



Pulling It All Together:

Connecting Liberal Arts Outcomes with Departmental Goals through General Education

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When our team arrived at AAC&U's 2009 Engaging Departments Institute in Philadelphia, we wanted to work on a plan to both broaden and deepen our students' knowledge of the liberal arts, and in doing so address issues relating to retention, graduation, and assessment as collateral benefits. We had already spent some years working on a number of parallel projects—a spectrum of general education core competencies; a means for students and faculty to assess the coverage of those core competencies; a set of general education rubrics; the design of an e-portfolio philosophy; the criteria for capstone courses—so what we were really interested in was a way to link everything together. We also knew that to create a viable plan we would have to collaborate with a variety of researchers and build on the contributions of others. The solution we came up with at the institute was a plan for the renovation of our liberal arts curriculum.

Eugenio María de Hostos Community College is an unusual place. It is simultaneously situated in one of the nation's most

economically disadvantaged congressional districts, but it is also located in one of the world's great cities. We like to call ourselves a small college, but with some 6,000 students, we are actually a large institution. We like to consider ourselves a typical community college, but we are not. Unlike most community colleges, our students are automatically enrolled in one of the world's major research universities, and faculty members with the rank of assistant professor or higher are not only required to hold PhDs, but also have a contractual responsibility to maintain an active interest in research and publication for the purposes of reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

By definition, the community college offers fewer opportunities for students to naturally draw a cohesiveness from their courses—they have, through no fault of their own, not enough credit hours to finish the process of learning how to “confront different perspectives and integrate insights” (Newell 1999, 18). Under the circumstances of a community college program of studies based on a sometimes

arbitrarily rigid set of developmental and general education curriculum, proponents of integrative learning face two challenges: one, the assumption that students do not have a broad enough multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary knowledge base from which to work toward developing “the habit of integration” (Newell 1999, 18); and two, the assumption that students do not have enough time to gradually build community, to be able to encounter different forms of campus and noncampus discourse.

At Hostos, we were well aware of these underlying issues, and the question merely became one of what to do about them. The key, we felt, was to comprehensively integrate our overall general education core competencies across the curriculum, through each department, and build into our methodology not only high-impact practices designed to capture our students’ imaginations, but to provide a means by which we can assess what we do. As it turned out, the most challenging aspect of this ambition was not the development of all of the constituent elements, but carefully thinking through the implications of their interactions.

Fortunately, the most critical of these elements, our general education movement, had been in place for some time. Characterized by the grassroots involvement of a large number of faculty and staff, our general education standards, procedures, brochures, and initiatives have been approved by the collegewide chairs and coordinators, the Center for Teaching and Learning’s Advisory Council, department faculty, the collegewide curriculum committee and the collegewide senate. We ended up with a set of general education core competencies designed to address the specific needs of our student population.

At the same time we were working on our core competencies, we heard about the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, from Judy Patton, associate dean of fine and performing arts at Portland State University, and a guest speaker at Hostos. Her leadership helped us corral an overarching vision within which the core competencies could be delivered by faculty to our students.

After formalizing the core competencies, the general education committee followed

Patton’s advice when she warned against assuming that important skills are being taught. Patton explained that it was critical for an institution to show proof that skills are being taught and learned across the curriculum. She cautioned us that when everyone thinks someone else is doing something, there is danger of no one doing it at all. To help us assess whether skills were actually being taught, we designed the general education mapping tool, an online application that could be easily used by both faculty and students. Developed over the course of a semester, the resulting application measures course-level exposure to basic and advanced core competencies. Faculty and students indicate the types and frequency of assignments presented in each course. The mapping tool records the faculty and student views of which competencies are being stressed, and faculty members are able to see their students’ results only after they themselves complete the same process for each of their courses.

The mapping tool features built-in data analyses and generates comparative reports at the course, unit, department, and collegewide level. The resulting data allow for comparisons between faculty and student perceptions of the frequency of occurrence of the general education competencies and associated assignments and pedagogies. Course-level aggregated data of student perception provide feedback to faculty, who can put the data to use immediately in clarifying student learning outcomes for their courses. Further, the data permit analyses at various levels of aggregations, from course to unit to department to collegewide, which provides invaluable data at the departmental level to support the academic program review process.

