



AAC&U NEWS

INSIGHTS AND CAMPUS INNOVATIONS IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

FEATURE: AAC&U MEMBER INNOVATIONS



[From Learning Communities to Capstones: Faculty Leadership for Integrative Liberal Learning](#)

Faculty and administrators from Clark University, Spelman College, and Wagner College share how their institutions support faculty efforts to integrate student learning across majors, general education, and the cocurriculum.

In September 2018, faculty and administrators from seven institutions gathered at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York, to share the work they continued in the years since they all participated in the Faculty Leadership for Integrative Liberal Learning project with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

From 2012 to 2015, the project led faculty teams as they worked on campus and in intercampus project meetings to build frameworks to support the faculty leadership and oversight that is critical for successful integrative learning, in which students learn beyond traditional boundaries through experiences that cross and connect the curriculum, cocurriculum, communities, and careers.

The project “deeply impacted the quality of our work at Clark to be able to participate as a team. It gave the work a kind of authenticity and timeline and some resources that quite frankly we had

not really thought about before in our institutional change initiatives,” said Nancy Budwig, professor of psychology at Clark University and a senior fellow at AAC&U. “If we’re really going to move the needle on integrative liberal learning, it’s going to take more of this coordinated national effort to push the dialogue along.”

Below, faculty and administrators from Clark University, Spelman College, and Wagner College share their institutions’ efforts to support faculty efforts to integrate student learning.

Faculty Learning Communities, Liberal Education, and Effective Practice at Clark University

In 2009, after nearly thirty years without a major review or revision of its undergraduate graduation requirements, Clark University’s Liberal Education and Effective Practice (LEEP) initiative restructured the curriculum and cocurriculum to help students make connections (1) between experiences in their major, (2) between their major and the interdisciplinary liberal studies program, and (3) between curricular and cocurricular frameworks.

“This is not just a burst of effort and energy that produces some quick results and then we’re done with it,” said Matthew Malsky, associate provost and dean of the college. “This is a campus-wide conversation that’s gone on for ten years now. It has really become part of the culture at Clark.”

Since 2009, faculty leadership has had a profound impact on LEEP. A taskforce of faculty and administrators led the initial process of reviewing the undergraduate curriculum and drafting the LEEP developmental framework, faculty have designed and approved a new definition of capstones and signature work that will be required for all seniors beginning in 2019–20, and a series of faculty learning communities continue to make many of the connections that are so integral to the framework’s success.

“We’re very careful about making sure that faculty leadership is front and center here. This really is faculty work with as light a hand from the administration as possible just to hold the pieces together and make sure that the communication is working,” Malsky said.

The learning communities, part of Clark’s Exemplar Project led by Budwig, include faculty and academic support staff from various disciplines and roles across campus. These learning communities, featured in a [2015 Peer Review article](#), have outlined structural changes to the college that help students make connections within and between majors, first-year seminars, and the [LEEP Center](#).

Just as the communities intended, Clark students make various connections through their coursework and cocurricular experiences. However, these linkages are often far more diverse and interesting than faculty ever imagined.

Toni Armstrong, a student graduating in spring 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in art history, is one of many students who “leverage liberal education in unusual ways,” Malsky said.

Armstrong began her Clark career in a first-year seminar on queer horror and has continued to work with that course's instructor. She gained public performance and speaking skills by working on the [New Play Festival](#), which features short plays written, directed, and produced by students, and she has held a position in the library working with reference librarians. In her junior year, she took a Problem of Practice course, an intermediate-level class that scaffolds learning that will be continued in capstone-level signature work during a student's senior year.

"These are courses built around group projects as defined by a faculty member," Malsky said. "They reach beyond the course boundaries to apply classroom learning in places where it has significant consequences."

The Problems of Practice course, "[Public History: Race, Photography and Community](#)," focused on hundreds of photographic portraits from the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century by a local commercial photographer who documented a predominantly African American neighborhood near Clark. Students worked with the course instructor and the curator at Worcester Art Museum on an exhibit focusing on the photographs, examined historical data to identify the subjects of the photographs, and worked with the subjects' descendants to share their stories on a [website](#).

Armstrong's capstone signature project builds on her earlier experience as an intern at the Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art in Luxembourg City, supplemented with weekend visits to over thirty modern art museums, archaeological sites, and other museums in Brussels, Geneva, Zurich, Munich, and Amsterdam. These experiences were made possible by awards and scholarships from Clark.

"I think the strongest element of my Clark education is how completely interdisciplinary it has been, both of my own design and because of Clark's structure," Armstrong told the [ClarkNow newsletter](#). "My time at Clark has encouraged me to challenge myself, and to build connections with people around me to help build my future."

