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Swallowing the "interdisciplinary pill"

Integrating the Fairfield Core: *Reflections on a Work in Progress*

By Suzanna Klaf, Laurence Miners, and Kathryn Nantz

[The Ignatian pedagogical paradigm has three elements: experience, reflection, and action. For the process to be successful, it must include a pre-learning element, that of context, and a post-learning

In 2005, under the leadership of a new President, Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., faculty at Fairfield University were asked to consider "integrating" the core curriculum, both horizontally and vertically. President von Arx encouraged faculty to make more intentional connections between core courses, and between courses taken to satisfy core requirements and other courses in majors, minors, and curriculum areas. Now in the fourth year of this project, Fairfield has created some cultural change among faculty and students around this idea of integrative teaching and learning.

In this article, we would like to share some of our most important lessons learned as we have helped to lead this initiative on our campus. Our model follows the Ignatian paradigm*, allowing us to see this pedagogy itself as very intentionally integrative.

Context: Listening to campus voices

Our first task was to hear from people across campus, and to listen carefully to their concerns. In

brown bag lunch sessions with faculty, we heard things like, "The core should provide students with a common experience on which we can build," and "I need to know more about what faculty teach in their core courses so that I can make connections with my material." In focus groups with students, we heard, "I love my core courses because I get to meet students from lots of other majors," "I don't know why my core courses can't relate more closely to my major," and "I don't think it is fair for core courses to be harder than my major courses." These comments indicated that faculty and students alike were yearning for the intentional connective tissue that would make core courses more meaningful learning experiences.

Fairfield's undergraduate core is comprised of 60 credits (half of the credits earned by a typical Fairfield student) distributed across five areas: mathematics and natural science; history and social and behavioral sciences; philosophy, religious studies, and applied ethics; modern and Classical languages; and English and visual and performing arts. Additionally, there are two diversity requirements, a world diversity course and an American diversity course. Though some faculty and students would like to see this pared down, the focus of our discussions was not on debating the number of requirements or changing to a skills or competency-based set of requirements but rather on changing the thinking around the core by working together to highlight its cohesiveness.

Experience: What might integrative teaching and learning look like at Fairfield?

The central goals of our core integration initiative are to: (a) create coherence within the core curriculum, both horizontally across disciplines and vertically in relation to the major, through mutual effort of faculty and students; (b) help students understand the impact of the core on their overall education; (c) create structures to foster discussion of the spirit and specifics of the core among faculty; and (d) develop a system for coordination and regular assessment of the core.

Faculty at Fairfield had already swallowed the “interdisciplinary” pill. There is a wide variety of interdisciplinary courses that students can use to construct minors, such as women’s studies, Latin American and Caribbean studies, and environmental studies. However, the idea of integration was new to most people, and asked them to reconsider the ways that students can engage in the construction of knowledge, not just the receipt and use of it. As described by Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings, “Significant knowledge within individual disciplines serves as the foundation, but integrative learning goes *beyond academic boundaries*. Indeed, integrative experiences often occur as learners address real-world problems, offering multiple solutions and benefiting from multiple perspectives.” (AACU/Carnegie Foundation Joint Statement on Integrative Learning) Core integration was also aligned at Fairfield with a living and learning initiative. This meant that students could be making connections between all parts of their college experiences — in the classroom, at service learning sites, during internships or study abroad semesters, while working with faculty on research — the opportunities to knit together different strands of interest and engagement are endless.

Action: Designing faculty development and student learning opportunities

Faculty development for integrative teaching was grounded in a “learning communities” model. Our Faculty and Professional Learning Communities (FPLCs) are groups of faculty and staff who work together for an academic year on projects that promote integrative thinking. For example, one FPLC worked on development of an integrative minor program on the environment that incorporated academic and co-curricular components. Another is currently developing a series of video segments that interrogate students’ notions of and experiences with diversity on campus. Though each

community is organized around a different theme, all are asked to develop strategies that help students to make connections across disciplines, methods, and skills.

Course “clusters” were used to provide students with opportunities to see faculty working together to make connections around a theme. A cluster is a pair of courses that share the same students; faculty work together to make intentional and explicit linkages. This allows faculty to model the habits of mind that are required to do this work. Students see faculty engaging one another across disciplinary lines, using common language and exploring questions from different perspectives.

