

Fayetteville State University
Liberal Learning Symposium
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Old Values, New Directions

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Introduction

As part of the core curriculum review process, the Core Review Team hosted a symposium for members of the FSU community. The symposium was held on five different dates to allow a maximum number of people to participate, and ninety-seven did—mostly faculty, but also administrators and staff. The Core Review Team—a subset of the Core Review Committee who attended an AAC&U Institute on General Education in May 2005—presented its research on recent trends in liberal education, focusing on student learning outcomes and assessment. Symposium participants were asked to identify what they considered to be the outcomes essential to a liberal education. They were asked to relate these outcomes to the proposed vision statement for FSU: “Fayetteville State University is a leading institution of opportunity and diversity committed to developing learned and responsible global citizens.”

This report will summarize the participant input and compare the results with current literature on liberal education. It will then suggest a framework for categorizing these outcomes and recommend a process for continuing the work begun in the symposium. The symposium generated a strong consensus that FSU graduates should possess effective communication skills and cultural awareness. Participants also agreed that FSU graduates should be ethical individuals and engaged citizens.

Symposium Summary

Symposium participants worked in teams to develop sets of student learning outcomes that all FSU graduates should embody. They were asked to list no more than seven outcomes. Over five symposium dates, eighteen teams took up this task. On four of the five occasions, the teamwork was preceded by a brief exercise in which participants were asked to write down learning outcomes and compare them with the person next to them. Those outcomes are listed on the Symposium website but are not included in the summary below.

If one groups the outcomes and counts the number of teams that mentioned them, some patterns emerge (Table 1). Every team included communication skills, usually specifying written and oral. Fifteen teams (83%) included Cultural awareness/sensitivity/knowledge in some form. An equal number of teams listed ethics and/or citizenship in some form. These were the most frequently mentioned outcomes.

A middle range of outcomes (33%-66%) included critical thinking, technology, quantitative skills, and inquiry skills.

A number of outcomes were mentioned by fewer than one-third of the teams. The low-frequency outcomes include several that have traditionally been considered important to a liberal arts education and that are included in SACS requirements (scientific literacy, aesthetic appreciation).

Table 1. Number of Symposium Teams Mentioning Specific Outcomes (N=18)

Outcome	Num	Pct
Communication	18	100%
Cultural awareness/sensitivity/knowledge	15	83%
Ethics, citizenship	15	83%
Critical Thinking	11	61%
Technology	10	56%
Quantitative skills	8	44%
Inquiry skills	7	39%
Life-long learning, empowered learners	5	28%
Scientific literacy	5	28%
Analytical reasoning	4	22%
Interpersonal skills	4	22%
Aesthetic appreciation	3	17%
Health	3	17%
Self-awareness/self-image	2	11%
Transfer, integrate knowledge	2	11%
Broad and deep learning	1	6%

One feature of the outcomes listed by Symposium participants was a bias toward skills over knowledge. Cultural awareness was the only content area mentioned by most teams. Does this bias represent the limitations of the Symposium format, or does it indicate something significant about the nature of liberal education in a changing world—i.e., that the ability to acquire, critique, and communicate knowledge is more important than the content learned in college?

One of the emerging outcomes for liberal education in recent years has been integrative learning, which can be defined as the ability to synthesize knowledge from different areas and to apply it to new situations. This outcome is explicitly mentioned by only two teams. Other, more traditional, expressions—e.g., application, problem-solving—might be considered rough equivalents. The Committee must consider whether to recommend an outcome that is a product of the literature rather than faculty consensus.

The Symposium generated some clear areas for inclusion in any liberal education program at FSU. It was less clear on the means of assessing these outcomes. After a presentation on assessment teams were asked to select one of the learning outcomes identified earlier and

- Delineate the evaluative criteria for determining whether students have achieved the outcome;
- Give examples of test questions that would require students to demonstrate that they have achieved the outcome; and
- Identify products of learning that would require students to demonstrate that they have achieved the outcome.

This task proved more difficult. It was impossible to create a detailed description of the learning outcome and a definition of proficiency levels in the time allotted. The assessments produced were more indicative than exhaustive, and they were extremely varied. There was considerable debate over the desirability of creating common definitions of competencies and especially over the implications of a serious commitment to assessment. Finally, given the time constraints, only a limited number of outcomes could be selected for assessment.

The very difficulty of the task suggests that definition and assessment should be the job of the task forces. Only in such a context can faculty accomplish the research and discussion necessary to create definitions that are aligned both with best practices and local FSU needs.

