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Developing Reflective Learners: Serendipity and Synergy at Wheaton College

by Hannah Goldberg, Daniel Golden, and Victoria McGillin

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Wheaton College, a small liberal arts institution located in Norton, Massachusetts, has been creating, refining, and integrating a range of initiatives designed to develop students into active and reflective learners. Some of these initiatives grew out of explicit institutional commitments to teaching and learning innovation, while others were in fact happy accidents of circumstance, or situations where an individual interesting program idea took hold, spread into other units of the College, and was itself transformed in the process.

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We define reflective learners as students who are self-conscious about how they learn, insightful about the links between learning inside and outside the classroom, and capable of applying the cumulative value of their education to life and career plans. With so ambitious and lofty a definition, we have emerged from the past 10 years with a core of key projects and programs that overlap and intertwine in the life cycle of a Wheaton student, including:

- An admission process devised to prompt students to perform aspiring "benchmarking" and begin to link their individual life plans to institution-specific goals and values;

- An advising system that invites students to develop academic and personal goals and reflective time-outs to enhance course and major selection, as well as graduate and career plans; and

- An institutional experiential learning methodology to document out-of-classroom learning in a portfolio-based reflective transcript, the *Wheaton Work & Public Service Record*.

For Wheaton College, the student as reflective practitioner is better able to make whole the components of educational and personal experience; better able to define an integrated perspective on self as learner, citizen, and potential member of the workforce; and better positioned to understand more quickly and deeply the transforming nature of the college experience.

We especially value this integrated outcome because, like many of our colleagues at all kinds of institutions of higher education, we encounter arriving students

who have led lives which are at once strangely fragmented yet structured. Even in an idyllic independent residential college, our students come to us from single-parent or blended and re-blended families, with histories of struggle with serious illnesses — both their own or those of people close to them, with learning differences that not too long ago would have kept them out of college altogether, with emotional problems for which they are being treated either with medication or by counselors and psychiatrists. Most of them are under exceptional financial pressure, as well as the squeeze of family expectations, in terms of pursuing a course of study that will make them employable as soon as they get out of college.

Small wonder that so many of us in higher education are especially frustrated these days by our often tentative ability to help our students make their lives, as Frost might say, "whole beyond confusion." We too often present students with an isolating educational structure, with one set of people attending to their "academic" lives from Monday through Thursday (courses, libraries, computer centers, etc.), and another set of professionals concerned with social life, student government, residence halls, athletics, and the like. And students themselves often segment their learning experiences even more, working their way glumly through general education requirements, breathing sighs of relief when they leave various onerous courses behind them, reductively self-identifying themselves by choice of academic major or career path.

For Wheaton College, the two key historic events that transpired in 1986–87 and

positioned us to begin our attempt to cultivate reflective learners were the founding of our Filene Center for Work & Learning and our decision to become co-educational after 153 years as a women's college. In transforming its former Office of Career Planning into an experiential learning and life-planning office, the College attempted to explicitly build mechanisms to help liberal arts students link their studies to the world of work and public service. In the much more massive (some might say cataclysmic) change to co-education, we had the chance to look at our entire institutional identity, and to think about what it would mean to be a *learner* as a man or woman at our newly co-ed college. In preparing to make our classes and campus as a whole hospitable to both women and men, we were forced to become more sensitive to all manner of differences that went beyond gender — differences in learning styles, in lifestyles, in levels of preparation and commitment to study, in values, in life histories, in social and economic status. So, in a sense, we had a rare moment to put some of our definitions of learning up for grabs, and began to craft reflective structures for students out of our own intensive reflections on our identity.

