

NILOA Featured Assignment
Assessing Integrative Learning in the Senior Capstone
Commentary: Ginny Russell Curley
Election Systems and Software, Omaha, Nebraska
And former associate professor at Nebraska Methodist College

During my varied career in higher education over nearly 25 years, much of my energy was focused on the priority of engaging students in their communities through service-learning and critical analysis of social issues. Now outside of academia, I continue my passion for active citizenship by working in talent development for a company in the election industry. It is here that I can see the product of academic labor that seeks to prepare educated citizens.

Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, democracy is best served by an educated citizenry. As a new member of the private sector, I am encouraged by any activity that challenges students to consider alternative points of view, for this critical thinking more closely resembles the demands of our complex world. The DQP reflects this focus on broad, integrative learning that goes beyond the major to include learning from other fields; I applaud Mount St. Joseph University for providing an opportunity to its graduates to explore the impact of their education and facilitating their synthesis of ideas across disciplines. As a trainer, I work with employees to transfer knowledge from one setting to another; those who have practical experience with this process are at an advantage in the workplace.

One of the many successes of the DQP is that it reinforces the integrated nature of knowledge in the baccalaureate level outcomes. Bold in its design, the DQP sends a powerful message to parents, prospective students, and employers that the value of higher education is not merely a larger paycheck, but a larger life. This focus on integration begs institutions to require graduates to demonstrate their ability to synthesize concepts from disparate fields.

True capstone assignments that require graduates to engage in metacognitive activities to consider *how* they think and *when* that has changed throughout the college experience are of extreme value. Mount St. Joseph applied its own metacognitive activity by revising the assignment after initial attempts led to feedback that suggested the assignment was more ambitious than students could master. Challenging students to direct their learning about social justice to a specific, self-chosen topic allows students to grapple with evidence as they develop their argument for action.

While the value of these assignments is clear, I would offer two challenges based on my experience with similar assignments: rigor and self-congratulatory work. The first challenge relates to rigor. Are these assignments graded in such a way as to demand students' best effort? Faculty are in a difficult position when the rubric is loosely interpreted and students are under the impression that this is an "easy A" project. Unless faculty have the support to demand excellence on these assignments, students will begin to frame them as a "necessary hoop to jump through", thus diminishing the value of the metacognitive activity. I was glad to

learn that Mount St. Joseph requires multiple readers of at least a random selection of assignments--a good strategy for lending greater rigor and an important aspect of assessment.

The second challenge relates to the risk of seeming self-congratulatory in the framing of the reflection essay. In some capstone assignments I have seen (from my own institution and others) it is clear that the intended outcome is for students to speak positively of experiences rather than honestly. While the first question of the essay allows students to demonstrate their ability to synthesize material from disparate classes, the closed-ended second question – at face value – leads students to a pre-determined answer that denies the value of critical thinking. I would encourage faculty to consider how to expand the instructions on the Reflective Essay so students can express a wider interpretation of their experiences. As a faculty member, the critique that cut closest to home was when students said they had to “make up” experiences so they would sound more significant than they actually perceived them. I was baffled by this conclusion, but now recognize how it was drawn. Students assumed, perhaps accurately, that positive expressions of the institution would be graded better than constructive criticism. Perhaps the best option is to give these assignments a completion grade, rather than a traditional letter grade.