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[Home](#) > [Campus Model](#) > [What's In a Dialogue? Lynn University's Core Curriculum Explores Big Questions](#)

Toolkit Resources: Campus Models & Case Studies



What's In a Dialogue? Lynn University's Core Curriculum Explores Big Questions

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When Lynn University Vice President for Academic Affairs Cynthia Patterson first launched a committee to extensively redesign the university's general education program, she expected some resistance from the faculty. So did Associate Professor Katrina Carter-Tellison, the university's core curriculum chair. "We basically heard a lot of 'Are you crazy?'" Carter-Tellison remembers. The ambitious new program they were proposing would completely change how Lynn students approached their education, weaving "big questions" of liberal learning into the curriculum from students' very first semester. The program also called for a dialogue format of teaching that was unfamiliar to many. "Lynn isn't a classic liberal arts college, and for us to create this kind of full-fledged expression of liberal education—well, a lot of people were really surprised," Patterson says.

More than three years later, however, the new program, Dialogues of Learning, is gaining accolades from both faculty and students, and has helped revitalize Lynn's mission. Lynn, a private institution of about 2,000 undergraduates located in Boca Raton, Florida, has long focused on professional education, and 95 percent of students are enrolled in programs like management, hospitality, communications, and business. But the institution's strategic plan, Lynn 2020, prioritized restructuring the general education program to provide students with the benefits of a liberal education without losing the professional programs that the school is known for. "Our vision was to create a curriculum in which all our degrees—most of which are professional—are grounded in the liberal arts," Patterson says. "We wanted everyone to be exposed to liberal education for all four years, not just the first two."

Planning a New Dialogue

In fall 2006, a task force began exploring the national conversation about liberal education. To introduce what was an entirely new educational paradigm for Lynn, its first goal was to create a common body of knowledge among the faculty about the language of liberal education. The task force members read *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a National Goes to College*, AAC&U's 2002 report that began outlining the essential learning all students need, and later read *College Learning for the New Global Century*, AAC&U's 2007 report from the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative that further clarified these essential learning outcomes. Members determined that they wanted Lynn to have a four-year integrated curriculum in which the majors were defined in relation to the core, rather than the other way around. The new core would also be "innovative, individualized, and international" Patterson says, and would build on national trends in higher education.

Almost 60 percent of Lynn's 110 full-time faculty members participated in committees that discussed in detail each learning outcome and refined it specifically for Lynn, explained Carter-Tellison. "When we created the task force, people realized that we really were going to do this big change, and they rolled up their sleeves and got to work." The committee decided to call the new core curriculum Dialogues of Learning based on a quote from Elie Wiesel in which he described a moral society as one "that is living in dialogue; that is

honoring the humanity of every member." Because dialogues happen more effectively within smaller groups, the curriculum would be centered on seminar-style classes in which students would have ample opportunities for discussion.

There are three main thematic areas that make up the core curriculum: Dialogues of Self and Society, Dialogues of Belief and Reason, and Dialogues of Justice and Civic Life. The dialogues are structured in three phases of learning, starting with a Foundational phase in the first and second years, and followed by Transformational and Integrative/Capstone stages in the third and fourth years. All Lynn students are required to take a total of twelve seminars over four years, four in each thematic area, and to move through the phases of learning as they progress. In addition, a fourth thematic area—Dialogues of Innovation—was created specifically for the university's new January term, a required two-week block in which undergraduates focus on experiential learning projects and courses. The Dialogues core also includes four required scientific literacy courses and four quantitative reasoning courses, also taken across the phases of learning.

What's In a Dialogue?