"As faculty, we had a more limited imagination of what would prepare students as they went on their journey," Budwig said. "But [over and over](#), students regularly surprise us by finding linkages that we never could have begun to imagine and that prepare them for leading lives of meaning and purpose."

Democracy, Love, and the Beloved Community at Spelman College

Much of the interdisciplinary learning at Spelman College, a historically black women's college in Atlanta, comes from discussions of the Spelman MILE (My Integrated Learning Experience), an integrative curriculum encompassing general education and the majors.

Since the Spelman MILE was proposed approximately a decade ago, faculty have led several initiatives to cross boundaries and bridge students with faculty, the curriculum with the cocurriculum, and the campus with the wider Atlanta and Georgia communities. Much of this work came from a simple "recognition that we need more opportunities for faculty to get together," said Karen Brakke, associate professor of psychology.

One of these first opportunities came in 2011 through a series of faculty workshops focused on storytelling and using Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* as a core text.

"Democratic values are crystallized in the text of *Beloved* through the lens of communion. And so the way that we translate that is through a vocabulary that is rooted in a love ethic," said Michelle Hite, honors program director. Featured in a 2015 article of *Peer Review*, this "Beloved community"—reflecting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the same name—has grown into other workshops and a wider campus-wide dedication to democracy, love, and communion.

"There are several points of contact between faculty and students in asking these common questions and having these common goals," Brakke said. "How do we use positive force, positive emotion, and inclusivity to engage in some of these dialogues and effect change?"

Spelman recently became one of AAC&U's ten Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers. Part of Spelman's TRHT work is being led by the Social Justice Fellows program, a student living-learning community that participates in community engagement, reading circles, and series of speakers related to promoting social justice. Students and faculty are exposed to scholars and social justice advocates who are engaging in serious conversations about race and racial healing. One goal is to demonstrate how all members of a university community can become thought leaders as they address systemic manifestations of racism in their society and attempt to create the beloved community.

The *Beloved* community's discussions of love and democracy led faculty to develop the Big Questions Colloquia, a group of first-year interdisciplinary seminars often focused on social justice questions related to black women. Like in the *Beloved* workshops, "faculty are interested in connecting with students around a shared text so the students can think about it in public and civic terms that they may not have been thinking about before," Hite said.

These seminars often focus on student interests, such as Beyonce's *Lemonade* album, the role of women in the Black Panthers, the politics of marijuana, or philosophy and film.

"These topics are not necessarily in the faculty members' areas of research expertise, and this gives the chance for faculty and students to explore together and to engage in inquiry almost on equal levels," Brakke said. The kinds of questions that are at the center of the colloquia project reflect what Fannie Barrier Williams, an early twentieth-century intellectual and activist, called "an organized anxiety of women." The anxiety, however, does not debilitate but rather produces energy for new ideas.

The sense of communion brought by these opportunities for faculty to explore integrative learning quickly spread into other activities. The Teaching Research and Resource Center started weekly book clubs and faculty discussions about their pedagogy and scholarship. And Spelman President Mary Schmidt Campbell initiated book circles for students, faculty, and staff. One circle read Ron Chernow's *Hamilton* and traveled to New York to see *Hamilton* on Broadway, and students and faculty had the opportunity to speak to actors, the director, and Chernow himself.

These discussions even cross campus boundaries and spill out into the wider community. The monthly Intercampus Seminar on the Practice of Democracy connects Spelman with communities across Georgia for monthly forums hosted by public and private colleges and universities. At one event at Spelman, a panel included a student activist from the 1960s, Roslyn Pope, who coauthored “[An Appeal for Human Rights, 1960](#),” and current student Mary-Pat Hector, founder of Youth in Action and national youth director of the National Action Network. Spelman, Georgia State University, and Emory University are working on a grant to integrate this intercampus dialogue into the curriculum through an online undergraduate class.

In 2018, three historically black colleges and universities in Atlanta (Spelman, Clark Atlanta University, and Morehouse College) came together to observe the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. As they thought about Dr. King’s legacy in the Atlanta community and at Morehouse, where he earned his bachelor’s degree, Spelman used its participation in the Intercampus Seminar to host a forum that examined intersections between vocabularies used to express “Desire and Democracy.”

“Dr. King was very clear on thinking about democracy through the lens of spirituality and religion, but we were interested in the potential for friendship and romantic love to inform the way that we thought about the highest ideals for democratic expression,” Hite said. “The language of love and communion became very important to us in realizing the potential for democracy.”

