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The Human Journey
Embracing the Essential

PERSPECTIVES

AT THE BEGINNING of the second decade of the twenty-first century, a new vision for college learning is clearly in view. Through its Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has outlined what contemporary college students need to know and be able to do—in ever-changing economic, political, environmental, global, and cross-cultural contexts. The LEAP essential learning outcomes (see fig. 1) provide a framework to guide student learning in both general education and the major. The LEAP initiative calls upon college administrators and faculty members to give priority to these essential learning outcomes in order to prepare students for the challenges of an increasingly complex world. (see fig.1, page 46)

Sacred Heart University has developed a core curriculum that responds directly to the LEAP challenge

Sacred Heart University, a comprehensive Catholic university whose mission is rooted in both the liberal arts and the Catholic intellectual traditions, has developed the Human Journey, a core curriculum that responds directly to the LEAP challenge. The development of the core program began in 2001, when Sacred Heart President Anthony J. Cernera charged a faculty committee to develop a new curriculum that would be consistent with the university's mission, engage students in both the arts and sciences and the Catholic intellectual traditions, and provide students with a common, coherent, and integrated core foundation. Five years of lengthy and detailed faculty discussion, debate, and compromise brought forth, in 2006, a proposal for a new core curriculum. This proposal was approved first by the university's academic assembly, which is comprised of all full-time faculty members and academic administrators, and then—unanimously—by the university's board of trustees. In 2007, Sacred Heart's freshman class of 950 students took the first courses in the Human Journey.

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The challenges

The proposal for the Human Journey included only a framework of four common core questions, six principles to guide curricular development, and the five disciplinary areas that would eventually design the common core courses. The four core questions of enduring human meaning and value that unify the Human Journey are: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose? What does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world? What does it mean to form a more just society for the common good? These "big questions" would be used thematically to organize five disciplinary areas:

1. The Human Journey: Historical Paths to Civilization (history)
2. Literary Expressions of the Human Journey (literature)
3. The Human Community: The Individual and Society (political science, sociology, psychology)
4. The Human Community and Scientific Discovery (biology, chemistry, physics)
5. The Human Search for Truth, Justice, and the Common Good (religious studies, philosophy)

The core proposal provided the following guidelines for the development of the curriculum and assessment of these five disciplinary areas: a common focus on the four big questions; multidisciplinary, integrative engagement of these disciplinary areas; engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition as characterized by rigorous scholarship and intellectual inquiry; incorporation of common readings; presentation of Western and non-Western culture; continuous development of critical thinking and oral and written communication skills across all courses.

Following the development of the core proposal, the department chairs and other faculty members from the disciplines involved in the core formed a Common Core Chairs Committee to consider how best to implement the proposal. How could each discipline embrace the four core questions? Should we parcel out different questions to different disciplines? Doesn't the question about the natural world,

Learning Outcomes

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for example, pertain mainly to the physical and natural sciences? Does literature really ask about the common good, and what does that question have to do with wanting our students to analyze the literary elements of a work of literature?

We were really stumped when we considered how each discipline could engage the Catholic intellectual tradition. First, we sought to clarify that we were *not* to be teaching the catechism, and that if this tradition was characterized by rigorous intellectual inquiry, then we wanted to make sure that that was what we would be doing. But we still needed to know how the tradition was defined or described, and we needed to determine which works, ideas, and principles constituted the tradition.

Next, we had to face the seemingly unbridgeable divide between commonality and individuality. This debate almost capsized us. How do we connect the individual courses, both within a discipline and across the disciplines? Should we connect the courses? Do we need common texts? Some argued vehemently

Figure 1
The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World
- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused *by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including
- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, *across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

Personal and Social Responsibility, including
- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored *through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

Integrative Learning, including
- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated *through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

Reprinted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise *(Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 12. This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. For more information, please visit www.aacu.org/leap.*

for separate and distinct courses even within the same discipline. Others fought back just as strenuously for commonality and connectivity.

It was one thing to have this argument within the same discipline—the historians debating whether to approach the course from the perspective of social history, for instance—but the argument took on gale-force-wind proportions when we tried to bring all the disciplines together. We had six different disciplines (psychology, political science, sociology, biology, chemistry, and physics) to organize in some common and coherent fashion. We had to hold additional biweekly meetings just for this group.

Without a common language, we were like the citizens of Babel, trapped in the separate and distinct languages of our specializations. Even those of us in the same discipline had difficulty speaking with each other. The room echoed with statements like the following: "I am a specialist in Chinese history." "I specialize in early American history." "I am a postmodernist." "My world ends in 1642 and doesn't go outside of the literary text." "I am a political theorist; what do I have in common with a neuroscientist?" "What is non-western science? There is only science." "I am not Catholic; I'm an atheist." We argued about texts, time periods, themes, and topics. We debated endlessly about pedagogy and best practices for teaching.

