

Integrative Learning in the Liberal Arts: From Cluster to Capstone

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LaGuardia Community College is one of seven community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Located in Long Island City, Queens, LaGuardia provides educational opportunities to a diverse student body from over 160 countries, offering over fifty associate degree and certificate programs, as well as noncredit educational advancement through our continuing education programs. To inspire students to achieve their educational dreams, LaGuardia offers students a robust educational experience that includes experiential education opportunities, e-portfolio development, an array of cocurricular activities, and capstone courses. Nowhere are these various elements more important than in our liberal arts major.

THE LIBERAL ARTS MAJOR

The Liberal Arts: Social Sciences and Humanities major is one of the college's largest degree programs, with over 2,700 students enrolled in fall 2013. The fact that the graduation rate of liberal arts majors is below the college average is indicative of the challenges faced in this program. At LaGuardia, the liberal arts degree is offered among six academic departments (education and language acquisition, humanities, English, mathematics, social science, and natural science), so "ownership" is not focused in one area. Therefore, developing and managing support systems such as advisement has proved problematic. As an additional challenge, liberal arts also functions as the "catch-all" major for undecided students, meaning that students often do not form an identity as—or see the value of being—a liberal arts major.

Within this challenging framework, the college is actively working to foster integrative learning into the curriculum. Structurally, the college has taken the initiative to bring the academic departments together by creating an ongoing working group of the department chairs; through this enhanced communication and relationship building, the college is starting to treat the degree more as a single program rather than an uncoordinated array of courses among six departments. In terms of curricular matters, this group provides guidance in offering the two key required means for fostering integrative learning within the degree program: first-year learning communities (liberal arts clusters) and a capstone course, titled Humanism, Science, and Technology. Faculty-led groups meet throughout the semester to discuss trends in teaching integration in the liberal arts curriculum and to share strategies to link writing, problem-solving skills, and technology from the clusters to the capstone course. By providing our liberal arts students with cluster and capstone courses at each end of their curriculum and supporting these courses through regular cross-departmental collaboration and discussion, we provide our students with a rich integrative experience.

In their first semester, all full-time liberal arts students are required to take the liberal arts cluster—a full-time schedule comprised of courses in their program. Students take two English courses (composition and research) and two other courses drawn from the social sciences and humanities departments. These courses revolve around a theme selected by faculty that is designed to enable students to examine a concept from mul-

tiple perspectives, with one hour of the schedule being team-taught by two faculty members to further enable integration between the subjects. At the end of the semester, students produce an assignment that demonstrates their ability to integrate methods, concepts, and terms from the various classes. This assignment can take a variety of forms, including films, performances, research papers, and exhibits.

One of our recent course offerings combines the two English classes with Latin American Philosophy and Introduction to Art in a cluster centered on the theme of hybridity and identity. In the composition class, students are invited to examine the concept of gender and how it plays out in our writing, speech, dress, and behaviors. By examining their own writing and the texts of others (fiction and nonfiction), students learn about composition, audience, and subtext while examining the concept of self-performance. In their philosophy class, they focus on issues of identity as hybrid—that an individual can be formulated by the negotiation between different sociopolitical, ethnic, or geographical groups. Their art class, meanwhile, focuses on representations of identity seen in portraiture, public art, murals, and performance, and students consider overt and coded identities, the interplay of truth and fiction, and the role of artist and audience.

Assignments for each of these classes draw on concepts and information learned in students' partner classes for support and insight. For example, an advertisement analysis paper for the composition class draws from readings on conquest in philosophy; study of conquest in the philosophy class draws on students' ability to "read" an image learned in their art class; discussions of how an identity can be seen in a piece of art draws in turn upon discussions of self-performance in students' English classes.

At the culmination of this class, students work in teams to devise original pieces for exhibition to the college community. After brainstorming what they are doing in each of their classes and locating points of intersection, students must devise an assignment that demonstrates integration. Photographic exhibits, documentaries, and dance pieces are among the various formats proposed by students for this integrative assignment.

After completing their learning community, students choose their own classes. Course selection is based on guidelines devised by CUNY to ensure breadth of study while maintaining their freedom to choose specific courses. After they have completed at least thirty-three credits, liberal arts students have an opportunity not typically afforded to community college students—they take a capstone course.

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A SPACE FOR STUDENTS TO MAKE SENSE OF THEIR LEARNING

In a writing-intensive capstone course, students build upon what they have learned while at LaGuardia in a unique interdisciplinary course. Taught by faculty from all six of our liberal arts departments, this course creates a space for students to make sense of their learning, in and out of the classroom. Drawing on the capstone principles of reflection, integration, closure, and transition, this course is a pivotal moment in their LaGuardia career. It allows students to bring the strands of their diverse academic careers together at the end of their two-year

degree by making connections between seemingly disparate courses and subjects, and prepare for their next steps (which for the vast majority of our graduates means transfer to a four-year school). Making sense of the diverse courses they have taken by the time they are preparing to graduate is not easy, but our capstone course provides students a forum in which this can happen. Faculty are supported in this through a professional development capstone workshop offered through the college's Center for Teaching and Learning.