The collaborative spirit fostered by faculty sharing expertise with each other and their students has led to new opportunities for more integrative and interdisciplinary projects from students.

The honors program now allows students to complete capstone projects under the direction of an interdisciplinary faculty committee. Brakke and Hite both serve on a committee supporting a student who is developing a prototype of a virtual reality app that helps students cope with anxiety. While this project creatively integrates elements of computer science and psychology, “in the past she would’ve been required to complete a traditional written thesis,” Hite said.

“We’re beginning to see the campus’s collaborative spirit reflected in the kind of work that we’re willing to accept from our students as valid, as valuable, and as contributing to the discourse in the college,” Hite said.

Scaffolded Student Learning Communities at Wagner College

Faculty members have been integral in the twenty-year evolution of the Wagner Plan, an integrative learning structure at Wagner College that includes three different learning communities in students’ first-year, sophomore or junior year, and senior year.

Each learning community is governed by a faculty leadership group that meets regularly and takes retreats to create guidelines for the communities, examine learning outcomes, assess whether communities meet these outcomes, share best practices, and troubleshoot problems.

Rather than sending problems up the administrative chain of command, the group intervenes when necessary to ensure faculty are meeting the community's goals.

“Wagner, at its very core, is a faculty-governed institution,” said Sarah Scott, dean of integrated learning and associate professor of art history.

The first-year learning community “is really meant to introduce the incoming students to what the Wagner Plan will look like for the next three years,” Scott said. Two faculty members from different disciplines guide a student cohort in a three-course sequence that builds analytical reading, writing, and research skills. Students take part in on-campus cocurricular activities and complete at least thirty hours of experiential learning, which can include service learning, field trips, or research at another institution. In class and in their residence halls, they also learn important skills for transitioning to college like time management or how to explore majors.

One first-year learning community, cotaught by an anthropologist and biologist, led students in thinking about the ethics of food consumption and the biology of diet as they worked with a local K–12 school. Wagner students visited lunch rooms and met with the K–12 students to assess what they were eating and what daily activities they participated in. Using this research, the learning community developed a healthy eating plan for the schools to share with their students.

This interdisciplinary model continues in the sophomore or junior year in either a two-class model, with students from different disciplines coming together for an interdisciplinary project, or in a single interdisciplinary course cotaught by two faculty members.

“The key outcome for the intermediate learning community is a deeper understanding of the way the two disciplines might work together or speak to each other in their research,” Scott said.

The senior learning communities are designed by individual disciplines and departments. Similar to the first-year learning community, seniors must participate in an experiential component ranging from one hundred to four hundred hours (depending on their major) as they complete a long-term [signature work](#) capstone. Students finish their senior year with the Bridges Program, which prepares them for life after Wagner through alumni fairs, career development, and practical skills for living on their own.

This scaffolded approach gives “students the opportunity to try things over time because we know competencies don't develop over one class or one experience,” said Ruta Shah-Gordon, chief of staff and vice president for internationalization, intercultural affairs, and campus life.

The faculty meetings have continued to drive change in the learning communities. Each community has a handbook that faculty analyze and revise regularly. Now, faculty in the first-year learning community are examining the evolution of these handbooks over the last twenty years to see how they want to transform the next iteration of the Wagner Plan.

“They really are the ones who are continuously innovating the program,” Shah-Gordon said. “As an administrator, that's been really exciting to watch the faculty take so much ownership and

think about what's working for our students and how they want to continue to innovate for the future.”

The Wagner faculty is also responsible for an expansive overhaul of the general education curriculum, the first that the college has undertaken in several decades. In a full faculty meeting five years ago, a debate broke out about the type of general education requirements that the institution should have for topics such as language, history, math, oral communication, or computer science. At former provost Lily McNair's recommendation, a faculty task force of twenty-five faculty members convened to assess the college's general education mission.

“The way that the [administration] thought it would turn out is not in fact what happened,” Scott said. “And that's because the faculty really took ownership of the revisions.”

The new general education curriculum, started in the 2018–19 academic year, is a competency-based model. Nearly every course is aligned with a skill, and faculty either provide a significant amount of instructional time on that skill or guide students as they complete related practical assignments. Many of these skills were already ingrained in courses; this new model just makes it clearer to students.

“The goal of this was to really bring some transparency to the applicability of what students are learning in the college,” Scott said, allowing them to clarify their experiences and skills for potential employers. “Not only am I able to talk articulately to colleagues or coworkers in a museum about works of art that I learned about but I'm able to apply these oral communication skills to a marketing proposal to a perspective client.”

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