Integrative Learning at EIU: Our Discussion Thus Far

The Goal

Integrative Learning has been the organizing conceit by which we have focused discussions to realize our overarching goal: To become the best in the nation at integrating the academic and personal development of our students.

After a good deal of discussion, we circulated a descriptive definition last year, modeled on that suggested by AAC&U. It reads as follows:

Integrative learning encourages students to make connections among all aspects of their lives--academic, professional and personal--and apply learning gained in classes and other life experiences to new, complex situations. EIU provides significant learning and life opportunities through which students, faculty and staff work together to connect academic, professional and personal activities into a harmonious whole. As students reflect on the meaning of their learning and their lives, they become confident, lifelong learners and engaged, responsible citizens.

So that the pursuit of integrated learning may serve us in thinking about how to educate our students most effectively, we now need to clarify the outcomes we are seeking at the unit level. As our discussion continues, we may also want to discuss whether we should establish another institutional learning objective to embody this explicitly in our curricula. By sharing our understanding of the foundations of integrative learning, we hope to move this dialog along.

The four “pillars” of Integrative Learning at EIU

Eastern Illinois University will be the best in the nation in the integrated academic and personal development of students.
Pedagogical Strategies

As we have mentioned from the outset of our discussions, the literature identifies a number of pedagogical dimensions which can help facilitate integrative learning. Throughout our curricula, there are many opportunities for academic and personal growth to occur; this does not mean, however, that these opportunities are being realized. What follows is a non-prescriptive list of these strategies:

**Intentionality**

Opportunities for students to meld together academic and personal growth exist across all curricula, but these opportunities will not always be realized serendipitously. Conscious and intentional inclusion whereby students are encouraged, perhaps even forced, to engage in academic and personal integration must be undertaken by instructors. This might start with something as simple as building IL opportunities into course syllabi at the individual instructor level and/or creating focus groups of students and faculty to discuss such opportunities more broadly for degree programs.

**Reflection**

The defining characteristic of IL is reflection. Assembling one’s larger understanding of how the pieces of a life come together to make meaning requires serious reflection. Embedding structured reflection comprehensively into the curriculum can be the defining experience for our students. Often, nothing more than an effective “prompt” is all that is required. For example, St. Louis University has proposed five simple questions which faculty can use to prompt reflection:

- What have you learned?
- How are you applying what you learned?
- What have you learned about yourself and others?
- How have you used what you have learned to make a difference?
- How has what you learned changed you?

Other strategies that have been used include:

- Written assignments requiring reflective thinking
- Assignments which ask students to reflect on how they learn, study, solve problems, etc.
- Portfolio assembly of academic artifacts which includes reflective assessments of learning and personal development
- Capstone projects which call for students to integrate information and skills across their academic program

**Problem Solving**

An essential feature of academic experiences that can have a significant impact on students is to put them into a “new” practical situation or give them a new problem
which requires them to draw upon information from other units in the course, other courses, and/or other experiences in order to solve or resolve the challenge. This allows learning to be applied to a different context, thereby deepening the learning that takes place.

Collaboration
Through collaboration students can draw upon a richer and more diverse set of experiences and information supplied by peers and faculty. Collaborative research projects, group assignments, interdisciplinary activities, and co-curricular activities all meet these expectations.

Engagement
It long has been known that active learning is a particularly effective strategy. Engagement certainly includes what is generally included within the concept of “active learning,” but it also includes participation in all sorts of applied and practical experiences as well as life experiences (e.g., laboratory experiences, internships, service learning ...)

Metacognition
In large measure this was covered under “reflection.” It relates to having students consider how they learn in addition to the “what.” Having students ponder how they learn can help them learn more effectively the next time they are asked to do so.

High Impact Experiences

These may be the critical element in taking our degree programs to new levels. They are almost unique in offering opportunities for students to make connections not generally offered through our more traditional in-class experiences. They can take many forms; the specifics will be left to the degree programs. That said, some of the essential features of these experiences include the following:

- Act independently
- Be highly engaged in the experience
- Participate in a problem-solving situation, which may be collaborative
- Be intentional in their actions and choices
- Reflect on how the experience has impacted their learning

Such experiences can be curricular or co-curricular, and challenging students in each degree program to participate in some number of these each year could advance our students’ academic and personal development. They include but are not limited to the following:

- Applied experiences such as practica, community-based experiences, etc.
Outcomes

Ultimately, we want our students to become academically and personally well-developed citizens engaged in learning with a burning desire to continue learning and inquiring about the world. At some point, we will want to establish that our students do, in fact, develop these attributes while studying with us and be able to offer evidence of this to prospective students and other public stakeholders.

Such outcome statements are yet to be crafted and should have a high degree of program specificity. As discussions of IL proceed, however, consideration needs to be given to crafting such measurable outcomes, and then gathering such evidence within our program assessment plans and other means by which we assemble student/alumni feedback.