

Bridging the Great Divide: Learning outcomes, learning communities and the New Freshman Program at AUC (Part II)

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Students enter AUC with high expectations, but after the first few weeks, they often express disappointment at the learning opportunities provided, which sometimes leave them lost and confused as they transition from high school to higher education. At the same time, professors complain that students' reading, writing, and thinking skills are not adequate for study in their majors. To address these concerns, in fall 2011, Provost Medhat Haroun convened a task force to redesign the freshman year and core curriculum to better meet students' needs and professors' expectations, particularly in the areas of communication and critical thinking skills. Composed of faculty, administrators, and students from a variety of disciplines and student development programs, the task force envisioned a new Freshman Program (FP) focused around a unified philosophy, clear learning outcomes, and learning communities for students in their first semester.

Learning Outcomes for the New Freshman Program

In most university classes, students are expected to read complex texts critically, absorb new vocabulary and concepts, listen and take notes, give presentations based on projects or research, answer exam questions, and write correctly cited papers, as they apply critical thinking. Often these skills are assumed and are not directly addressed or taught; instead instruction emphasizes explaining concepts and conveying information. A learning outcome tells us what students should be able to do at the end of a course of study, including not only knowledge but also "skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education." ("Providing Evidence of Student Learning," 2012) The American Association of Colleges and Universities recommends that liberal education in the 21st century be accomplished through "studies that emphasize the essential learning outcomes across the entire educational continuum—from school through college—at progressively higher levels of achievement" ("21st Century Liberal Education," 2013).

In keeping with this recommendation and with its own strategic goals, the task force identified FP learning outcomes in six key areas to be addressed during students' first semesters at AUC. These outcomes include the communication skills of critical reading, oral communication, and effective writing; critical thinking skills (particularly analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity); and the 21st century skills of information literacy and collaborative teamwork. To ensure that all learning outcomes are addressed in the typical student's first semester, the concept of learning communities in higher education was adopted as a way to engage students with meaningful liberal arts content while training them in academic skills-based outcomes.

What is a learning community?

According to Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith, a learning community is a curricular structure which is intended to "restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students" (cited in Magjuka, 2001, p. 19). Universities apply the concept in different ways. The new model at AUC defines a learning community as groups of first year students who take two tandem courses together on related (though not duplicated) themes. The tandem courses include a freshman seminar course (CORE 1010) and a writing course (RHET 1010) taught by the same faculty member or by two faculty. Faculty who share students are encouraged to meet during the semester to tailor connections, coordinate assignments, and share strategies to help students at risk of low performance.

To achieve this learning community model, the previous three Rhetoric and Composition (RHET) courses taken by most first-year students over three semesters were combined into two newly designed writing courses—one on analytical and persuasive writing for the first semester and one on research writing for the second semester—and the tandem freshman seminar course. The research writing course (RHET 1020), also theme-based, requires students to build on the skills acquired in the first semester and incorporate higher level learning outcomes leading to more student autonomy. When the new Freshman Program (FP) design was adopted by the AUC Senate in spring 2013, new courses were designed for the fall.

New Tandem Learning Community Courses

The Freshman Seminar— Writing (CORE 1010/RHET 1010) tandem course “learning community” ideally consists of a class of 16-18 students. The goals of the tandem courses are to 1) provide exposure to the liberal arts, 2) link writing skills instruction to meaningful content, 3) foster a sense of community among first semester students through a commonly shared experience, 4) promote critical learning habits across courses so that students realize the transferability of skills from one course to another, and 5) provide more exposure to varied genres of readings in the Freshman Seminar course as a basis for better writing in the tandem writing course.

The freshman seminar courses are interdisciplinary, discussion-based, and focus on critical issues and/or “big questions.” In addition to two already established seminar courses, i.e., “The Human Quest” and “Who am I?,” five new courses were designed (most of them to be taught in multiple sections) as tandem CORE 1010 courses for fall 2013. They include “Creative Expressions of Resistance,” “Filming Difference,” “How Do We Know What’s True?” “Imagining Exile,” and “Of Heroes and Demons.” These courses built on student and faculty interest and feedback and incorporated the new Freshman Program (FP) learning outcomes, particularly critical reading, oral communication skills, teamwork, and reflective writing, such as reading journals and response papers. Student-centered pedagogies such as small group discussions, oral presentations, debates, project-based, and experiential learning activities were incorporated to achieve the outcomes.

The tandem writing courses link thematically to each freshman seminar course but focus more on writing, information literacy, and critical thinking outcomes. Key elements include at least four major writing assignments: one low-stakes personal narrative, one formal analysis essay, and two persuasive or argumentative essays. The first two writing assignments closely parallel the tandem seminar course content; the second two connect thematically but may focus on a new direction for the theme, with different complementary readings.

As these new learning communities begin, students, faculty, and program administrators are all engaged in a new learning experience. Feedback will lead to improvements, and other new courses will be piloted and assessed in the spring. However, no matter how effective the new learning communities are, the skills acquired in them will need continual reinforcement in other courses at University. The process of incorporating the FP learning outcomes into new and existing courses has just begun, and over the next few years the goal is that every core curriculum course for freshman students will incorporate several of these vital learning outcomes to enhance learning and the student experience at AUC.

References

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