Themes for this course have varied from genocide to mapping to madness, which has allowed faculty to deliver an integrative learning experience based on their research interests. One section of this course approaches the capstone course by focusing on American

museums. The readings are drawn from fields that are in and of themselves interdisciplinary, including American studies, museum studies, and visual studies, exposing students to subjects removed from traditional disciplinary divides. In terms of the content of class discussions, students consider questions related to the ethics of displaying human remains and religious artifacts, how scientific theories are treated differently in different cities and states, how peoples of other countries and eras are recorded, how curators shape our understanding, the desire to learn, and the impact of space and layout on the reception of knowledge.



In addressing such issues, students apply knowledge gained from specific courses in traditional disciplines. In a recent discussion in the museum-themed section about how we categorize animals and people using systems of taxonomy, for example, a student currently taking a biology class introduced the system of “domains” and argued for its superiority over the more well-known Linnaeus system (kingdoms, classes, etc.). This sparked debate over the need to classify and find order in scientific fields and how that relates to religion, individuality, and prejudice. The debate focused on how to classify people, animals, and plants based on what can be seen with the naked eye *versus* how something came to be *versus* structural features or abilities. Students volunteered examples that were drawn from classes they had taken (including anthropology, philosophy, biology, math, and art), and from their lived experience, including census forms and surveys they had completed, the designs of uniforms, and their observations of grocery store layouts (why we place tomatoes with vegetables but with canned fruit in a different aisle). They then apply these ideas to museums in New York City that they visit during the semester. Readings, discussions, and assignments such as these allow students to critically examine what they see around them by drawing upon their educational experiences (past and present), their lived experience, and the interplay between their understandings and the views of others.

At the conclusion of this course, students develop an original museum exhibit for display in New York in a real (present day or historical) museum and create an advertisement for the exhibit. In creating this exhibit, students are applying what they’ve learned about museums to a subject of particular interest to them. In doing this, they are not only furthering their integration of the various pieces

of knowledge they’ve accumulated over the prior year and a half, but are also focusing that knowledge and critical thinking on a specific topic of interest to them. Indeed, students reported in recent reflection papers that this assignment has “challenged [them] intellectually,” helped them “draw connections between earlier classes,” allowed them explore the importance of their “future major,” and to apply knowledge and skills to their “outside life.”

FOSTERING INTERDISCIPLINARY THINKING SKILLS IN ALL STUDENTS

Each capstone’s theme is secondary to the principles behind it—courses are always interdisciplinary, require critical thinking, and draw upon students’ lived and learned experiences. LaGuardia’s liberal arts students have a diverse and amorphous array of courses, as there is no prescribed sequence. However, the cluster and the capstone courses that frame LaGuardia’s liberal arts curriculum foster interdisciplinary thinking skills in all students, which they will use to make connections between their classes (past, present, and future), their future careers, and their lived experience outside of the classroom.

As we move forward with trying to enhance the program’s success rates, the challenge is to link clusters to the capstone course in ways that continually engage students from their first semester through graduation, fostering even greater integration, curricular cohesion, and sense of community. LaGuardia continues to innovate in this regard. Faculty recently created our Community 2.0 program: online learning communities that link students, for example, in a first-year composition class with the capstone course. Students in the advanced course may give feedback on the writing of first-year students, and often become informal mentors and role models for success. Faculty

are also now considering if it is possible to sequence the courses in the liberal arts curriculum, potentially creating more of a cohort model that can foster more peer interaction and community.

As part of an ambitious redesign of the college’s academic advising system that is now underway, faculty have joined with professional advising staff from the division of student affairs to create a liberal arts advising team. In addition to providing direct advisement (such as course selection), the team will encourage students to participate in cocurricular activities and advising events. For example, this past semester liberal arts students were invited to hear a panel of diverse New York City professionals talk about how a liberal arts education prepared them for their careers; beyond being a presentation, the event was set up for networking, so that students could have the opportunity to articulate what they have learned in our liberal arts program and begin to draw their own connections between their learning and its possible application to a future career. The touchstone for creating all such events is that they reinforce our integrative learning philosophy, dovetailing with a key approach of the clusters and capstone: making connections between students’ lived and learned experiences, between their learning and its application in the world. ■

REFERENCE

Gardner, J. N., G. Van de Veer, and Associates, eds. 1998. *The Senior Year Experience: Facilitating Reflection, Integration, Closure, and Transition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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