

The Catalyst Project

In a turbulent world every college student will need to be purposeful and self-directed in multiple ways. Intentional learners are integrative thinkers who can see connections in seemingly disparate information and draw on a wide range of knowledge to make decisions. They adapt the skills learned in one situation to problems encountered in another: in a classroom, the workplace, their communities, or their personal lives . . . intentional learners succeed even when instability is the only constant. (Greater Expectations, Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002)

I sometimes think, using Robert Frost's words, about "how thoroughly departmental" colleges and universities are. We divide up the pursuit of knowledge into disciplines, each of which is represented on campus by a department. Students must choose one of these specialties—a major—and at the same time take a broad General Education program that is also divided up by subject matter. Then there are the divisions between liberal arts programs and professional programs, and between the academic life and "real" life. College can be a fragmented experience, where, in order to receive a diploma, students complete lists of requirements as if they were so many hurdles to clear.

Yet when we list the benefits of higher education, we assume that students will be able to "put it all together." When graduates take up jobs or professions, we expect that they will be able to apply knowledge and intellectual skills to complex problems. For example, a public relations specialist might draw on statistics, interpretive abilities, and ethics to develop a fundraising campaign. We believe that our graduates will also be productive citizens, able, for example, to write a letter to the editor of their local newspaper addressing a political or environmental issue. Finally, we want graduates' lives to be enriched by many interests and the ability to continue to learn and adapt to changing

circumstances. Many will have not just one but several careers. In all of these instances, educated people must have the ability to integrate, in ways that cannot be anticipated, both knowledge and the different ways of conceptualizing and communicating.

At Oswego we are proud of several initiatives to encourage our students to be “integrative.” In First Choice courses, freshmen learn how critical inquiry, debate and discussion, and research lead to understanding. Advanced students in the interdisciplinary Intellectual Issues courses approach complex problems from several academic perspectives. Seniors finish their college careers with a capstone course in which they pull together work in their majors and other courses in a final project or internship, and anticipate how they will use their knowledge after graduation. We believe that it is the challenging and intense academic experiences that promote “putting it all together”—research projects, internships, study abroad, interdisciplinary study, and written and spoken presentations, and we are seeking ways to embed more of these experiences in our courses and programs.

Because of these efforts, SUNY at Oswego has been invited to be one of ten institutions participating in a national Integrative Learning project, co-sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Oswego’s integrative learning initiative, known as the Catalyst Project, will ask students to reflect on their learning: how they have used their knowledge and skills, whether they perceive coherence in their academic experiences, and how they have been changed by their education. We will ask them these questions when they attend

freshman orientation, after they have complete their First Choice course, after they have completed their Intellectual Issues course, and at the end of their Capstone.

Students' answers to these questions will show us ways in which we can strengthen opportunities for integrative learning at Oswego. We also believe that because they have been asked to reflect on these issues, students will become more aware—or more “intentional”—about their academic work. And thus we have named our project “Catalyst”—“an agent for change or transformation.” We suspect that personal motivation, interest, and even excitement are keys to integration. It is therefore important to learn what students themselves say about how they become in engaged in learning.

This fall we have gathered reflections by all incoming freshmen, and we are preparing to ask them again, at the end of their first semester, to think about how their learning comes together for them. I invite alums to respond, as well: *Looking back at your experience at Oswego, reflect on how your experiences as a student have influenced your interests, goals, beliefs, and/or general outlook. Describe an assignment or project for which you had to draw on a broad range of knowledge and abilities. What was the value of taking a wide range of courses at Oswego?* You can email your reflections to me at varhus@oswego.edu. I look forward to hearing from you!

