Dear Colleagues,

I would like to accept the kind invitation extended by Ann Smith and Chris Michener to engage in a conversation about our general education program. I would also like to respond, positively, to remarks made by two other colleagues, Larry Luttmers and Greg Gaut, at our last faculty meeting. First Larry: I totally agree that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. To that end I have attached excerpts from three recent articles, in the form of a .rtf file, and a working definition that I have crafted. There is an entire literature out there that we can and should access. I invite you to open and read this material and to respond to it.

Let me first suggest a postulate: it is very difficult to create distinctive major programs. This is because all disciplines need to address requirements formulated by our disciplinary societies. We need to adhere to these formulae if we are to offer credible majors. Selective universities distinguish themselves more by recruited faculty than by distinctive major programs. This is much less true of general education programs. You will find more about this below.

The first excerpt refers to eight transferable liberal learning skills, most of which we already focus on. But I call your attention to the last one, "value awareness." Also in this excerpt is the practice of "...monitoring individual student progress toward identified outcomes."

The next article suggests the need to prepare graduates for moral and civic commitment. This is, I believe, what Greg Gaut was referring to. It also observes that faculty members receive no preparation in helping students connect values to course topics.

The third offers some ideas on how to assess values and attitudes, while the fourth suggests a working definition of values and its relationship to mission.

You would be mistaken to assume that I offer these points for conversation out of some pie-in-the-sky idealism. I believe that our future in an increasingly competitive environment necessitates us making Saint Mary’s more distinctive. As noted above, general education is the best means to accomplish this goal. Needless to say, distinctiveness cannot be construed without reference to mission and each of the points made above—value awareness, monitoring individual student progress, and moral and civic commitment are purely Lasallian values. Assessment of these Lasallian values is essential.

I have begun a new thread on Blackboard accessed through: the Undergraduate College, then Communication, then Faculty Discussion Board and attached (rather clumsily, I'm afraid) the excerpts there as well. I would welcome an online conversation only slightly less than a face-to-face one. Thanks for considering these thoughts, and my gratitude again to Ann and Chris for initiating this conversation.

Tristano
10/1/07
Creating a Lasallian General Education Program

   Authors: Hutchings, Pat and Marchese, Ted
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Answers to these questions can be found in the new core curriculum that faculty forged over several years and that went into effect in 1985. Required of all students and constituting half of the work needed for graduation, the King's core [King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania] is a sequence of entirely new courses, each designed by a team of faculty who began not with questions of turf or coverage but by asking how each course would contribute to student learning of eight "transferable liberal learning skills": critical thinking, creative thinking and problem solving strategies, effective writing, effective oral communication, quantitative analysis, computer literacy, library and information technologies, and values awareness.

These eight outcomes were not only the framework for a new curriculum; they were the building blocks of King's evolving assessment program. Rather than establishing a self-standing office responsible for assessment across the entire institution, King's opted for what it calls "course-embedded assessment," that is, assessment done by faculty with their own students in regular courses. In contrast to the practice elsewhere of episodic, large-scale testing, assessment at King's is an ongoing process of monitoring individual student progress toward identified outcomes; its aim is to provide each student with feedback that promotes learning of larger, cross-cutting outcomes. Assessment exercises and exams are part of regular course activities, and, yes, they count toward the final grade.


Developing these capacities likely requires an intentional approach above and beyond the traditional academic endeavors of colleges and universities. Educating for academic skills alone is not sufficient to prepare graduates with moral and civic commitment. Although many institutions espouse the goal of producing morally responsible as well as intellectually competent graduates in their mission statements, colleges and universities—in practice—do not generally educate for morality as intentionally or proficiently as they do for intellectual skills.
We know we can teach students organic chemistry; we know we can teach them Keynesian economics and the history of the Italian Renaissance. But if that is all we do, then we have failed them. If, in the process, we don’t also teach students about passion and the relationship between passion and responsible action, then we leave them dulled. Our students will have all the knowledge and skills they need to act, but they will lack the focus or the motivation or the profound caring to direct the use of their skills. For that, our students will need passion with a conscience, passion imbued with a keen sense of responsibility….

On most campuses, ethics, values, and social responsibility have become, at best, tacit concerns in the explicit college curriculum. Faculty members receive no preparation to address such issues in their teaching, and they often shy away from helping students connect the values implications of their course topics and themes with students’ own lives. Recent data collected on nearly twenty thousand faculty indicate that fully half of them see students’ development of a code of ethics or values as a low or nonexistent priority for their own teaching, while 87 percent view students’ development of a deepened sense of “spirituality” as a low or nonexistent priority (Faculty Survey 2004).


“But beyond the veil that often exists between instructors and students, the students are thinking. They process the content of the curriculum in the context of their values and attitudes. Sometimes, the curriculum may even change those values and attitudes. While finding out about those changes is a facet of outcomes assessment that faculty members seldom worry about, it is a legitimate and even necessary subject for exploration through assessment. We ought to know the effects of the curriculum, whether those effects are intended or not…” (23) “Along with many faculties elsewhere, we at the University of Maine are struggling with the need to assess our general education (core curriculum) programs. Accreditation teams ask difficult questions about outcomes that are beyond the simple response of a carefully written committee report.
Answering such questions requires hard thinking and creative experimentation in assessment.” (24)

4. OUR LASALLIAN IDENTITY

Values are the priorities individuals and societies attach to certain beliefs, experiences, and objects, in deciding how they shall live and what they shall treasure. Therefore, they are not mere cognitive states of mind but an active positioning of self in regard to a whole-person decision, readiness, or disposition to act in certain ways. Values are moral, religious, intellectual, aesthetic, political, economic, and social. They relate self to the world. Ultimately, values are part of our identity and determine the way we put our lives together. Therefore, the mission of a Catholic, Lasallian university is to offer students a clear sense of Catholic Lasallian values, with an invitation to embrace them in forming their identity and living their lives.¹