

An integrative approach to assessing several Augustana integrative outcomes

Dordt College developed an intriguing integrative assessment approach to general education that might with some adaptation be useful in assessing our integrative outcomes. They use a “social challenges” essay to assess student growth in personal, affective and cognitive dimensions. Faculty readers rated the essays on the following six dimensions: level of critical thinking, level of moral reasoning, world view (faith implications of assumptions, issues and decisions), understanding of Biblical themes (e.g., creation-fall-redemption), perception of personal responsibility in response to challenges, and historical/structural understanding. Level of critical thinking and historical/structural understanding were used to evaluate the clarity, logic and depth of reflection in the student’s writing. Moral reasoning involves judging the student’s progression from an externalized to internalized orientation. Ratings of world view reflect whether students recognize that they have and can articulate a world-view. Evaluation of the student’s understanding of Biblical themes consists of how well they recognize and incorporate biblical themes and directive in their thinking about social issues. Finally, students were assessed in terms of how they see themselves involved and responsible for dealing with issues. Dordt’s research on use of the essay demonstrates that it is a reliable and valid measure and that there is growth in students based on a comparison of seniors to a group of freshmen. Interestingly, Dordt did not use the essay to evaluate writing competence.

The prompt for the essay and related questions were as follows:

What are two significant challenges facing our society today?

Why are these challenges important?

What factors have contributed to the development of these problems?

How should Christians respond to these challenges? Discuss concrete ways in which Christians can make a difference.

The rating dimensions and scales including descriptors and the criteria for scoring are attached.

It would appear that a similar approach could be used for assessing several of our integrative outcomes. Such an approach might be a natural assessment in some of our capstone courses. Most capstone courses are organized around significant social and cultural issues with ethical, moral and character considerations that ultimately lead to the question of how students live their lives. If capstone courses already incorporate a major writing assignment, might we be able to use these papers as a means for assessing some of our integrative outcomes? Dordt has demonstrated that student essays can be used to assess student growth in a number of areas without a lot of extra effort. Can we develop a reliable, cost-efficient ratings scheme for the outcomes we are particularly interested in assessing (e.g., critical thinking, writing, incorporating knowledge, recognizing and applying moral values)? Would capstone instructors who assign major papers be willing to adopt our rubric?

Nine capstone courses were taught in the 2004-05 academic year. Most involved writing assignments that considered values and the capstone theme, “how then shall we live?” These courses and their written work lend themselves to assessment of student’s writing competence in their senior year and presumably represents their progress as writers. Inspection of the topics for the papers would suggest that the written work could also provide the opportunity and means to assess the other integrative outcomes.