Reflection on Experience at the Filene Center for Work & Learning: In the late 1980s, Wheaton's Filene Center rapidly became the locus of reflective learning activity by creating its experiential transcript, the *Work & Public Service Record*. Long-time readers of *Experiential Education*, the predecessor to the *NSEE Quarterly*, may recall articles profiling our efforts in trying to build our pro-

cess for learning from experience (Golden, Kimball). The *Record* grew through various refinements into a goal-setting and evaluative instrument, with entries comprised of reflection essays by students after particular experiences and corroborating performance reviews by supervisors. As populations of student documenters of learning increased, and as they encountered the work and learning approach in many different campus settings (hall staff positions, campus jobs, public service activities), students gradually began to embrace the value of reflection on experience. In 1994, the Wheaton faculty voted to include the *Work & Public Service Record* in the General Education requirements of the College, thus expanding the institutional learning definition into the experiential environment. At the time of the faculty vote, close to 65% of the student body had already completed entries in the *Record*, and it has played an increasingly important role in supporting graduate and fellowship applicants and job hunters as a one-of-a-kind credential.

Reflections on Future Planning — The Wheaton Admission Process: By 1990, with our co-educational transition moving forward successfully, Wheaton's Admission Department reviewed our admission process and refined it so that applying to Wheaton would more accurately reflect attending our college. This approach meant giving the applicant the option of submitting standardized test scores and a Personal Academic Portfolio of supplemental evidence of in- and out-of-classroom learning and achievement. It also made standard an application essay that grew out of the "Life Aims" project at the Filene Center. The essay asked students to look out 10 years into the future in the form of a letter to an old high school friend on the occasion of their upcoming reunion, and requested details of the student's work, relationship, and community service situations.

This fictional first step in future planning had its undeniable artifact effect, as applicants tried to write to the expectations of the Admission Committee, and many quite easily imagined a future that neatly balanced rewarding careers, healthy traditional families, and ennobling volunteer work. But with close to 2500 essays overall, we have learned much of texture of the aspirational lives of late-adolescent

applicants, and some are amazingly candid about their immediate and long-term concerns about the forces that will impede their movement toward a happy, balanced future life. The fictional format of the application seems to release many students to imagine futures that encompass life-threatening illnesses, failed marriages, aging and infirm parents, and even the premature death of spouses and partners. Often, students reflect on global issues, like environmental pollution, political instability, and the uncertainty of financial success in an expensive future world.

The Admission essay is a frozen moment in time, but we get to "defrost" it along the way for each student, for it becomes the first entry in their academic Advising Portfolio, the icebreaker for the first meeting with their faculty advisor on arrival. We have used the essay during the sophomore year as students approach declaration of academic major, and most students are amused by their imaginings of barely two years earlier, at times surprised by how quickly their academic and personal plans have altered. As seen below, the essay returns to become a core reflection prompt itself during the senior year as well. But well before the senior year, Wheaton students have many additional reflection prompts in both experiential and academic learning settings. And much of our advising is built on the foundations of our reflective out-of-classroom environment.

The Expansion of the Reflection Model to the Academic Sphere: Assessment, rumination, and goal setting are valuable steps in the development of a reflective learner. Wheaton students who had the opportunity to place an entry on their second transcript were not only acquiring co-curricular credentials, they were developing critical thinking skills. As valuable as these steps were for the out-of-class learning, they were slower to be accepted in relationship to the in-class learning experience. If setting goals for an out-of-class learning experience is important, imagine the impact of setting such goals for one's classroom learning each semester or each year. If connecting knowledge gained outside the classroom with course work can be valuable, reflect for a moment on the value of having students connect the knowledge, information, and skills gained in one class with those

gained in a second. It is through such discussions that a student might actually come to understand the intent and value of liberal arts classes and general education requirements. The advising relationship was the natural sphere within which students could explore the connections between their classroom learning experiences and between those experiences and their out-of-class growth.

One of our goals was to refine a developmentally sensitive and reflective model of academic advising for faculty advisors. First-year student advising at Wheaton College is delivered by faculty in concert with an academic First Year Seminar, one of 26 variations on the theme, "Great Controversies" (e.g., The Biodiversity Crisis; It's Art Because I Say It Is; Generation X: To Have or to Be). Instructors served as advisors to their 16 students, interacting with them both inside the classroom and out. This had proven a successful model but was in need of further development. The first step for the new Advising Dean was to augment faculty advising through the addition of a peer advisor (Preceptor) for each seminar. Peers and faculty co-advised first-year-students throughout the first year. The Preceptors both provided a student perspective in the advising process and a student contact in the student community for the advisors. They were also free to take on additional responsibilities, such as teaching study skills.