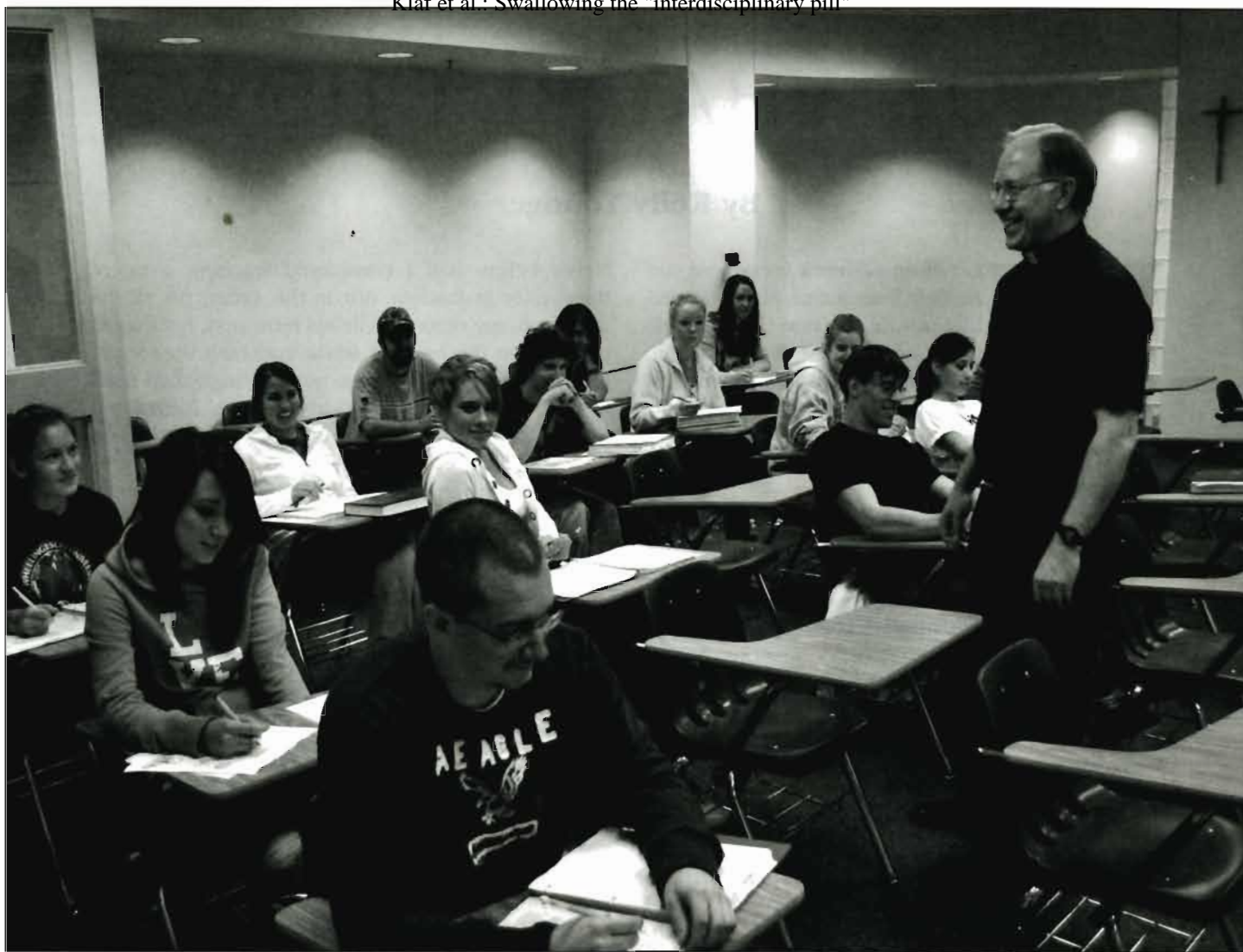
Course “couples” in the science disciplines work on the same model, but highlight two science disciplines; these teams of faculty use backward course design (see Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*) to align their course goals and learning objectives, and then create a series of integrative activities and assignments that help students to achieve those goals. Though not all students have the opportunity to enroll in a cluster, many of those who do report that they lead to other interdisciplinary work in minors, majors, capstone courses, etc.

This summer we will conduct two Summer Institutes on Integrative Learning. These three-day faculty workshops will provide colleagues with the opportunity to work in teams on particular projects related to teaching and learning; the workshops will be organized to promote integrative teaching and learning techniques. Just as we have to build integration as a habit of mind for students, so too for faculty. Currently, seventy-five faculty are enrolled for our workshops. Planning is involving a variety of campus partners with a focus on living and learning, assessment, and reflection.

Reflection: Students making meaning

An essential component of helping our students make their core experience more meaningful has been reflection, engaging students in thinking carefully about the meaning and value of the core, relationships across the knowledge gained from the core, and appreciation of the core’s implications for their intellectual growth. Some of this happens in individual courses, where students are provided with writing prompts that engage these questions. Other reflective writing has been assigned as part of our First Year Experience program, and so has involved both residence advisors and community associates in the residence halls.

For several years, we have asked graduating seniors to write notes to incoming freshmen, completing the following statement: “Dear Incoming Freshman Student, Let me tell you a few things about Fairfield University’s core curriculum...” Though the responses to this prompt are



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varied, one student said, "Another really interesting aspect of the core curriculum is the fact that it pops up everywhere! I have felt a lot more prepared in some of my classes for my major because of philosophy and religion classes that I have taken for the core." Another writes, "I should probably tell you that the core is actually what led me to choose my major. I took a 'cluster' course my freshman [year]; the cluster was a macroeconomics course, linked with an introduction to politics course. I took them to fulfill my social science core, and the ironically ended up being the first prerequisites for an international studies major...It is safe to say that the core gave me an advantage, and led me to a discipline that I love, but which I may not have ever considered." These reflections on their intellectual journeys during college are important opportunities for students to consider their own progress and development as learners.

Building on these efforts, Fairfield is planning to implement an ePortfolio system as a tool to help our students reflect on their learning and make connections. Such a tool would allow our students to move beyond

knowledge to action. Students are encouraged to personalize and integrate their learning.

Evaluation: What have we accomplished?

Making progress on this initiative required top-down empowerment of faculty and the academic and student services divisions, cross-campus collaborations, strategically drawing on campus resources.

Pursuit of core integration is intended to help students move beyond compartmentalization of their learning. Ignatian pedagogy has been instrumental to this end. At Fairfield, we are working to create a context in which integrative thinking and learning take place.

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