A first-year student's academic load looks much different now than it did a few years ago, Patterson explains. Then, a student might have taken English 101, introductory math, public speaking, and a major course during his or her first term. Now, the student will take a Dialogues of Self and Society seminar at the Foundational level, a quantitative reasoning course, and one or more courses in the major. In each Dialogues seminar course, half the content is common among students in other Self and Society seminars, and half is specific to the particular course. The common content comes from a set of course readers, designed by faculty disciplinary committees over a year in 2007 and 2008. The Self and Society foundational dialogue reader includes thirty-two selections ranging from the ancient world to the twenty-first century—from Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* to Emerson's *Self-Reliance* to essays about reconstructing gender. The specific content varies depending on the course: in Spring 2010, students looking for a foundational-level Self and Society dialogue can choose among American Pop Culture; Where Do I Belong: Emerging Self; and Oedipus to Oprah. "Students get their 101-level writing and their oral communication practice—what used to be public speaking—embedded in this foundational seminar course," Patterson explains.

While many faculty initially expressed concern about having to revamp their existing entry-level courses, most became more supportive of the Dialogues curriculum as they realized the benefit of all entering students using common core material. And many faculty members were excited to be able to focus the seminars on their own areas of interest and expertise in a way that wouldn't have been possible in standard 100-level survey courses. Carter-Tellison, Patterson, and their colleagues also developed an extensive guidebook for faculty about teaching within the new curriculum, and monthly faculty development workshops provide support and assistance in improving Dialogues pedagogy and content.

Students' responses to the new curriculum have also been generally positive, Patterson says. "As a first-year student, you're excited because the courses are not just like what you had in high school," she explains. "Instead of Intro to Biology or a generic science course, you're taking The Scientific Imagination, and the book is Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*." The Scientific Imagination course fulfills one of the four required scientific literacy courses.

J-Term: Dialogues of Innovation

In Associate Professor Anna Krift's J-Term Course, Talking Trash and Tracking Turtles Take Two, students spent the two-week January term collecting trash—and data—from four different beaches in the Boca Raton area. The students in her class collected trash, studied currents and tides, and tracked turtles and sea birds. The students also studied "sea beans"—plant seed pods that travel with ocean currents—and tracked them back to their most likely place of origin. "We saw Amazon beans that had come up the Amazon river, worked their way into the ocean, and floated up from South American and the Caribbean," Krift explains. Of the twenty-one students in the class, only seven were biology majors, while the rest of the students came from fields like business administration, education, and psychology, and spanned all four class years. The J-Term classes are important because they foster connections in learning, Krift says. "I think the real beauty of the Dialogues of Innovation is that it provides students with an opportunity to really focus on something intensive for a short period of time, and to try something new that they otherwise wouldn't have had the opportunity to explore. The whole idea of the Dialogues of Learning is to look throughout the curriculum for liberal learning, not just in your major."

At the end of the course, students compile the data they've collected during their trash cleanup and share it with several coastal cleanup groups in the Boca Raton area. Krift's Talking Trash course is one of more than fifty options for on-campus study during J-Term; students also may choose an off-campus experiential course. Recent offerings included The Original Americans: Beliefs, Practices, and Challenges, in which students traveled to Native American territories; Ireland's Tradition through History, Literature, and Religion; and Journey of Hope to Haiti, a service-learning course through the nonprofit Food for the Poor.

The Dialogues of Learning has worked well at Lynn University because of its small size and the faculty's willingness to work hard to transform the curriculum, Patterson says, but that doesn't mean Lynn's methods aren't transferable. "I think that every undergraduate institution can benefit from common reading experiences and integrated learning over four years."

Special Note:

Lynn University J-Term students participating in the Journey of Hope to Haiti were in Port-au-Prince on January 12 when the devastating earthquake struck. AAC&U extends its concern and sympathies to the Lynn community, as well as our admiration for the efforts of Lynn's students and faculty working in Haiti and around the world in the best tradition of liberal learning and international dialogue. For updates and information, visit Lynn University's [earthquake update page](#). To contribute to Lynn's Haiti Crisis Fund, visit its [Web site](#).

Institution:

Lynn University

About

- Strategic Plan & Goals
- Annual Meeting
- Membership
- Network Meetings
- Manage Account
- PKAL Events
- AAC&U Donors
- Summer Institutes
- Privacy Policy

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- Publications
- AAC&U News
- Liberal Education
- Diversity & Democracy
- Peer Review
- Research

Programs & Partnerships

- LEAP
- Programs
- Partnerships

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