

The Catalyst Project ❖ SUNY @ Oswego

Understanding & Promoting Integrative Learning

AAHE Panel – March 19, 2005 – Atlanta, GA

❖ Project Overview

The Catalyst Project is studying three initiatives on our campus where students are encouraged to be “integrative” – these are:

1. First Choice courses for first-year freshmen students are limited in size (n = 19 or fewer) – faculty members who agree to teach these courses receive training to insure that their courses will help students develop integrative skills, strategies they need to succeed in college and to start planning for their future;
2. Intellectual Issues courses represent a 6-credit hour component of our General Education program and build upon the knowledge and skill foundations established in the students’ previously completed general education courses; upper level students enroll in their choice of classes where they are actively engaged in the arguments, debates and controversies that emerge when multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives are brought to bear on important contemporary issues.
3. Capstone Courses that culminate students’ learning as they complete their majors.

During Oswego’s Summer 2004 Freshman Orientation program, we began the process of directing a cohort of first year students to respond to a series of reflective essay questions. These questions ask them to reflect on their learning, explain how they have used their knowledge and skills, let us know if they perceive coherence and relevance in their educational experiences, and describe how they have been changed by their education.

My colleagues and I, through working with the members of our cross-disciplinary Advisory Board, anticipate the Catalyst Project will ultimately help our students to become more fully engaged in their learning. We also imagine that faculty will become more focused on the process of integrative learning, and may be inspired to modify or revise their teaching methods in their courses.

❖ Reflective Questions

These were administered among entering freshmen during summer orientation; the exercise was facilitated by a faculty adviser, and discussion followed their writing time.

1. Looking back at your high school years, reflect on how your experiences as a student have influenced your interests, goals, beliefs and/or general outlook.
2. Describe a recent assignment for one class in which you used skills, knowledge and/or methods that you learned in other classes. Describe how you applied your learning in this course or assignment.
3. In college, you will be taking classes in your major, general education courses, and courses that you choose simply because they interest you. What do you think is the value of the variety of courses that you will be taking?

[Continued on reverse]

This set of questions was administered to the same cohort of students as they were near the completion of their First Choice course at the end of the fall 2004 semester. Some instructors allowed time during class for the students to complete their writing; others asked the students to complete their responses outside of class.

1. As you complete your first semester at SUNY Oswego, reflect on how your early experiences as a college student have changed or influenced your interests, goals, beliefs and /or general outlook.
2. Describe an exercise or assignment you were asked to complete this semester that required or enabled you to use information and/or strategies you learned in other classes. How did you go about integrating your learning for this exercise or assignment?
3. During this fall semester, you have taken classes in your major and general education, as well as elective courses that interested you. What do you see as the value of this variety of courses you are now completing?
4. What have you learned in this First Choice course about being a college student?

❖ **Creation of Focus Groups**

The next phase of the Catalyst Project has our team engaged in reviewing the large amount of qualitative data assembled via these first two distributions of our reflective essay questions.

Concurrently, in order to obtain some benchmark data, we are in the process of assembling several focus groups among upper level students who are currently enrolled in either an Intellectual Issues course (juniors) or in their major Capstone Course (seniors).

The team is working with a faculty member in the Department of Psychology to select several of her advanced students who are completing a course in Program Assessment and Evaluation, and who have also received training in how to conduct focus groups. These students will meet with the team to determine the types of questions they will use during their assigned focus group sessions – in other words, how can we better phrase our questions to motivate these junior and senior level students to be reflective and discuss “integrative learning” as it makes sense to them?

❖ **Catalyst Project Team Members at SUNY Oswego**

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