

## **Integrative Learning in the Freshmen Year: What is an Acceptable Level of Integrative Understanding?**

### **“From Integrative Structures to Integrative Learning in the Freshmen Year”**

**Presented at the AAC&U Conference on Integrative Learning, Denver, October, 2005.**

#### **Background -- The Freshmen Year at Philadelphia University**

A number of structures are in place to support the freshmen year and integrative learning at the university. The First Year Experience overseen by Student Life has grown from pilot programming in small residential communities to programming for all freshmen. All freshmen are presently housed at one end of campus, and this has created a much stronger sense of community than hitherto. Academic units have worked with Student Life to promote programming and curricular connections through a joint committee with members from the faculty, Academic Affairs and Student Life.

A separate initiative within the general education core ( College Studies ) created integrative links between the freshmen writing seminar and freshmen history.

Both groups came together to work on a overall theme for the Freshmen Year. In 2004/05 the theme was “Finding Philadelphia.” An urban historian, Sam Bass Warner wrote a seminal article on the history of Philadelphia entitled “If All the World Were Philadelphia,” which argued that almost every major change in American society happened in Philadelphia and it thus can easily serve as a vehicle to look at broad social, economic, political and cultural change. A common book was selected -- *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell* – Jane Golden and others and the public murals project relate the history of the project and focus on specific murals. Philadelphia at this point is the only major city with such a long running and successful mural program, one based in community involvement and now spread all over the city. The murals are not a symptom of poverty or ghetto public art but part of the whole city fabric.

The freshmen initiative involved the following:

1. **Students were given copy of the book** and asked to do **summer project** on their own communities as point of entry into Philadelphia communities. Summer projects included essays/poems/artwork – prize competition and display. This project was organized by Student Life with input from faculty and the Learning and Advising Center staff.
2. **Student Life supported programming** throughout year : paid for a mural artists panel on campus, ran trips into center city, supported faculty site visits to murals, and a Philadelphia film series.

3. **Faculty were asked to find ways to include the Murals book or connected themes in their classwork, with specific focus on environmental science** ( all non-science majors), American history, Freshmen writing seminar, design studios – architecture, landscape architecture, other design majors, and visual literacy/fine and performing arts of courses in College Studies. Assignments connected to the Public Murals project and some connected simply to the Finding Philadelphia theme – which encompassed the issues of community, racial and ethnic divides, and immigration, among other topics.
4. **Another integrative project arising from faculty cooperation from professional majors and liberal education is the freshmen writing anthology—OPEN** which is a **collaborative** product created from freshmen student work by graphic design majors, honors students as editors, and faculty from graphic design, liberal arts, and the writing program. This year also a multi-media version was created by faculty and students from digital design program – on line version – and CD-Rom.

**We can conclude that the structures for integrative learning are in place. Students had the opportunity to experience integrative learning. But what, we asked, actually took place and what was the level of integrative learning on the part of freshmen students? The Integrative Learning Project team working with the AAC&U/Carnegie project set out to bolster the Freshmen Group assessment process by looking specifically at integrative learning issues.**

### **The Assessment Process**

It was imperative to find an assessment methodology that would take into account the heavy pressure of service work on our campus. We needed an approach that would be sound methodologically, but which would be realistic in terms of faculty time and resources. We collected student work from the Freshmen Writing Seminar because this course reached all freshmen over the course of the year. Work ranged from weak to excellent in quality – as decided by individual faculty.

### **Faculty Analysis of Integrative Learning**

Using this evidence of student learning, we gathered 27 faculty/staff from liberal arts, student life, professional majors, and the writing program. A rubric for analyzing the assignments was created, with questions that focused on whether the students were connecting knowledge from the FYE broadly speaking, with co-curricular programming and classroom assignments. To what extent, we asked, is there evidence of integrative thinking? The assessment process proved effective on a number of levels. Perhaps as important as anything formal we produced was the faculty development aspect of the discussion and the all too rare opportunity for faculty and staff from across the university to talk about freshmen learning and integrative learning in particular.

**Summary of Findings:**

Faculty were asked –“What evidence, if any, of the following can you find in the student work?”

1. The student is connecting knowledge and skills from multiple sources and experiences related to FYE. -- 18/27 said yes - 67% .
2. The student is applying FYE-related knowledge and skills in varied settings. - 11/27 said yes -- 41%
3. The student is examining FYE-related topics from diverse points of view. --15/26 said yes -- 58%
4. The student is understanding FYE-related issues in terms of their context. --13/27 said yes
5. The student is relating co-curricular experiences to in-class assignments. --17/27 said yes -- 63%
6. The FYE experience is leading the student to civic or cultural engagement in Philadelphia. --10/27 said yes -- 37%

We concluded that a majority of students were handling multiple sources, were using co-curricular programming in their papers as sources if given the opportunity, and were able to connect the context to what they were seeing if they were dealing with the public murals project . Moreover, the majority also could see that there were diverse perspectives and diverse groups of people in the city.

Some expressed the concern that many of the connections revealed were superficial and reflected the student as tourist than a traveler – to use the language of intercultural studies. Even so – as one faculty commented - students “did try to make connections about the neighborhood through the murals lens and a history lens.” The percentage of students who were using their FYE experience to become involved in further civic or cultural projects was small, but we concluded that our evidence was limited by the nature of the assignments we were examining in this context, and further investigation was called for.

