

ASSOCIATION FOR GENERAL AND LIBERAL STUDIES 2015

AGLS Awards for Improving General Education: Exemplary Program Processes

Program Improvement

Section #1

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Section #3 – Application Summary

The Collegiate Seminar Program is the cornerstone of the general education requirement at Saint Mary's College of California, a Catholic liberal arts university with approximately 2800 undergraduates. Over the past eight years, the College has been immersed in a process of collaboratively re-envisioning its entire core curriculum, including the Seminar Program. We have endeavored to facilitate a democratic, inclusive and transparent community process which respects the values and traditions of our institution while also identifying and integrating best practices from across the nation. In multiple formats, the process has highlighted collective reflection, earnest consultation and genuine engagement among faculty, students and administrators. Throughout we have embraced a firm commitment to ongoing and frank inquiry into the educational effectiveness of our curriculum, relying on innovative measures of student learning.

Criterion #1: Identifying the need for new program creation and revision.

Since 1941 the Collegiate Seminar Program has played a key role in the undergraduate experience at Saint Mary's College. The Program seeks to engage our students in a critical and collaborative encounter with the world of ideas as expressed in great texts of the Western tradition in dialogue with and exposure to its encounter with other traditions. The four-course sequence is designed to foster a genuine sense of collegiality and intellectual community by providing an authentic forum for students to meet and partake of a common experience — the reading and discussion of shared texts under the guidance of faculty from all disciplines. Classes meet around a seminar table in small groups so that each person can participate actively in the discussion. Equally concerned with teaching a practice of reading as encountering a specific set of readings, the courses seek to heighten the student's awareness of the existence and use of different kinds of knowledge, and, through the discussion of challenging texts and compelling ideas, to improve their skills of analysis, comprehension, and expression. Designed to serve the College's goals of a liberal education, the Program strives to put students in possession of their powers to think clearly, critically and collaboratively, and articulate their ideas effectively — powers that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

These goals enhance and harmonize with the three identifying traditions of Saint Mary's College —Catholic, Lasallian, and Liberal Arts. It is in Seminar where students are most expressly and overtly given the opportunity to think freely and where they are most consciously given the occasion to practice those 'liberal arts' of analysis, reflection, and articulation, which will nurture the habits of such freedom. The search for truth beyond the mundane world of information, the commitment to wisdom both theoretical and practical, and the love of the beauties of mind, spirit and world are values which the Catholic tradition embraces in its institutions of higher learning and these are values both inherent in the Seminar Program and essential to its goals and objectives. Finally, student-centered education and the nurturing of the whole person are qualities at the heart of both the Lasallian mission and of the Collegiate Seminar Program.

Since 2006, the College has been conducting a thorough review of the general education aspects of our curriculum, in the context of maintaining Saint Mary's values while taking into account best practices across the nation. This "Core Curriculum" revision has involved a large scale community effort to re-envision our core learning goals and outcomes in order to nurture a common undergraduate educational experience that is guided by the Mission of the College. Among the new Core learning goals, those labeled "Habits of Mind" represented a renewed commitment to the traditional objectives of Collegiate Seminar - specifically a focus on Shared Inquiry, Critical Thinking, and Written & Oral Communication. The Program revisited its own learning outcomes in 2010 to align them more explicitly with the new Core language and intent.

Within this overarching context, the Collegiate Seminar Program undertook its own review process to further build upon its strengths and more directly address some of its weaknesses. While the Program has always attempted to embody the Mission "to probe deeply the mystery of existence by cultivating the ways of knowing and the arts of thinking", the review asked us to seriously consider how we might rethink our curriculum and pedagogy to promote deeper "probing" and more skillful "cultivation". We also wanted to revisit how our Program might more effectively embrace the Mission's exhortation "to create a student-centered educational community whose members support one another with mutual understanding and respect."

We began our own review by carefully listening to our students. In 2009, we consolidated and analyzed four years of data from the senior survey that students take as they leave the College. A qualitative analysis of students' comments over those years highlighted some key areas for potential improvement. Student reported that:

- They did not understand or appreciate the objectives of the Program;
- There was too much reading assigned in too short a time frame which left insufficient time to thoroughly analyze the texts;
- There was not enough cultural and gender diversity in the reading lists;
- The courses did not seem relevant to their daily concerns and "real lives";
- There was a lack of consistency across Seminar instructors (e.g. expectations, standards, facilitation skills, etc.)

