

YOU HAVE ✓ PREMIUM ACCESS

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEWS OPINION DATA ADVICE JOBS

DEAN ▼
Subscriber RENEW

SECTIONS

FEATURED: Linda Katehi's Tenure at UC-Davis How to Be a Dean What College Presidents Make Get the 2016 Report

Search



CURRICULUM

General Education Gets an 'Integrative Learning' Makeover

By Dan Berrett | AUGUST 08, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM



Appalachian State U.

Saskia van de Gevel, an associate professor in the department of geography and planning at Appalachian State U., studies tree samples with her students as part of the geography course Global Change of the Biosphere. The course is one of six that use integrative learning to explore the theme of global environmental change by using different disciplinary perspectives to answer a shared set of questions.

Students at Northern Illinois University felt little love for general education.

Courses were organized in a way that's common at many colleges: Students picked, say, two courses from column A and three more from column B. The distribution model there had devolved into a "menu-driven sprawl," according to a faculty committee. Another analysis found that just 8 percent of the words that students used to describe their general-education experience were positive, said Edward W. Klonoski, acting associate vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs.

"They found it irrelevant, unrelated to their major, and unrelated to their career aspirations," he said.

Northern Illinois thinks it has found a solution: integrative learning. This approach to learning, which develops the ability to think broadly and connect ideas across disciplines and to the outside world, has become a buzzword among academic managers who see it as a way to make general education meaningful and useful, and to realize the aims of liberal education.

Northern Illinois's newly revamped general-education and degree requirements have been unveiled in stages, with an integrative-learning component starting in the fall. "I hope," Mr. Klonoski said of the new curriculum, "it results in students' being more thoughtful and intentional about their general-education choices."

But converting the grand hopes of a shiny new curriculum into the daily acts of teaching and learning can be difficult. Institutional inertia, turf battles, and competing priorities can get in the way. And it can be tempting to assume that integrative learning is happening when such experiences may need to be deliberately fostered.

Interest in integrative learning has become widespread, says Kathy J. Wolfe, vice president for integrative liberal learning and the global commons for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which offers annual summer workshops to help institutions create closer connections among their courses and extracurricular activities.

"Students and faculty need to be able to practice making these connections among ideas, synthesizing multiple perspectives, and translating that learning into new situations," said Ms. Wolfe. "Most institutions have sort of left that up to the students."

Animating Questions

Big curricular changes often have a lot of moving parts. Northern Illinois's shift is no different, and it includes experiential-learning and professional-development programs. The institution's integrative-learning focus is optional and a bit of a work in progress.

Students can choose among seven "thematic pathways," which are essentially arrays of courses clustered around a common theme and designed to foster integrative learning. The thematic pathways are things like health and wellness, or social justice and diversity. Within each pathway, students take courses in three broad disciplinary categories, like critical analysis, nature and technology, or society and culture, which cast light on that common theme from different perspectives.

Each pathway is also driven by overarching and open-ended questions. Students pursuing the creativity, innovation, and change pathway, for instance, will answer these questions: How can we develop new ways of thinking and behaving? What is the process of creativity and how does it manifest? What precipitates change and what are its consequences?

A student will ponder those questions in, say, a course on Popular Culture in Japan; on Leading and Managing Change; or in an Introduction to Lean Systems Engineering, using each discipline's approach. Many of these courses were once restricted to majors; now they're part of general education and open to everyone.

It's still not clear, though, precisely how students will select their pathways and courses, or how the courses will link to one another, said Sarah J. Marsh, chair of the management department and coordinator of the creativity, innovation, and change pathway. "This is a dynamic process," she said. "We're going to learn by doing here."

Connecticut College has also adopted integrative learning as part of a larger curricular overhaul.

The integrative-learning component will be optional there at first, too, until the number of offerings increases. Connecticut also uses the word "pathways" to refer to the integrative-learning aspect of its curriculum, and they explore similar subjects, like social justice, sustainability, and health.

A key difference is that Connecticut's students will devise the question that animates their pathway. Advisers and sophomore-year courses will help students develop their individual question, which they will try to answer over five courses, making connections through

assigned projects, papers, and exams.