Student Learning Outcomes and Task Forces

It seems clear that Task Forces will be needed to refine the learning outcomes identified above and to suggest assessment strategies for them. However, it would be impractical to have sixteen task forces, one for each outcome. In addition, the list in Table 1 is to some extent arbitrary, since the vocabulary used by participants varied and the consolidation superficial. The Committee should establish a categorization of outcomes—probably no more than six or seven—that would serve as the basis for the work of the Task Forces. Many of these outcomes might be further divided by the Task Forces.

Some of the categories are fairly straightforward, especially those concerned with skills:

- Communication skills
 - Writing
 - Oral presentation
 - [Multimedia?]
- Reasoning skills
 - Critical Thinking
 - Analytical Reasoning
 - Quantitative Analysis
- Inquiry Skills
 - Information Literacy
 - Research skills
 - Scientific method
- Technology Skills

Defining these skills will take a great deal of work, and there will be some overlapping areas. For example, communication and inquiry now require technology skills. Should technology be a separate category, or could it be subsumed under other skills? The Committee might wish to decide this before creating task forces. Given the background and preparation of our students, reading probably needs to be explicitly included among the skills. Is it a communication, reasoning, or inquiry skill?

Knowledge areas are somewhat more problematic:

- Cultural awareness
 - Self-knowledge
 - Health and Wellness
 - Psychology
 - American culture
 - Other-knowledge
 - American ethnic cultures
 - Non-American cultures
 - Social sciences
 - Foreign languages
- Scientific literacy

The Symposium participants strongly recommended that knowledge of one's own culture and of other cultures, both within and beyond the United States, be an explicit component of liberal education at FSU. Is aesthetic appreciation part of culture, or should it be a separate category?

Ethics and citizenship, which were clearly identified as important, are also problematic. Are they forms of knowledge, to be subsumed under cultural awareness, or should we create a separate category of Values and Action? The Committee needs to provide guidance here.

However the categories are defined, the Task Forces need to be carefully constituted and charged. They must be constituted to include both the expertise of faculty who teach in the skill and knowledge areas (e.g., composition, critical thinking) and the perspectives of faculty who utilize or reinforce these skills in their courses (e.g., natural sciences core classes, any upper-division major courses). I recommend that each Task Force have two co-chairs, one of whom will be a subject matter expert in the knowledge or skill, the other not. I would also recommend that one of the co-chairs be a member of the Core Review Committee. The Task Forces themselves can be communities of interest; however, it would be desirable to have representatives from all schools and colleges on each Task Force.

The charge to the Task Forces should also be clear. I recommend that each Task Force be charged

- To define its assigned the skill/knowledge/value;
- To provide a rationale for why the skill/knowledge/value is essential to liberal education;
- To specify proficiency levels on the following scale:
 - **Developing:** Needs reinforcement to reach basic proficiency levels.
 - **Basic:** Prepared for entry-level college-level work.
 - **Proficient:** Prepared for upper-division work in the major field.
 - **Advanced:** Prepared for active participation in professional, public, and personal life.
 - **Exemplary:** Prepared for leadership and innovation in professional, public, and personal life.
- To consider in crafting definitions and proficiency levels
 - Any standards and proficiencies identified for high school students (as a starting point)

- Any standards and proficiencies identified by major programs (e.g., Nursing, Business, Education accrediting bodies)
- Existing practice at FSU (e.g., departmental or program statements, rubrics, etc.)
- National assessment instruments.
- To identify assessment measures, both embedded and external, that would demonstrate student proficiency in the outcome.

Each Task Force should be required to hold a forum for input before reporting back to the Core Review Committee. The Task Forces should be given a deadline of March 1 to report back to the Committee. The Committee will then review and align these reports into a coherent statement of liberal learning outcomes.

I recommend that before the Committee proceeds to curriculum development, the set of student learning outcomes be submitted for review and approval by the Faculty Senate and the Chancellor. This was the procedure at NC State and at IUPUI. Although this review will add to the timeframe of the core review process, it will commit the faculty and the administration to principles that will guide the curriculum development process. Even if no new courses are generated by the curriculum development process, we can use the principles as a means of reviewing and assessing the core curriculum. And the suggested proficiencies will have implications beyond the core curriculum. If we take them seriously, they will require an alignment and assessment of major programs and major capstone experiences. This is beyond the scope of University College. It involves the entire University.