In 2010-11, we used these student concerns as a backdrop for extensive faculty discussions of how the Program might evolve alongside the new goals and outcomes emerging from the overall Core Curriculum process. On the basis of a faculty-wide survey, we identified both the commonalities we continued to embrace with respect to the Program as well as our differing opinions. The Collegiate Seminar's Governing Board hosted a year of public fora, meetings with departments, individual consultations and student focus groups to further refine the consensus as well as the disagreements within the community. We then developed 5 potential models of curricular reform that all embodied the consensus while also articulating competing visions of how to move forward. The models all continued the established traditions of student-driven discussions, a common reading list, and a four course sequence. They also incorporated to a greater or lesser extent a mandate from the new Core Curriculum to create a curriculum that was more explicitly developmental i.e. with increasing challenges and expectations across the four years. The models differed most significantly in the structure of the reading list: chronological versus thematic, Western or cross-cultural, and shorter readings or similar to previous practice. But they also highlighted different pedagogical concerns such as developmental progression, scaffolding, incorporation of historical/cultural context, and focus on shared inquiry skills. In the Fall of 2011, the entire faculty voted online on the 5 models and the Academic Senate ultimately endorsed the model with the most votes. The approved model will be described more fully in the next section but it should be noted here that the decision was a democratic one but not based upon a full consensus. While a majority of the faculty endorsed the new model, a minority strongly believed that the Program did not require any significant revision. This dynamic added a level of complexity to the implementation of the new model that will be revisited later in this narrative.

Criterion #2: Identification of Goals and Procedure Used to Address Goals

The primary curricular innovations of the new model were

- 1) a developmental progression of readings and assignments;
- 2) the scaffolding of shared inquiry, critical thinking and writing skills;
- 3) an emphasis on reflective practice and meta-learning;
- 4) a more deliberate integration of global and multicultural voices;
- 5) and an explicit alignment between writing in Composition and in the Freshmen Seminar.

Developmental progression of readings and assignments

The Core Curriculum process identified and endorsed best practices in developmental learning as central elements in achieving academic excellence. An institutional commitment to a general education curriculum which embodies incremental learning and increasing levels of challenge clearly emerged from the Core revision conversations among faculty. In addition, our Seminar students were telling us through the senior surveys that they felt overwhelmed by the quantity and difficulty of the reading expected of them, and that they did not see how many of the readings were relevant to their own lives. In dialogue with these concerns, and in keeping with the Lasallian principle of “meeting the students where they are”, the new Seminar model shortened the readings in the lower division seminars and reorganized them to engage students more fully from an early point. For instance, in the past the Freshmen Seminar had been chronologically based and confronted incoming students with long reading assignments of Classical philosophy and literature that presented significant difficulties. The new Freshman reading list abandoned the chronology and instead juxtaposed contemporary and ancient texts to facilitate how the students make connections to their daily human concerns. They would read Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” alongside LeGuin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” and wonder what it means to challenge the status quo. Or they would read Aristotle’s chapter on friendship from the Nicomachean Ethics alongside Dana Johnson’s “Melvin in the 6th Grade” – a short story about the challenges of friendship for a young girl.

Scaffolding of shared inquiry, critical thinking and writing skills

In the spirit of the Mission’s commitment to fostering a “student-centered educational community”, the new model also attempted to developmentally scaffold some key skills required to participate effectively in the intellectual community of the Seminar classroom. The goal was to deliberately and consistently introduce new students to the foundational writing, reading, and discussion skills necessary for success in the seminar sequence. We wanted to make these skills explicitly developmental, such that more challenging or complex skills could follow upon more basic or comparatively simple skills in a progression of learning. In the initial stages of implementation, when designing the first Freshmen Seminar to be piloted in 2012-13, we attempted to identify these skills by tapping into the accumulated pedagogical experience and wisdom of the faculty. In November 2011, an email poll of the faculty at large asked two questions: “What specific seminar skills do you find your students have the most difficulty mastering and would you want us to specifically address in the Freshmen Seminar? Do you have any pedagogical approaches that you have successfully used to guide students in this particular area?” The 11 themes that emerged from that poll have come to be called the “seminar learning modules” or “skills modules”. They included things like Finding a Voice, Listening, Questioning, Close Reading, Collaborating, and Disagreeing. Our goal became to find ways to explicitly foreground and scaffold these skills through the use of classroom activities, written assignments, and structured reflections. Once a module had been introduced, students might return to it in

later courses as they learn to grapple with its increasing levels of complexity. So the curriculum would have an iterative developmental structure that highlights relevant skills within the ongoing practice of text-centered discussions.