The college is now working with the resultant data to determine how the findings can be aligned more efficiently to tell a more complete story of the teaching and learning at the various levels of aggregation. While not specifically related to Standard 14





(the assessment of student learning) from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education—our accreditation agency—our work in this area is clearly related to the assessment of student learning outcomes as they pertain to the general education competencies determined by and for the college.

The next phase of our general education mission has been the development of rubrics to assess the degree to which students demonstrate mastery of the general education competencies. Using the initial rubrics and development process established by the AAC&U VALUE initiative, the General Education Committee implemented a similar, small-scale project to develop rubrics for each of the Hostos-identified general education core competencies. The general education committee appointed a rubric leader for each Hostos rubric team. We received an overwhelming response to the call for volunteers. More than twenty full-time faculty set out to design four rubrics. The resulting seven rubrics, which will ultimately become eight rubrics, are now in use around the college.

Concurrent with the development of the general education core competencies, online mapping tool, and general education rubrics, we have been slowly introducing various e-portfolio pilot projects. In 2006, the Center for Teaching and Learning, through the college's Title V grant, provided funding to two professors to research the implementation of e-portfolios at the college. The resulting white paper has driven all subsequent e-portfolio development.

By linking students' self-assessment and teachers' evaluations to the overarching goals of general education at their institution through e-portfolios, we hoped that student learning as well as faculty instruction would be enhanced, since these goals typically include skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and the development of global perspectives, to name just a few. In addition, linking electronic portfolio assessment to general

education objectives provides accreditation bodies with electronic portfolios to use in their analysis of institutional effectiveness in meeting the goals Hostos had set for itself, as well as statewide standards. Using the rubrics, artifacts stored in student e-portfolios will be assessed on the degree to which they meet the competency. The resulting data will be analyzed in conjunction with the results from the mapping tool to provide faculty and administration with a clear understanding of how well the general education competencies are being met. Using that information, appropriate actions will be taken to further ensure that the general education competencies are infused throughout the curriculum.

The penultimate piece of the puzzle is the ongoing development of freshman foundation and sophomore capstone courses. The design of these courses was influenced by AAC&U's 2008 publication on high-impact practices, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Initially, these practices found their way into our recently revised honors curriculum. In summer 2009, a task force of the honors committee worked to create a new model for the honors section, and determined that such courses would have to adopt at least two high-impact practices, and address three level-two core competencies. Similarly, we built assessment into the model, and called for carefully indexing specific learning objectives with assignments, planning in advance for ways to evaluate student mastery of general education goals. In addition, the task force decided that all honors students would maintain e-portfolios to track their progress.

In order to complete the final task of linking the general education core competencies, the mapping tool, general education rubrics, e-portfolios, and foundation and capstone courses together to form a more rewarding and transparent education for our students, we brought our team of senior

professors and members of the administration to the Engaging Departments Institute to formulate a plan. We constructed four models for finalizing the integration of general education into our curriculum—beyond a basic distribution model—and then charged the faculty with completion of the job. Representatives and alternates from each department were appointed to a task force and are busy weighing the merits of each model. In the closing weeks of 2009, task force members brought their departments up to date and by spring 2010, the completed package should be ready to bring before college and ultimately university governance.

Although we still have much work to do, we can make two major observations about general education reform. First, the sophistication and interrelated nature of the task makes it impossible for a college to develop an entirely homegrown approach to the successful integration of general education into an undergraduate curriculum. We will also draw upon the experiences of colleagues at distant institutions, upon published research, and upon the resources of groups such as AAC&U. Second, broad faculty participation is crucial for the venture to succeed. At Hostos, we were fortunate that so many faculty were interested in participating in committee work, completing the mapping tool, and piloting rubrics in their classes. In the end, nearly half of our faculty have served in one or more ways on the various committees and task forces responsible for our approach to general education. ■

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