaged in a common conversation about the goals of an undergraduate education and what it takes to achieve them. A particularly challenging task for many institutions of higher education is clarifying for all stakeholders that in order to get the most out of an undergraduate education, students need to connect, reflect on, and apply learning so that “the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts.” This task of integrating learning is especially challenging for the many students who complete their education at more than one campus and over the course of more than four years, and who may not have structured opportunities to mentally connect their myriad experiences and reflect on the whole. Many faculty recognize that just counting credits and leaving it to students to make connections on their own does not lead to high-quality education. Even small residential campuses—often known for transformative educational experiences—recognize that their students can benefit from more intentional curricula rich with integrative and applied learning.

With funding from the Teagle Foundation, AAC&U launched a multiyear project with nine liberal arts colleges to explore both the various forms of integrative learning and the leadership strategies faculty use to advance and sustain this curricular and pedagogical work. With funding from the Mellon Foundation, five additional campuses joined the project at the midpoint. This issue of *Peer Review* chronicles some of these teams’ work and offers insights about the central role of faculty in galvanizing the necessary experiences that cross disciplines, units, and campus boundaries to promote integrative learning.

At the outset of the project, integrative learning was broadly described as a type of learning that cultivates essential student capacities, skills, and values; engages students with significant questions through multidisciplinary lenses and methodologies; fosters strong connections between academic learning and community-based and cocurricular learning; strengthens the connections between educational outcomes and career expectations; and uses assessment tools that provide evidence of applied integrative learning. Over the course of the project, however, our lively conversations revealed that integration is more complex than just countering disconnects between general education and the major, between academic affairs and student affairs, or between theory and practice. The student experience, more than curricular structures, came to frame our inquiry, expectations, and questions. What problem-centered experiences challenge students’ intellectual and personal capacities without overwhelming them so that they become resilient, adaptable, creative, and confident about

their futures? What types of interactions with faculty, advisors, or professional staff provide students with guidance but do not usurp agency? Are our practices of integrative liberal learning inclusive and supportive for all students? While this group of short case studies emphasizes change processes and faculty roles, their major theme is student success.

Inventories of Curricular Practices

The Faculty Leadership for Integrative Liberal Learning (FLILL) project began with participants conducting a campus inventory of the integrative learning practices at their institution. Each campus had several exciting examples of integrative learning to share but soon realized that (1) many of the practices had grown up organically and relied on the interest of a few faculty, (2) in many cases not all students participated, and (3) to a large extent, standard quality assurance processes such as assessment, program review, and accreditation had limited impact in evaluating and/or strengthening the integrative learning experiences.

Strategic planning and faculty interest were noted as the most important impetuses for creating courses with a multi-disciplinary lens or strengthening the connection between classroom and community. However, as participants reviewed where integrative learning experiences were anchored, they noticed that most of the integrative learning was front-loaded into first-year seminars and general education requirements before it tailed off in subsequent years with faculty being less explicit about integrative outcomes in either the major or in capstone work. As a result, several projects addressed the importance of understanding integrative learning as foundational. The Wagner College case study highlights its effort to provide additional follow-up to their strong First-Year Experience, thus filling a gap in what is a carefully constructed, longstanding four-year program. Spelman College joined the project midway, just as the college was preparing to implement a four-year developmental curriculum called My Integrative Learning Experience (MILE); Spelman's case illustrates the importance of preparing all faculty in order to help them empower the whole student.

Even though the project teams identified missed opportunities, the inventories were also reassuring because they revealed many positive, previously established curricular elements that fostered integrative learning and only needed strengthening or connecting rather than requiring an entirely new initiative. The Wheaton College case study describes the college's work to refresh its signature interdisciplinary program, Connections, by providing students with additional structured opportunities for applied work and experiential learning to cultivate their capacities for analyzing and acting in a complex world. The Bard College team members describe their intention to connect five powerful core experiences, in which all students and all faculty already participate, through a cumulative portfolio that will strengthen reflection on academic and personal growth. Of particular note is the value placed on faculty guidance so that students are more aware of their own goals and progress and consequently take greater responsibility for their education.

As the FLILL project progressed, our discussions moved from a focus on the forms and process of integrative learning to an exploration of integrative outcomes. What began as an effort to create more coherent curricular designs and assignments that emphasize interdisciplinary work

and progressively challenging opportunities to practice skills in diverse settings, for example, was enhanced by a growing appreciation of education as a creative experience for each student. These experiences allowed students to draw upon previous learning to address complex problems and develop new insights. Any formulaic list of structures, outcomes, assignments, and pedagogies intended to promote integrative learning cannot fully capture the spirit of inquiry, discovery, and personal connections that are necessary for deep and meaningful learning. In short, to advance integrative work requires a shift in emphasis from what faculty can do to what students can do.

