

Faculty and Student Perspectives: The Why's and How's of Integrative Learning.

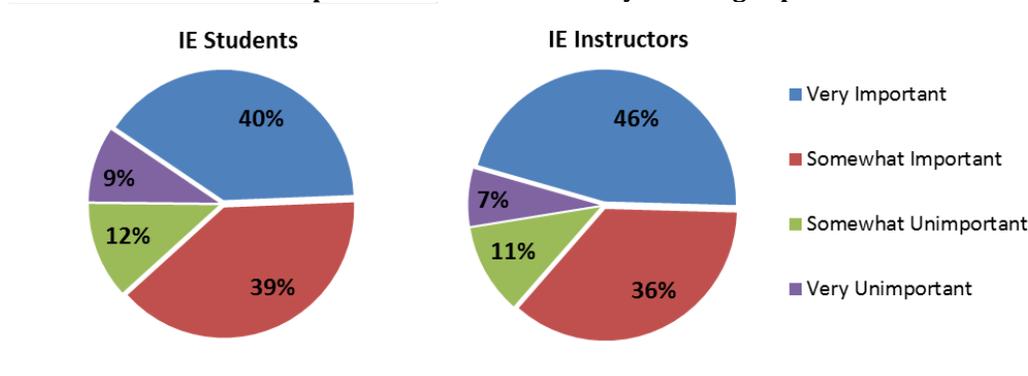
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Introduction

In fall 2012, the first courses to fulfill the university's new Integrative Experience (IE) requirement were offered; in spring 2014 the first class that entered under the new IE requirement graduated with over 4000 recent alumni having engaged in the Integrative Learning Experience. The formative years of an initiative are an important time to gather evidence of the effectiveness of implementation and identify lessons for continued program improvement. Through collaboration with the IE Steering and Assessment Committees and the General Education Council, and with support from the Davis Educational Foundation, the campus has conducted substantial formative research into IE implementation and early impacts. In this research brief we focus on IE instructors' and IE students' perspectives on the integrative learning goals of the IE. Drawing from a range of evidence sources¹, our analysis offers insights into the many commonalities in faculty members' and students' views on the importance of making connections, and how to best foster integrative thinking in IE courses.

We know from the surveys that the majority of both students and faculty find it very or somewhat important to have a course that asks students to make connections across the various components of their undergraduate learning experience (see graph below).

How important do you think it is to have a course that asks students to make connections across the various components of their university learning experience?



One aspect of our research is to ascertain the kind of *connections* that are valued and, in turn, ideas for ways to foster integration in courses.

Making Connections

Faculty and students pointed to three primary approaches to integration, or connection. While all three were valued by both groups, faculty tended to comment most often on the value of making connections across courses, and students tended to emphasize “real world” applications and career connections.

Connections across courses: When talking about what they valued and how they approach “integration,” many faculty commented that students too rarely have the opportunity for making connections across courses, or as one professor said, “connecting the dots.” Their comments reflect two ways that they aim to help students build connections: 1) taking multiple perspectives on a topic or issue by drawing explicitly on learning from a course(s) outside the major, and 2) having students explore relationships among their courses to make their own sense of those relationships. This second type of connection is more distinctly related to the IE. Students’ comments similarly reflect these two ways of connecting.

¹ IE Instructor Survey (n=214); IE Student Survey (N=4449); interviews with IE instructors (N=8) and with IE students (N=11); and 9 focus groups with sophomores (3 groups), juniors (3 groups), and seniors (3 groups) (N=63).

Both faculty and students spoke of the challenge of making connections between Gen Ed courses and their majors. Students spoke of their Gen Ed courses as “hit or miss.” For the “hits,” they valued them for the skills they developed (e.g. writing), for helping them discover their major, a Minor or related interest to their major, and for trying new things. Faculty, too, commented that Gen Ed courses are a “mixed bag,” and that some students have forgotten or have had bad experiences with their Gen Ed courses; on the other hand, they said some students saw strong and valued connections with specific Gen Ed courses.

Both faculty and students also spoke of the value of reflecting on connections across courses within the major. And more broadly, faculty also said that the IE enhances students’ progress toward achieving learning goals specific to their major.

Real World Applications: Students spoke most frequently of valuing IE courses that focused on real world applications: for instance, connecting what they have learned to societal questions or using varied lenses to understand some aspect of life. Faculty also valued making such connections, noting that many other courses also include this dimension.

Career Connections: Students also spoke frequently of valuing IE courses that help make connections to careers and professional development, and, more generally, life after college. While many faculty noted the importance of career or future-oriented connections, faculty in professional programs were more likely to emphasize the career connection.

Both faculty and students mentioned valuing other learning activities that can prompt making connections, including experiential learning such as Internships, some extra-curricular activities, work on campus, research, and study abroad; and making connections to personal life experiences.

Suggestions for Pedagogy

The interviews, surveys, and Focus Groups elicited a number of suggestions for pedagogical practice. Here we highlight ones most salient for both faculty and students.

- Frame the purpose of the IE early on in the course to help students understand its purpose in relation to their undergraduate education.
- Create purposeful assignments that “count” and truly help students make connections and reflect. Students commented that if teachers convey they don’t value integrative activities, then those activities feel like “forced connections” to the students.
- Weave IE activities throughout the course. Don’t make the IE a one-off activity.
- Provide opportunities for Self-directed learning and agency: Making room for students to bring their own interests into a course via, for example, unscripted questions, assignments with some room/responsibility for students to decide on an angle of interest; students having some voice in shaping portions of the course. Related to agency, students also commented that they valued faculty flexibility.
- Build in Shared learning experiences: A range of activities were mentioned from team-based learning, group discussions, and paired peer work such as peer review of writing drafts. Both faculty and students commented on valuing discussions where students could learn from one other, particularly about how to make connections across their experiences.
- Design activities/assignments to Develop Gen Ed skills students hadn’t had much chance to practice or need further practice with (e.g. oral communication, critical thinking, writing).
- Recognize that Class size matters. Evident to all, classes need to be sufficiently small in order to accomplish many of these valued activities (e.g., receiving individualized feedback from one’s teacher on such Gen Ed skills as critical thinking and writing) and to be responsive to student interests and self-directed learning. Students also noted the importance of small classes for facilitating student participation and for effective peer work.

For more information on the IE: <http://www.umass.edu/gened/teachingAdvising/integrativeExperience/ie.html>