"The beauty of this is that the students own their own question," said Jefferson A. Singer, dean of the college.

The question's origin matters, he said, because it affects students' motivations. If, for example, they are in an art course because it's part of their pathway, they will experience the subject differently because they might be thinking about how to interpret and depict war and peace. Many times, he said, students are simply "sitting there because they are checking off a box."

Explicit Connections

If courses are truly going to connect to one another, professors will need to make specific curricular and pedagogical choices. Otherwise, a college's new integrative framework will become little more than a new set of boxes for students to check off.

Appalachian State University has made integrative learning an explicit part of its general-education curriculum since 2008. It recently revised its approach, scaling back how many thematic groupings of integrative courses it offers, partly to ensure that integrative learning was actually happening.

Cameron D. Lippard, an associate professor of sociology, has taught Sociology of War to sophomores and juniors for six years. He's revised the course to fit into the integrative theme called war and peace. He will teach it in the fall.

The revised version won't be aimed at upper-level students or focus on the nitty-gritty of sociological research the way it used to. It will feature more introductory sociology, include different readings, and be more interdisciplinary. But the thrust of the course is generally the same.

One change will be significant, though, and it will link his course to the others in the war and peace theme. Students will grapple with a question: Are human beings aggressive by nature or are some societies and cultures more violent than others? Students will write a three-to-five-page paper on a conflict, perhaps the one in Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq, examining what sociology says about war as an inherently human endeavor or as a socially motivated one.

Later — in an anthropology, history, peace-studies, political science, or religion course — students will answer the same question, but from one of those disciplinary perspectives. They might do it in a paper, as part of a project, or on an exam. The form of the assignment is up to each professor, but the question will be the same.

"The students encounter that same question again and again," Mr. Lippard said. "They're getting to weigh out from the very beginning each discipline's view about why we go to war."

Students also produce an electronic portfolio, in which they reflect on commonalities and themes in their courses. It is one of the key drivers of integrative and reflective learning, officials at App State say.

But Mr. Lippard also recognizes that many students will still need to be sold on general education. They come to college chiefly to earn a degree that will help them get a job, he said.

He tries to explain that a course like his can help them flourish in their careers, even if they don't realize it. Sociology of War might seem irrelevant to a nursing student, he said, but it could come in handy when he or she is treating a veteran. "That's the importance of a university," said Mr. Lippard, "to give you perspective on something you didn't think would matter."

Transition to Skills

To successfully carry out integrative learning, flexibility matters, too.

The Dallas County Community College District tried several years ago to make this approach part of its core curriculum. The idea was that students would proceed through three clusters of courses, the last of which would be integrative.

But that plan failed, said Christina M. Tomczak, coordinator of the department of philosophy and religion at Cedar Valley College. Students there, like those at many community colleges, tend to take courses when they can, in fits and starts. Their enrollment patterns meant that the college couldn't shepherd them through a carefully curated series of courses. "Our ability to control when students take stuff and in what order was useless," she said.

Faculty members and administrators retooled their approach. Instead of offering students multiple disciplinary perspectives on, say, war and peace or sustainability, students now cultivate skills like oral presentation or critical thinking in several different courses.

"Content is no longer king," said Ms. Tomczak. "Integrative learning is in transition to skills, in the state of Texas for sure."

The skills-based approach will still allow students to make connections across disciplines, she said, and to link what they learn in class to the workplace. English courses, for instance, have begun incorporating science, business, and technical writing into their assignments. "Over time," she said, "we think we will be able to give students a better experience."

That practical focus runs through efforts at other institutions, too. Employers often report that they want college graduates who have not only specific professional skills, but also generalizable ones like the ability to think, write, make presentations, work in groups, and solve open-ended problems. Ultimately, that's what integrative learning is supposed to foster, too.

"We want," said Mr. Singer, the Connecticut dean, "to help students become the kind of thinkers they'll need to be out in the world today."

Dan Berrett writes about teaching, learning, the curriculum, and educational quality. Follow him on Twitter @danberrett, or write to him at dan.berrett@chronicle.com.

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education