Wheaton advisors were genuinely curious and interested in who their students were. After all, they would be working with them twice weekly in the seminar from the fall semester. Any insights into those students could provide an early "read" on the flow of the seminar. Therefore, the second advising step was the introduction of an advising portfolio. We initially designed the Advising Portfolios as a folder to hold a student's advising records. From their inception, however, they contained several critical pieces, designed to prompt more meaningful and reflective discussions between students and their advisors. Beyond a student's high school records, test scores, and registrations, these portfolios also contained the students' admissions essay — The Life Aims Statement. We trained faculty and Preceptors to use this as a starting point

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for advising discussions. We anticipated that advisors would be most interested in the student's putative career choices with their road map toward the attainment of that future. We urged that advisors use these statements as icebreakers, as the first step in helping students to plan a map for their careers at Wheaton and as a reflection point. We anticipated that advisors would bring students back to these "Life Aims" at selected points in their academic career, the better to assess growth and development over time.

In the second year of the Portfolios, we also included the newly admitted students' responses to a learning questionnaire and essay. On this form students assessed their learning styles and responded to a request for a description of a recent learning experience. Combined, they afforded advisors a glimpse into each student's construction of learning. As most students wrote about a learning experience outside the classroom, advisors were well placed to help the student connect a learning experience in that venue with responses to the explicitly "classroom" focused questionnaires. Preceptors "scored" those questionnaires and both faculty and preceptors used that information in their advising meetings during Orientation. Wheaton advisors were now poised to take the next critical step toward truly developmental advising.

Advising and Reflection — A Developmental Model: Since the 1950s and the wide acceptance of Erik Erikson's theory of identity development, a range of theories has attempted to explain the emergence of reasoning and identity in the adolescent through adult years (Loevinger). Several theories (Perry, Belenky et. al., Magolda) were derived specifically to explain development during the college years with a particular emphasis on epistemological development; that is, how college students come to know and reason both about the world and their relationship to that knowledge. Along with Chickering's vector hypothesis, these theories are all rooted in an equilibrium until a crisis or a novelty that cannot be accommodated by their old system challenges them, leading to disequilibrium and distress. The possible outcomes are deterioration, compromised balance, or differentiation at a new

and more complex level (i.e., development) (Mahoney). A developmentally oriented advising process, then, is one that both challenges the students to move into disequilibrium and supports them during that difficult period of change. "The *process* of developmental academic advising refers to those institutional systemic structures, departmental policies, and individual advisor behaviors that challenge a student's current state of equilibrium and support the student throughout the process of re-equilibration. The *content* of developmental academic advising refers to specific challenges and supports necessary for optimal development during each state" (McGillin).

Effective developmental advisors, thus, should be able to guide students through an assessment of their status and current goals, and a reflection upon that position and any gaps between that position and their defined life goals. Finally, advisors should be poised to challenge students to set new goals and support them as they move toward those outcomes. Once they learn the skills, students should be well-placed to move through these stages whenever they encounter a new and challenging learning experience.

Teaching Academic Reflection: In the fall of 1994 we pioneered our first efforts at teaching academic reflection. Preceptors met with their advisees in the middle of the fall semester to guide them through a reflection exercise. We timed this to best prepare them for their course selection conferences with their faculty advisors. In this reflection exercise, Preceptors asked students to identify their academic learning goals for the semester and the year. We asked that they assess their progress toward those goals and to identify any connections between what they were doing inside their classes with their experiences outside. This first effort proved less successful than hoped for several reasons. First, few students had given any thoughts to these goals. Developmentally, classroom learning was still something being done to them, not goals over which they were expected to have control. With no framework for these discussions, students were clueless about what their goals ought to be, e.g., many defaulted to

"getting good grades," "getting on the dean's list," or "passing my classes." Second, mid-October was clearly still too early for students to have formed any clear sense of how they were doing. They had limited information upon which to assess their development to date. Students still needed a context within which to begin their academic reflections.