And as if these issues were not challenge enough, we tilted our wordy swords at the next daunting monster: the assessment dragon. For some of us, assessment was both an unchartered and a presumably treacherous wilderness fraught with all kinds of threats to academic freedom and the intellectual life of a university. For some, a syllabus had little more to it than the course title and required texts. Some among us had spent years as excellent teachers convinced that one could not "assess" what takes place in the magic of good teaching; beyond the grade given on an essay, they disclaimed that one could truly "assess" what a student learned. There were those who were not aware of the debate on assessment taking place in the upper environs of higher education, or they put little stock into it. But nonetheless, we were committed to developing an assessment model for our new core.

So we had to begin the arduous and necessary task of educating ourselves. We started with the basic vocabulary of assessment —learning outcomes, rubrics, artifacts, "closing the loop." We struggled to understand what these terms meant; we agonized over how to formulate a clear outcome statement and a meaningful rubric; and then once we could do that, we were able to argue with each other over what the common outcome statements and rubrics would be for each common core course. Most of all, we had to learn—and this was a major breakthrough—that assessment was neither threatening nor treacherous, but rather that it is the systematic ordering and recording of what we already excelled at: effective teaching and learning. Assessment, we came to understand, was the compass we needed to ensure the continuous development and improvement of our new core.

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Human cultures, science, and the big questions

Each syllabus for every course that constitutes the Human Journey is framed by the four core questions, and includes a boilerplate, signature statement about the common core. At least two common readings are included in all course sections taught within each discipline. The course material is then presented from the perspective of the four big questions.

In literature, students read and discuss how authors from Homer, Shakespeare, and Dante to Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, and Marjane Satrapi invite us to think about the big questions across cultures, eras, and genres. Students in history examine these questions from the perspectives of both the foundations of Western civilization as well as from a non-Western culture.

In the natural and physical sciences, students begin with a unit on science and religion by reading Dawkins and Collins or Polkinghorne to discuss and debate this contentious issue. They also investigate any number of topics such as biodiversity in nature and human nature; humans and their environment; evolution and natural selection; the mechanics of physics in Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton; or atomic and nuclear physics and quantum mechanics. But the main emphasis for each of these topics is on getting students to think critically and analytically about how our knowledge of the physical and natural world relates to our humanity; helps us to understand the meaning and value of our place in the world; enables us to recognize our responsibility to the world and to each other. Similarly, in the social and behavioral sciences, whether students are reading Hobbes, Locke, Gandhi, Skinner, or Freud, they are focusing on the four big questions of human meaning and value.

A capstone course in religious studies or philosophy focuses on the development of students' ethical and moral reasoning as well as on issues of social justice. Whether our students read Aristotle, Augustine, or Aquinas, and whether they read Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks's *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility,* Lao Tzu, or the Sermon on the Mount, the course challenges students to think ethically and morally as they grapple with real-world challenges and contemporary issues dealing with the environment, global and national political-economic issues, women's issues, governmental leadership, health and disease, poverty, genocide, war, and prejudice. The questions underlying

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Figure 2
Five Dimensions of Personal and Social Responsibility

Ethical, civic, and moral development should not be addressed separately from students' basic responsibilities as learners. Core Commitments identifies five key dimensions of personal and social responsibility that describe developmentally appropriate goals for students in college:

1. Striving for excellence: developing a strong work ethic and consciously doing one's very best in all aspects of college;

2. Cultivating personal and academic integrity: recognizing and acting on a sense of honor, ranging from honesty in relationships to principled engagement with a formal academic honors code;

3. Contributing to a larger community: recognizing and acting on one's responsibility to the educational community and the wider society, locally, nationally, and globally;

4. Taking seriously the perspectives of others: recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work;

5. Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action: developing ethical and moral reasoning in ways that incorporate the other four responsibilities; using such reasoning in learning and in life.

While these five dimensions do not encompass all aspects of conscience and citizenship, they offer a compelling claim as the initial focus for a widespread reengagement with campus values and ethics. For additional information about AAC&U's Core Commitments initiative, please visit www.aacu.org/core_commitments.

the conversation, regardless of the topics, are: What does it mean to form a more just and equal society for all human beings? What are our ethical, moral, and civic responsibilities to forming a more just and equitable world?

