


Using Integrative Studies to Enhance Academic Challenge

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Institutional context for academic challenge initiative


- ▶ Elon's growing reputation for engaged learning has increased its ability to attract well prepared students.
 - ▶ Average SAT scores for matriculating first-year students rose from 1057 in 1996 to 1220 in 2007.
 - ▶ Enhancing academic challenge for all students became a top institutional priority in 2006.
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Summit on Academic Challenge


Questions that emerged in campus forums and white papers by focus groups:

- ▶ How do integrative courses and programs contribute to academic challenge?
 - ▶ How can we ensure that required integrative courses enhance students' ability to think and act in ways that are complex, critical, and synthetic?
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Integrative Studies at Elon

- ▶ **General Studies Program:**
 - The Global Experience (1st-year)
 - Capstone interdisciplinary seminar (jr./sr.)
 - ▶ **Honors Program**
 - Team-taught sophomore seminars
 - ▶ **Interdisciplinary majors and minors**
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Interdisciplinarity and Academic Challenge

- ▶ Elon's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning has sponsored research and workshops to investigate these questions.
 - ▶ A preliminary report identifies five principal ways that integrative studies promote the types of academic challenge and student learning most relevant to Elon's mission.
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1. Integrative study promotes civics education by teaching students how to acquire and apply knowledge to address social problems.

Ernest Boyer's "scholarship of application" requires instrumental interdisciplinarity: drawing upon the insights of various relevant disciplines and integrating those insights to solve real problems.

- ▶ 2. Integrative study helps students to comprehend complexity and to answer complex questions.

“The frequent pairing of complexity and interdisciplinarity is no coincidence....An interdisciplinary approach is justified only by a complex system” (William Newell).

- ▶ 3. Integrative study promotes critical reflection on ways of knowing and categories of knowledge.

Student engage in critical interdisciplinarity in courses that require them to compare the assumptions, methods, and theories of two or more disciplines as they use them to understand a complex subject. These courses intentionally provoke epistemological reflection on the structure of knowledge.

- ▶ 4. Integrative study strengthens disciplinary learning by promoting contextual study.

The postmodern idea that knowledge is socially constructed or contextual rather than objective, timeless, and universal has moved interdisciplinary study inside the disciplines. Recent emphasis on contextual study—the “historicizing, sociologizing and politicizing of all subjects and objects”—has made disciplinary boundaries increasingly permeable (Julie Klein).

- ▶ 5. Integrative study fosters intellectual community.

Interdisciplinary research and teaching require extensive collaboration between faculty from different disciplines. Integrative courses can promote intellectual community between faculty and students.