This past fall, we introduced a more significant set of exercises, designed to guide students through the process of setting up their own context for academic-reflection discussions. We expected that all first year students participated in a set of corollary First Year Workshops. Three times during the fall semester and twice in the spring, students gathered in groups with their Preceptors and faculty advisors for discussion. In their September meeting, we expected students to connect their public service experience on Orientation Service Day with an article by Robert Coles and a talk he delivered to the campus as a whole. We designed this to connect the curricular with the co-curricular life on campus and introduce students to our expectations of their role within a learning community. In the October meetings, students completed two evaluations that we designed to prompt an assessment of their goals, expectations, and status. Students identified areas of greatest discrepancy and discussed methods of managing their choices (time management). In November, students identified a range of possible courses and co-curricular activities for the spring, plus statements about *why* they chose each item. They discussed the nature of such choices in preparation for their advising meetings with the faculty advisors. In February we again asked that students reflect upon their own development to date, while in March they took the discussion of course and co-curricular choices to the level of major selection and four-year planning. We are currently evaluating this sequence of events. But even in our preliminary view on these initiatives, it is clear that there is a considerable empowering effect on students when they are afforded the opportunity to decipher their own learning styles and intellectual development, and to bring this new insight into their selection of academic courses of study and decisions about graduate school and professions.

The Big Picture — Senior Year Capstone Reflection: In their senior spring semester, all Wheaton graduating students participate in a special "back to the future" event that at once celebrates their impending commencement and, more importantly, invites them to reflect on their Wheaton learning experience as a whole.

Early in the term, Seniors are sent copies of their original Admission essay and are asked to review this document in the context of their intervening years at the College. They prepare informal responses to key qualitative questions, such as:

■ Do your aspirations for career, relationships, and community commitments remain essentially the same as four years ago? Or, how have they been refined or altered?

■ In what ways has Wheaton College helped you to prepare to achieve these aspirations and goals? How could we have done a better job?

■ What do you yourself wish you had done differently in the course of your years here, both in and outside the classroom?

■ As you prepare to leave the College, what next steps are you considering, and how can Wheaton assist you now?

Seniors are then gathered at a festive dinner, with younger alumni invited and assigned among the dining tables. We break for dessert into small group discussion sessions, co-facilitated by the alumni, faculty, and staff, to discuss the preliminary questions and the role Wheaton has played in the life-planning process of students. This reflective capstone is a valuable institutional research counterpoint to the naked statistics of our other quantitative senior survey instruments. "Back to the Future" is a synthesizing forum, a locus for speculating on and redefining earlier dreams and goals, and for linking personal growth to the educational program of the College. And it is clearly an unusual moment for students who have evaluated their education piecemeal, one course at a time, with little or no way to put the learning pieces together.

Some of our conversations are halting, uneasy, and awkward, some are trenchant, rueful, and insightful. But the event in its entirety reminds those of us who stay on after commencement that there is tremendous value to us as teachers and program managers in opening up students to the process of their own educational experience.

Certainly, not all students attain a uniform level of integrated reflective learning, nor is there any correlation necessarily between being a nimble and highly accomplished academic achiever and being someone who can see the big picture. But in an age when outside forces clamor for accountability and assessment, often with reductive or even wrong-headed measuring approaches, we have felt it crucial to demonstrate to students and to ourselves the value-added nature of higher education. Even if some of our efforts are not entirely replicable in other kinds of institutions and with other kinds of students, we are convinced that, whatever the institutional ethnography, the development of reflective learners is an essential integrative tool. It can help us as educators to wed the practical and philosophical goals of experiential learning, moral and ethical development, and servant leadership with the academic curriculum itself. Even as increasing numbers of faculty incorporate field-based learning into their teaching, to integrate theory and experience one course at a time, we would all do ourselves and our students a great service if we looked to our institutional missions (and sometimes to our actual mission statements) for even more pervasive transformational activity. Developing reflective learners can, in the end, be one important part of higher education's contribution to a more ethical and prosperous America of citizen-learners.

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