Emphasis on reflective practice and meta-learning

The Core Curriculum process had identified and endorsed best practices in self-reflection as a powerful support for effective learning. In addition, we were hearing from our Seminar students that they did not understand or appreciate the objectives of the Program. With these concerns in mind, the new model set a goal to incorporate reflective practice throughout the Seminar sequence. We wanted to be more transparent about our own learning objectives and engage our students in a more explicit dialogue, with themselves and with one another, about their progression toward those objectives. The primary design element in this area became a self-reflection essay that each student completes at the end of each Seminar course. In it, they step back and consider their learning with regard to the Program's learning outcomes. These essays become part of a portfolio so that instructors have access to their students' prior self-reflections, and thus can track their students' progress through the Seminar sequence. These essays culminate in a capstone assignment in the Senior Seminar where the students are asked to synthesize and integrate their learning across their Core courses as well as their majors.

In March 2015, we invited Ellen Woods, the Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Stanford University, to complete an external review of the Program. In her final report she stated that "student engagement in self-reflection and metacognition anchors the achievement of learning outcomes for the new Seminar. This emphasis ensures a learner-centered pedagogy and encourages students to think critically and to be intentional about taking responsibility for their own education."

Integration of global and multicultural voices

In response to long-standing requests from both students and faculty, the new model specifically prioritized the integration of more cultural and gender diversity into the reading lists. The Freshmen Seminar "Critical Strategies & Great Questions" would include a significant number of texts representing American Diversity (one of the Core Curriculum learning goals) and the Senior Seminar "Global Conversations of the 20th and 21st Centuries" would include more Global Perspectives (another Core learning goal.)

Alignment between writing in Composition and in the Freshmen Seminar

The Core Curriculum process also encouraged more integration across Core courses. To better prepare students for the experience of Seminar, the Freshmen course was moved to the spring semester so that students could adjust to college life and have already completed one course in composition, English 4. Our goal was to more explicitly align the writing assignments between the two courses, so that students entering the Freshmen Seminar could build upon the foundational writing skills that they had developed in their Fall Composition class.

Criterion #3 – Actions Taken

Faculty Development

The significant changes in the curricular design of the Seminar Program called for more extensive opportunities for faculty to gather to discuss operationalizing and implementation strategies. This was an opportunity to reinvigorate our teaching community, share existing best practices amongst ourselves, and embrace our shared commitment to the Program. Beginning in 2011, we inaugurated a new series of faculty development experiences dubbed the “formation” – a term used by the Christian Brothers for their own process of deepening their understanding and commitment to their vocation. The Formation was designed to

- provide a grounding in basic seminar pedagogy for both new and returning instructors;
- guide all instructors through the innovations of the new sequence (e.g. the developmental progression of skills, more guidance in shared inquiry processes, emphasis on reflection and meta-learning, etc.);
- support them in developing individualized curricula that meet its spirit and intent (e.g. class plans and common assessment processes.)

Before teaching in the revised sequence, all faculty participated in an intensive two-semester faculty development process, beginning in the semester before they taught in the new sequence and continuing through the semester when they actually taught their first new course. Every participating faculty member received a \$1000 stipend at the end of their two semesters. These stipends were made possible by a four-year grant awarded to the Program by the President’s office.

The first two years of the Formation (2011-2013) focused on maximizing opportunities to bring faculty together in face-to-face retreat formats and lunchtime workshops. These meetings were run as collective reflections on how to best address the goals of the new model. The fruits of these labors were collected in a searchable online archive that acted as a virtual teaching commons for the Program. The second two years (2014-2016) shifted to focus more on sharing the approaches that had been developed. In order to provide faculty with more flexibility in participating, the Formation moved to a hybrid format. Face-to-face meetings continued in traditional retreat formats but the lunchtime workshops were phased out and replaced with online and small group activities. In essence, the Formation was “flipped.” So the delivery of content (e.g. curricular frameworks, examples of best practices, and other such resources) occurred mainly via online videos, presentations and documents, while precious face-to-face time was devoted to the more interactive activities such as text discussions and class visit exchanges. Our goal was that this community development approach would have the benefit of disseminating the accumulated pedagogical wisdom of the faculty and thus organically addressing students’ previous concerns about consistency across those teaching Seminar. We made special efforts to invite faculty who did not support revising the curriculum during the model vote described in Section #1; participation was genuinely framed as an opportunity to continue to contribute their perspective and expertise with their colleagues, including their skepticism about the changes. Our external reviewer, Ellen Woods, noted that “bringing faculty together for a common learning experience parallels the students’ experience of Seminar. It builds a sense of community and purpose while acknowledging that developing students’ shared inquiry and metacognitive skills is not part of the typical doctoral preparation for the professoriate. Commitment of such a considerable amount of faculty time to this activity demonstrates convincingly that Collegiate Seminar matters to the mission of Saint Mary’s.”