**Assessment Analysis: What the Students Report.**

Our second assessment approach was to ask the students themselves what they thought about the FYE experience. In order to look deeper into the integrative learning then, we wrote a brief survey for freshmen – at the end of the spring semester, in May of 2005. The survey examined what students thought about Philadelphia and the university’s connections to the city. We asked if the student had participated in any of the integrative

programming or curricular elements, and then asked whether the student perceived integrative connections between the classroom, co-curricular events and the city.

The questionnaire was administered to all students in freshmen history and writing and garnered a fairly good response with 298-304 students responding, depending upon the question.

**Question One:**

What has the “Philadelphia” in “Philadelphia University” meant to you since you have been a student here? For example, what resources of the city have you made use of? What features of city life have you enjoyed...or not enjoyed? How might your college life have been different if it were located in a setting outside Philadelphia?

89% said yes, they used the city, liked that Philadelphia University was in the city, and commented that it was a positive experience and supported their decision about coming to Philadelphia University

11% said no and a few positively loathed Philadelphia.

Sample Responses:

- I enjoy everything about Philly – the people, the smell, the sounds, the atmosphere, everything.
- I typically visit center city at least five times a week, so it has a large meaning (for me) Without Philly, I would have less inspiration and probably waste nights drinking at a frathouse.

**Question Two:**

The theme for the First Year Experience (FYE) has been “Finding Philadelphia,” and the common book most first-year student received was Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell. Have you used the ideas or parts of the book in any of your classes? If so, please describe how you have done so.

59% said they had done in class assignment using the book. This was actually a positive finding as the choice of the book was made fairly late, many faculty had already written their syllabi and the large number of adjunct faculty also made the administrative aspect of the theme a challenge. Students had used the common book in writing, history, environmental science, design and visual literacy classes. Our FYE functions on a number of levels, constrained by the usual things that bedevil integration across the freshmen year, notably:

- Student life institutional culture differs from faculty culture
- Faculty feel the need to cover content – or lay foundations for upper level courses
- Timing of coordination between groups difficult

- Decisions about common themes and common book were often not made until well into the summer

The last question was the one that tried most directly to measure extent of student integrative learning, that is the extent to which students recorded making connections beyond curricular and co-curricular activities. We intentionally did not use the term “integration” feeling that it would not be as effective as asking about connections, so connections was the surrogate for integration in this survey.

### **Question Three:**

Have you done assignments or design projects or other course-work that connected what you did in the classroom with Philadelphia? For example, did you go on a trip connected with class, did you think about something you learned in class while you were in the city?

### **Summary of Findings:**

78% said yes, in a simple count of the responses which indicated that the student did something which connected to the common theme projects. Those that said yes all noted that they had done something that involved the city and its resources, particularly the murals. Many said that the university should do more in the city, and many said they appreciated the opportunity to use the city as inspiration. Others noted that they understood more about conditions in the city as a consequence of their assignments.

**Far fewer made more explicit the fact that they thought differently as a consequence of their assignments and co-curricular experiences. About one-fifth of all the students surveyed showed a level of integration beyond a surface connection.**

Careful reading of the answers revealed that around 16% of those answering yes (ie 16% of the 80% who noted something ) made explicit that they saw things in new ways . We could conclude that these students moved beyond just commenting on going places and doing assignments.

Sample answers:

- Yes... I derive inspiration from Philadelphia
- I think after this... I have noticed more when I am out in the city, I pay more attention to people, houses, murals and neighborhoods.
- I think it has ( connected the classroom with the city) because whenever I go into the city I pay close attention to the murals and look for the ones we talked about as well as finding new ones.
- I learned how to see things and then think in a critical manner about them. I learned to see diversity and realize it is not a bad thing. All in all, Philadelphia is a good learning tool.

- I examine aspects of the city's detail I would normally just glance at.
- Everytime I go into the city and see a mural I think back to writing class and what the picture says about the city. I think that is exciting and neat....
- Whenever I have been in center city and I see the murals, I think about my writing class and what we discussed in the class.
- It is interesting now to go into the city and connect some of the housing to the historical part of Philadelphia.
- (I have learned) general social transitions throughout history can be applied anywhere. Yes, I have made connections from what I have learned, thanks to Prof X teaching American Transitions.
- It tied together what we had learned and really made me see what I read really took place
- Whenever I have been in center city and I see the murals, I think about my writing class and what we discussed in the class.

### **Conclusions:**

One fifth of our freshmen made substantial integrative learning connections as a result of the freshmen year programming. The level of this integrative learning was more than superficial. We could examine student comments in more depth for a more comprehensive analysis but as a rough first measure this survey method and simple count worked well. Whether 20% of the freshmen reaching this level of understanding is acceptable remains for faculty and student life groups to examine. A much larger number of students made surface connections, with 80% of the students responding positively to the FYE initiatives.

This raises the question: what is an acceptable level of integrative learning in the freshmen year? This question should be central to further work on our campus and on other campuses.

Our investigations pointed to a number of lower level and pragmatic conclusions. We could reach more students in class by earlier planning and more extensive involvement of faculty early in the planning process. Faculty trips connected to classroom activities show up as important and memorable and should be supported by funding from both Academic Affairs and Student Life. Co-curricular experiences are clearly positive to integrative learning.

The "city as text" allows for effective integrative learning and using the resources of local institutions, the built environment, local political and economic issues is an effective way to promote student civic engagement on and off campus. Philadelphia has wonderful

resources for learning and students had positive experiences when using the city as a cultural resource. These were freshmen students, moreover, for whom travel into the center of the city was often difficult. Freshmen are not allowed cars on campus, and public transport is often a challenge. Those who overcame the challenges were excited about learning from their surroundings.