

Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect
An Application to Participate from Carleton College

Carleton has just launched a major study of its present curriculum, which is expected to take several years. We are applying to the “Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect” program to advance a specific part of this curriculum study: an assessment of the literacies that cross-cut individual courses in the curriculum (including, but not limited to: writing, oral presentation, quantitative literacy, information literacy, critical thinking, and visual literacy).

Carleton faculty have created a variety of experiments over many years in attempts to help students integrate learning. These include: Integrated General Studies (a sequence of courses focused on Western intellectual thought), first-year seminars, courses linked as dyads and triads, interdisciplinary minors (concentrations) and majors, “integrative exercises” in majors and capstone projects or seminars in concentrations (these are required for all majors and concentrations), off-campus studies, and, most recently, a student writing portfolio requirement. In the past, these efforts have involved individuals and small groups of faculty. Until now, there has been little explicit discussion of how these and other learning opportunities relate to broader goals of the Carleton liberal arts education. The purpose of this project, then is to “better link opportunities to explicit learning goals and to other parts of the curriculum.”¹

Right now, there is general, if unspoken, agreement among faculty (and students) about what cross-cutting skills are important for students to develop as undergraduates. So much so, in fact, that many faculty members take it upon themselves to deliver all of the skills in single courses, while bemoaning the shortness of Carleton’s 9.5 week terms. We think that a project that helps us discover and articulate how faculty are now teaching transferable, cross-cutting

skills will help relieve pressure from individual faculty members who try to “do it all” every term. In a sense, this project will help us chronicle what is already being done at Carleton, by framing it within a structure of cross-cutting literacies.

One mechanism that has proved effective in several departments at Carleton is constructing a two-dimensional matrix of courses and other student experiences along one axis and important literacies and skills along the other axis (Savina and others, 2001).² One starting question for such an exercise is: What literacies and skills should our majors have as they begin developing their senior integrative exercise project? (The next question, of course, is what literacies and skills should they have when they graduate?) Use of the matrix, pioneered in the geology department, has spread informally across other departments on campus. Recent grants from the Bush Foundation (to support the Writing Across the Curriculum program and the writing portfolio) and the Mellon Foundation (to support Information Literacy) have encouraged departments such as history and economics to hold multiple department retreats and analyze their curriculum in these cross-cutting ways.

Simultaneously, the Perlman Center for Learning and Teaching, has launched a series of general faculty panels and forums in the fall of 2003 to discuss the basic literacies and how they are reflected in the curriculum. These events will address quantitative literacy, writing, oral presentation, scientific literacy, information literacy, critical thinking, and visual literacy.

Finally, all students at the end of their second year are now required to submit writing portfolios, an initiative that began several years ago and became a requirement in June 2003 for the class of students that will graduate in 2005. Students must submit papers from several classes in at least two of the four divisions of the college and write a reflective essay to introduce the portfolio. The writing portfolios have had at least two positive, unanticipated side effects: first,

they have brought together faculty from many departments to discuss college-wide goals for writing and to see how faculty are now achieving these goals through specific writing assignments and second, they have required students to reflect formally on one part of their education. Additionally, our assessment of the portfolios has led to campus-wide discussions about the value of aligning of our writing placement and freshman composition courses with identified writing goals, confirmation that the kinds of writing we value as a college are occurring across divisions, and the importance of faculty development opportunities in both the curriculum and student learning. These positive results suggest that experiments with portfolios for other cross-cutting literacies, such as quantitative literacy and information literacy will be valuable faculty and student development tools.

Through this project, departments and interdisciplinary programs will have opportunities to share their curricula widely across the campus. They will have assistance in examining their curricula in terms of basic literacies, with the hope that individual faculty will come to trust each other's efforts as knowledge increases. By making the "literacy scaffolding" that underlies course content explicit, students will become more intentional about their education and faculty will see more clearly how their efforts contribute to the larger college goals.

The primary questions to which we are seeking answers include: (1) What fundamental literacies are faculty trying to develop in different classes and how do these accumulate along common paths that students take through Carleton? (2) Can faculty regain precious classroom time from a greater awareness of what is occurring elsewhere in the curriculum? (3) Can we use some of what we have learned from the required writing portfolio to construct portfolios that provide checks/guideposts concerning other literacies? and (4) Can we identify the connections

between the development of literacies early in a student's education at college and the capstone experience in that student's senior year?

While the specifics of the skills faculty hope to develop in their individual classes will be unique to each institution, the organizing principles that we hope will underlie the initiative at Carleton are not. The way in which we end up defining the various literacies will provide an intellectual framework from which other colleges and universities are likely to benefit. Furthermore, just as the matrix framework developed by the Geology Department at Carleton has been usefully adopted by other departments, we expect that many other colleges may find this way of organizing their curricula valuable. The way in which Carleton is conceiving of the fundamental literacies and examples from a number of departments of their matrices will be made readily available on Carleton's web site.

As noted above, Carleton has just inaugurated an examination of its curriculum. Among the goals of this effort is to better understand the value of being more intentional about integrating important literacies into a student's education early in her college life. This is a theme that will likely continue to be a focus of programming by Carleton's Learning and Teaching Center. The initiative proposed here is an important step towards understanding what it is the faculty at Carleton collectively do. Identifying to faculty ways in which they do not have to "do it all," will demonstrate the value of this form of assessment and create a demand for it by faculty that will continue into the future.

The team assembled by Carleton includes Mary Savina (Humphrey Doermann Professor of Liberal Learning and Coordinator of the Perlman Center for Learning and Teaching), McBride Professor of Geology and Environmental Studies), Elizabeth Ciner (Associate Dean of the College and Senior Lecturer in English), and Scott Bierman (Associate Dean of the College and

Ada M. Harrison Distinguished Teaching Professor of the Social Sciences). Professor Savina's position as Director of Carleton's Learning and Teaching Center provides her with the opportunity to shape faculty conversations about important curricular initiatives. As a member of Carleton's Geology Department, Professor Savina has been among the College's leaders in discussions about curricular effectiveness. Dean Ciner's responsibilities include oversight over Carleton's writing program and academic advising. Furthermore, she is a standing member of the College's Education and Curriculum Committee that, among other things, annually assesses the effectiveness of a variety of learning goals. Dean Bierman's responsibilities include working closely with faculty to support their teaching and scholarly development. He has been an active participant, along with Professor Savina, of faculty discussions to better understand quantitative literacy at Carleton. Other important participants in this initiative include Carol Rutz, Director of the College Writing Program at Carleton and Lecturer in English, and Jackie Lauer-Glebov, Assistant Director of Institutional Research and Coordinator of Educational Assessment. Both will play crucial roles in developing a framework to achieve the objectives of the initiative.

¹ Huber, Mary Taylor and Hutchings, Pat, 2003, Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain: A background paper for Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect.

http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/LiberalEducation/Mapping_Terrain.pdf

² Savina, Mary E; Buchwald, C Edward; Bice, David M; Boardman, Shelby J, 2001, A skills matrix as a geology department curriculum planning tool: Abstracts with Programs - Geological Society of America, vol.33, no.6, pp.191