We have just completed the 3rd year of the Formation and a total of 85 faculty members have finished the process, with another 70 due to complete sometime in the final 4th year (2015-16.) This represents the vast majority of ranked faculty previously teaching in the Program, including many but not all of the faculty who did not support revising the curriculum in the first place. Ranked faculty and Christian Brothers comprised 70% of the participants and contingent faculty 30%.

This year (2014-15) we also piloted a mentoring program for new faculty whereby they are assigned a veteran Seminar mentor who receives a course release for serving in the role for three mentees. These mentors orient new instructors to the structure, outcomes, and philosophy of the program while offering one-on-one guidance through individual meetings and regular class visits.

Implementation Committees

The revised Seminar courses were rolled out in a staggered fashion over four years while the old sequence courses were phased out in parallel. Each course required a year of development by faculty committee before being offered. Thus the Freshman seminar was designed in 2011-12 and first offered in 2012-13, while the Sophomore seminar was designed in 2012-13 and first offered in 2013-14, etc. We have just completed the design of the Senior seminar which will be offered in 2015-16. An implementation committee was designated for each course, comprised of roughly 6-10 ranked as well as contingent faculty who volunteered and were approved by the Collegiate Seminar Governing Board, the elected faculty oversight committee. The implementation committees were charged with shepherding faculty-wide participation in deciding the reading lists and common assignment structures for each of the four new courses. They each began by soliciting recommendations from the faculty at large for text suggestions appropriate to the seminar they were developing. They communicated the Program's general text criteria as well as any additional criteria specific to their particular seminar. All text suggestions (typically 200-300 in number) were vetted by the committee and then reading groups were organized to read a few texts, discuss them and make a recommendation regarding their inclusion. These reading groups were comprised of volunteers from across the College and represented a vast outpouring of effort and community participation in the text selection process. For instance, there were over 20 reading groups considering three or four texts each for the Freshman seminar. Texts under consideration were also regularly discussed at the Formation retreats and lunchtime meetings where more input was solicited. Through intense deliberations, and in consultation with the Governing Board, each committee then decided upon a draft reading list. This draft was then presented to the community through lunchtime fora where all could comment before the list went before the Governing Board for final approval. Every effort was made to make the process as inclusive and transparent as possible. Ultimately, it only succeeded through the tireless efforts of the implementation committee members as well as all the faculty volunteers who supported them. Referring specifically to the Freshmen seminar implementation, external reviewer Ellen Woods expressed an "immense appreciation of the work involved to create this integration of social-intellectual-personal development. It is a testament to the program leadership and governance groups that first-year students experience a seamless learning/living environment steeped in the liberal arts tradition. It is no small task to agree on a set of texts, to define a shared inquiry pedagogical approach and to establish professional development opportunities for the faculty who deliver this learning-centered program.

Criterion 4: Evidence of Improvement and Continuing Commitment to the Processes

Throughout the implementation process, we have been collecting various forms of assessment data to track the impact and efficacy of the improvements. Early results with regard to reading practices, understanding and appreciation of seminar learning goals, transfer of seminar skills, and alignment with Composition have been encouraging. Our long term assessment plan expresses our commitment to continuous improvement. While the four years of intensive implementation have been quite labor-intensive, we look forward to reaping some of the benefits of our collective labor while continuing to refine our curriculum at a more sustainable pace.

Of all the effects the curricular revisions had on educational effectiveness, few manifested more directly than the impacts on students' reading practices. Following the first round of course offerings in the new curriculum in Spring 2013 and Fall 2014, the program surveyed seminar students, asking them to estimate the percentage of the assigned reading they had completed for each text. Results revealed students were reading 15% more overall compared to previous survey data. As the curricular revisions were enacted in part to address concerns that too much reading in too short a time frame left students insufficient time to complete their assignments and thoroughly analyze the texts, these results suggest the new curriculum works as designed in this regard. Curating the length of reading assignments is a foundational change that not only improves reading practice, but also sets the stage for myriad other curricular revisions to take effect, as shorter readings leave more time in class for meta-discussion, informal writing, and reflection.