Collaborative Faculty Leadership

In addition to developing a better understanding of the forms and approaches to integrative learning, the FLILL project focused on how this work is initiated and nurtured. Faculty leadership is key to curricular change processes, and we assumed that small campuses had an easier time of engaging their faculty in conversations that would connect their work. Despite surface similarities among the participating institutions, context, campus culture, and timing emerged as critical variables. In some instances, new administrative leadership prompted intensive rethinking of the undergraduate experience as part of a new strategic plan, whereas for others, the stability of the administration and curriculum called for a strategy to overcome inertia. The Mount Holyoke College curriculum-to-career case study describes a well-developed strategic process for engaging all stakeholders in the future of the institution and its students. Thoughtful braiding together of multiple conversations created momentum to institutionalize integrative learning and rebrand its liberal arts curriculum.

For some campuses, a long history of faculty learning together was already in place to support a new conversation, whereas for others creating new formal and informal learning spaces would be necessary for their projects. Clark University and Allegheny College represent two different approaches and contexts for making visible the time and place for faculty learning. Indeed, a careful reading of all of the cases reveals important lessons about the role of administrators, how faculty take ownership of projects, and the importance of a supportive faculty community. Many of the “lessons learned” can provide guidance to all types of campuses, especially the recognition that faculty cannot do this work alone. The Reality Check by Skidmore College participants highlights several strategies to establish common ground so that administrators and faculty—who by definition operate with different perspectives—can work together.

Although faculty typically claim sole ownership of the curriculum, the initial campus inventories also pointed to important roles for professional staff in connecting classrooms to cocurricular requirements, community projects, and work experiences—all opportunities for integrative learning. As campus teams shared their work over the course of this project, the traditional definitions of “curriculum” and “faculty” changed significantly. Almost every article in this issue suggests that an inclusive community of faculty, staff, and administrators modeling integrative work is an essential foundation for students’ integrative learning. Equally important, participants concluded that not only do students need more experience with synthesizing knowledge, addressing complex problems, reconciling contradictory points of view, and

engaging in personal reflection, but, also, so do those who educate and support them. Yet, as noted in the Carleton College case study, learning together, sharing expertise, questioning assumptions, and constructing creative approaches takes time, trust, and risk taking. While there are no shortcuts, both the Spelman and Clark cases demonstrate how shared texts and tools can facilitate collaborative faculty work.

Approaches to Developing and Sustaining Faculty Leadership

This project revealed some of the challenges in both extending integrative learning as well as developing and sustaining faculty leadership. Whereas hundreds of campuses have adopted some version of the AAC&U LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning—somehow, integrative learning often lacks the specific curricular frameworks, centers, or leadership needed to make it evident on campuses.

In addition, there are some invisible barriers that do not exist for implementing the other outcomes. First, despite having been identified as institutions where integrative learning was taking place, participants in this project realized that the term at best had multiple meanings on their campus and at worst had no meaning at all. Faculty were more comfortable with terms such as interdisciplinary, connected, and experiential. Several of the cases demonstrate the importance of clear communication and common language. Second, it was not clear who “owns” integrative learning, and participants often questioned whether they had the authority to cross boundaries of disciplines and units. And yet boundary-crossing is essential for extending integrative learning beyond a few isolated initiatives. Ultimately, the faculty in the project saw themselves not as leaders but as facilitators or co-learners in working with their colleagues, and consequently they were able to promote collaboration outside of traditional hierarchical and department-bound relationships.

When describing their collaborative approach, several of the cases reveal the value of diverse membership in work groups. Broad participation, however, calls for skilled leadership or facilitation to encourage careful listening, negotiate differences of opinion, and support relationship building in order to accomplish designated tasks. The case studies illustrate how essential personal relationships are for introducing new ideas and creating safe spaces for faculty learning in addition to the more formal professional development opportunities designed to build faculty capacities. Furthermore, as the participating teams move forward with their respective projects, they understand the need for their institution and their colleagues to adapt—including by developing clearer communication strategies and more innovative faculty leadership—because the challenge of sustaining the work is just as great as getting it started.

Ultimately, we learned that providing more opportunities for more students to understand their education as a whole does not mean campuses have to start from scratch. Institutions that are built on the enduring premise that liberal education prepares students for active and meaningful citizenship, careers, and lifelong learning often have strong foundations of integrative learning already established. What is crucial, however, is what administrators,

faculty, and staff do with what they have, and how they see themselves in relation to the students they serve. One key lesson is that faculty should model integrative learning for students in order to define it and sustain it across the institution. Developing faculty's capacity for leadership in integrative learning, then, is not just about working with other faculty for institutional change, but also demonstrating for students what this form of leadership looks like: adaptive, collaborative, inquisitive, reflective, and boundary-crossing. The process of implementing integrative learning on a campus becomes a teaching tool, a means of modeling for students how to engage thoughtfully and actively in their communities toward a common purpose.

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