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Learning Outcomes

“Common Area Requirements” is a phrase that many college students are familiar with. It is not uncommon for colleges to require certain courses in order to graduate, such as an English, Mathematics, or Social Science course. Here at Holy Cross, it is no different. A new draft of learning outcomes has been released, outlining a system for developing a new set of course requirements. From mastering critical and creative thinking to practicing reflection on the responsibilities of global citizenship, the draft covers a vast array of areas. It outlines the goals that Holy Cross has set for their students, both inside and outside of the classroom. These goals will eventually lead to the creation of a new system of common area requirements.

Upon first reading the draft, I was struck by the variety of areas that were covered. The “Foundational Competencies,” such as critical thinking and problem solving, were no surprise. The draft highlights what Holy Cross believes is most important for students to be and things they should work toward in order to be successful. These foundational abilities are things I have seen throughout my time in school. Even from middle school, my teachers were always emphasizing the importance of thinking through a problem by using critical thinking and analysis. I remember posters hung up in classrooms displaying the steps of “problem solving.” So, reading about how students should ask questions and evaluate the validity of information, a few more things covered under “Foundational Competencies,” was nothing new to me.

What surprised me more was the “Responsible Citizenship” section, which recognized the responsibilities of students as members of the Holy Cross community. Many times, schools focus too much on what goes on inside of a classroom and not enough on social responsibility. Undoubtedly, education is a top priority in college, but what goes on outside of the classroom is just as important. Considering ethical issues that affect the lives of ourselves and others, engaging in challenging conversations, and re-examining one’s own values and beliefs are a few of the things listed that I found to be the most important. In light of the terrible events that have recently happened at Holy Cross, moral responsibilities should be prioritized more than ever. As unfortunate as these events were, they have enabled us to reflect on what we need to fix as a community. We have asked ourselves, “what do we need to change?” and becoming more focused on our responsibilities as people, not just students, is the first step toward a solution. Working on empathy and examining issues from multiple perspectives are essential to forming a united community. Additionally, these moral responsibilities are expected to be carried beyond college. Practicing social responsibility is not something that should end after graduation; Holy Cross expects their students to keep their social responsibilities in mind even after they are no longer on campus.

Learning occurs both inside and outside of the classroom. Developing relationships with professors, growing as an intellectual, and working with others are things that occur during class. But, building relationships with people of diverse backgrounds, discovering our passions and finding new interests, and becoming more understanding of people who are unlike us - these are things that cannot happen solely within the confinement of a classroom. Building relationships with others is an essential part of the college experience, and without working on our moral

responsibilities, we cannot grow as individuals and as a community. In college, the majority of students' time is spent outside of class, where we interact with other students in various social situations like meals, parties, and athletic events. Because of this, the ideas listed under "responsible citizenship" are that much more important, despite them often being overlooked. When I think about the term "education," I think of what goes on inside of a classroom. But after my first year at Holy Cross, and especially after reading this draft, I have discovered the necessity of practicing moral responsibility as well.

I believe that, overall, these are the right learning outcomes that should guide everyone's educational experience. I do not necessarily think the learning outcomes are "slanted," but I do think that it is difficult to formulate one set of standards that can apply to every single student. In other words, these learning outcomes may not work for every member of a college community. Everyone has different abilities, challenges, and passions. In the same way that some students seem to have a knack for writing, or can easily pick up patterns while learning a new language, students vary in ability in regard to "foundation competencies" as well. Some students tend to be better at thinking critically, while others may lack in this area but are incredibly creative. For example, "oral communication" is listed under foundational competencies, and it relates to speaking in front of audiences. This has never been something that I am particularly good at. On the other hand, some people are naturally good at public speaking; they have no problem being in front of a large audience. This is just one simple example of how students can vary in their "academic skills," just as some are naturally better in Math or English classes.

Because of this, what I think is missing from the draft is a more personal touch. It would be unrealistic to expect a draft highlighting strengths and specifying areas to work on for each

individual. But, what I think could help address this problem is an additional draft for faculty. Rather than a set of learning outcomes, possibly a set of “teaching outcomes” could be created. I agree that all faculty should expect their students to take *something* away from their class. “Not being good at writing,” for example, is no excuse for not working hard and accepting a poor grade. But I believe that in class, and especially in 100-level courses that often introduce material to students for the first time, faculty should keep in mind that some students will struggle more than others.

This year, I enrolled in an Elementary Italian course for first and second semester. About every other week, we had to write short, in class essays on various prompts that pertained to what we were learning. After each composition was graded, my professor required that every student who got below a certain grade stop by his office. (For example, sometimes he would set the minimum grade at an 80, and anyone who got below this would have to meet with him.) He would then talk through what that particular student needed to work on. I appreciated the individual attention that my professor gave to each of his students. Rather than go over common mistakes in class, he specifically made an effort to meet with students and personally work through their errors. This could be a goal for every professor listed on the hypothetical “teaching outcomes” that I am proposing: professors should require one-on-one meetings for students that are not doing as well as that professor deems they should be. This would not only compel struggling students to figure out what they need to work on, but it will help faculty understand what they could change as well. Understandably, both students and faculty have limited time, but a quick, occasional meeting will lead to more success for both students and professors. In general, it should be addressed that the varying abilities of students should not be ignored.

Faculty cannot expect the same “outcome” (grade, experience, etc.) from every student in their classes; every student is different and professors should not expect the same thing from every student.

Personally, I have not had a professor at Holy Cross that ignored the different ability levels of his or her students. But I have heard from friends about professors that have set unrealistic expectations from students, so this problem is present to a certain degree. Should faculty have their own set of teaching outcomes, which would address how they should be teaching their students to compensate for varying ability levels, this would allow students to get the most out of their college experience. Ultimately, Holy Cross will only continue to grow as students and faculty work together, forming the welcoming community that coincides with a wonderful college experience.