Analysis of student writing suggests that understanding and appreciation of the objectives of the Program also improved as a result of the curricular revisions. As mentioned above, students complete self-reflection essays at the end of every Seminar class and they are collected in an electronic database. This database allows both students and faculty to access their reflection essays from previous Seminars which facilitates a more integrated narrative of their learning across the sequence. Beyond its pedagogical advantages however, this portfolio system also presents unique opportunities for longitudinal programmatic assessment of student learning. In 2013/2014, Professor Ellen Rigsby designed and completed a qualitative assessment project of the existing self-reflection essays. With the help of a team of faculty coders, she conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of a sample of self-reflection essays from the Freshman and Sophomore seminars. Analysis of the reflections revealed that the depth with which students understood the learning outcomes varied across a broad range, from misunderstanding a given outcome to reflecting on it in a way that indicates a multidimensional transfer of knowledge through several parts of the seminar experience and beyond, such that activities focused on one area of learning (e.g., listening, annotation) produce skills or abilities that manifest in other areas of learning (e.g., discussion, questioning). Single- vs. Multi-Dimensionality was identified as a potential rubric divider or benchmark for developmental progression in seminar, as increasing levels of dimensionality in metacognitive reflection were considered indicative of greater transfer of knowledge and deeper learning. Our current plan is to perform a comparable analysis in 2016 when the first cohort of students completes the new sequence of courses. This will allow us to follow individual students longitudinally across their four years and assess the ongoing development of their learning in Seminar. We will also continue to explore and refine the possible developmental rubric based upon dimensionality. This research is part of ACTC's Qualitative Narrative Assessment Project and we look forward to pursuing it in discussion with

our institutional partners. We believe that this ongoing database of self-reflection essays will provide a unique and powerful window into our students' learning experiences .

The first phase of assessing the desired alignment between first year Composition and Seminar courses involved an analysis of the over 300 student surveys completed in 2014-15. The results indicated that Seminar instructors are incorporating a wide range of writing activities that address the new learning outcomes in diverse ways. Certain skills (e.g. grammar instruction, drafting and peer editing) are appropriately emphasized in Composition more than Seminar. While others (e.g. close textual analysis and writing as intellectual discovery) are more emphasized on Seminar, where they build upon what students were introduced to in their previous Composition courses. As a result of the Formation process, Seminar instructors are incorporating more exploratory writing assignments than Composition instructors are. These preliminary findings identified exploratory writing or "writing as learning" as an area where the two programs hope to align more fully in the future. That is an approach to writing that consciously uses the act of writing as a form and means of intellectual discovery. This past spring, the two programs convened a joint workshop to further articulate their intention and develop a plan for integrating "writing as learning" more fully into both curricula.

Since the Spring of 2013, all faculty teaching the first iterations of the Freshman, Sophomore and Junior seminars have participated in an extensive online survey. The survey was designed to be a first snapshot of the implementation of the new curriculum. There were detailed questions about the effectiveness of the new readings, the implementation of the modules, the utility of the Formation events, and the use of the online resources. In addition, the survey solicited an assessment of what the students might need help with in the next course in the sequence (i.e. what developmental benchmarks were they hitting consistently and in what areas did they need more assistance.) Preliminary analysis of this data have guided the evolution and shifting focus of the Formation. Identical survey data will be collected in 2015-16 with the first iteration of the new Senior Seminar. Once the four-year data collection is complete, we will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the full sequence and begin the first of the periodic reading lists reviews mandated by the Governing Board.

In April 2013, the Governing Board established a timeline and process for the periodic development and revision of the new reading lists. Beginning on 2016-17, the Freshman and Sophomore reading lists will be reviewed and then in 2017-18, the Junior and Senior lists will be reviewed. Subsequently each list will be reviewed every other year according to the following process. Written suggestions will be invited from all faculty and students and maintained subsequently in a "green room" for texts under consideration. A Revision sub-committee will make recommendations to the Governing Board which will be responsible for the final determinations. In order to maintain the integrity of the reading lists, no more than two readings per seminar will be changed each revision cycle.

Lastly, we are committed to involving our best students more actively in the governance and development of the Seminar Program. This past year we have reinvigorated our student co-leader program where veteran Seminar students become teaching assistants for faculty. For next year, we have invited our most distinguished co-leaders to join a pilot Student Advisory Board which will serve the Program in a variety of ways – as a source of ideas for curricular and co-curricular innovations, as a sounding board for administrative plans, and even as ambassadors to faculty interested in teaching in the Program.