

a statement on integrative learning

*association of american colleges and universities
the carnegie foundation for the advancement of teaching*

Fostering students' abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education. The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, co-curricular activities, and “the real world” beyond the campus. But an emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life.

Integrative learning comes in many varieties: connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings; utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually. 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, unscripted and sufficiently broad to require multiple areas of knowledge and multiple modes of inquiry, offering multiple solutions and benefiting from multiple perspectives.

Many colleges and universities are creating opportunities for more integrative, connected learning through first-year seminars, learning communities, interdisciplinary studies programs, capstone experiences, individual portfolios, advising, student self-assessment, and other initiatives. Often, however, such innovations involve only small numbers of students or exist in isolation, disconnected from other parts of the curriculum and from other reform efforts. But a variety of opportunities to develop the capacity for integrative learning should be available to all students throughout their college years, and should be a cornerstone of a twenty-first century education.

Students need programs of study that will help them understand the nature and advantages of integrative learning and assist them in pursuing their college experience in more intentionally connected ways. They also need courses designed by creative faculty that model and build integrative skills, and curricula that define pathways that encourage integrative learning within and across fields. Wider collaboration between academic and nonacademic staff, college and community, four-year and two-year institutions, higher education and K-12 will create further opportunities for integrative learning throughout students' educational careers.

It is important for educators to work together to build knowledge about integrative learning in its many varieties, and about how it is best encouraged and assessed. Developing students' capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today's global society. Students face a rapidly-changing and ever-more-interconnected world, in which integrative learning becomes not just a benefit... but a necessity.



This statement was developed in conjunction with the national project, *Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect*. March 2004.