As often as possible, classes are brought together for cross-disciplinary conversations on various topics. A cross-disciplinary conversation on love intrigued the students. Faculty from chemistry, literature, religious studies, and psychology came together with students to discuss the different ways the disciplines think about love. Students read a scientific article on the neurochemistry of romantic love, an article by an evolutionary psychologist, Pope Benedict's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, and a wide selection of love poetry. The wide-ranging conversation addressed what love is—emotion, chemistry, cultural conditioning, hard-wired need—what the different kinds of love are, whether love is essential to human existence, and whether it contributes to a life of meaning or misery?

Intellectual and practical skills

We had diverse opinions about topics, themes, and texts as we developed the core, but we all agreed about the importance of developing our students' intellectual and practical skills. Our assessment model enabled us to incorporate the development of critical thinking as well as oral and written communication skills into the course rubrics. We shared best practices for developing assignments and class exercises for teaching these skills in our various courses.

This work led us to a larger discussion about the advancement of academic rigor across the university. A subcommittee of the Common Core Chairs Committee developed a substantive and comprehensive white paper on academic rigor, which the authors defined as "challenging students to perform beyond their current level of achievement through an educational process that nurtures critical, creative, and integrative learning." The authors of the white paper outlined what teachers need to do with and for students in order to help them cultivate the habits and skills of academic rigor. The paper was disseminated to all faculty members across the university and used as the focus a daylong faculty institute. The white paper has generated university-wide attention to the development of our students' intellectual and practical skills.

Personal and social responsibility

Sacred Heart University has a long-standing commitment to educating students to become ethical and moral leaders and active citizens who are responsible to the common good of society. Community service, service learning, and attention to issues of social justice are hallmarks of the university's mission.

Based on a proposal to extend the work of the core across the cocurriculum, Sacred Heart University was selected to be part of the National Leadership Consortium of the AAC&U initiative Core Commitments: Education for

Personal and Social Responsibility. One goal of this consortium is for institutions to create and disseminate innovative practices and programs that foster students' ethical, moral, and civic development across the curriculum and cocurriculum, guided by Core Commitments' five dimensions of personal and social responsibility (fig. 2). Joining the five dimensions and our core's four big questions into a single framework, we formed a leadership team comprised of forty student affairs staff, common core faculty, and academic administrators. This collaboration was a major accomplishment at our university, and with great momentum we created several lasting projects. Two initiatives, in particular, stand out: the establishment of Core Communities, a learning-living community that links our core courses to a residence hall, and the reestablishment of academic clubs that are now built around the five dimensions. Our participation in the Core Commitments leadership consortium has generated university-wide collaboration to foster our students' personal and social responsibility.

Integrative Learning

At colleges and universities where departments, disciplines, and faculty areas of research are increasingly specialized, integrative learning does not just happen. Integrative learning requires work—and lots of it—by faculty, administrators, and students. Our work on developing integrative learning actually began with our faculty development discussions about the core courses within the departments. History was the leader. The faculty of that department began the hard work of getting all their members—full-time and adjunct—on board to develop a common syllabus. The history department's effort was a great success, and it became a model for the other departments.

Our next endeavor to create multidisciplinary, integrative core courses began with the goal of including weekly colloquia for our students. We first established a weekly colloquium hour as part of the university course schedule. Then fifteen faculty members from the different disciplines collaborated during an intensive and immersive weeklong seminar to create multidisciplinary curricular modules. Our aim was to bring together faculty members from different disciplines who were engaging students in making connections across the disciplines. We presented such topics as prejudice, the environment, genocide, ethical leadership, ethics, and genetic engineering.

The colloquium format includes a presentation by three or four faculty members from the different disciplines, followed by roundtable discussion among the students. The faculty members prepare questions or problems for the roundtable discussion, a student from each table reports on the group's discussion, and the colloquia conclude with open conversation. We tape the sessions and make them available online for further viewing.

Catholic intellectual tradition

Engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition is entirely consistent with our effort to help our students achieve the LEAP essential learning outcomes. We understand the Catholic tradition as an ongoing, two-thousand-year-old conversation about the world, our place in it, and God's work in it. The tradition is marked by a set of moral values including love, human dignity, social justice, the common good, concern for the poor, and respect for freedom and human rights.

From the time of Thomas Aquinas, this tradition has rested on the primary assumption that reason and faith are compatible, and so a Catholic university must be first and foremost a university dedicated to search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads us. Moreover, the Catholic intellectual tradition emphasizes the importance of the integration of knowledge. From the perspective of this tradition, integrative learning involves the education of the whole student—mind, body, heart, and spirit. Finally, the tradition is characterized by rigorous scholarship and intellectual inquiry.

The journey continues

We have worked long and hard to develop the Human Journey, and we take pride in what we have accomplished so far; but we also know that we still have more work to do. We are committed to the continuous development and improvement of our core. We continue to meet monthly, with a little less debate but just as much discussion about how to proceed with the Human Journey. □

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