Exploring Students’ Integration of Learning After Four Years of College

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Exploining Students’ Integration of Learning After Four Years of College

James P. Barber

Student affairs professionals are fortunate to have a perspective that allows for a close look at how students integrate learning. In our work advising student leaders, guiding campus organizations, and developing programs to enhance student learning, student affairs professionals often see (and sometimes help) college students connect learning from one context to another. I served in student affairs roles for many years and was privileged to frequently witness students’ integration of learning: watching a fraternity treasurer use knowledge from his finance major to create a balanced budget, processing reentry with a student leader returning from study abroad who suddenly has new perspectives and priorities after traveling, seeing a resident assistant draw upon skills from a summer internship to do her job on campus better. This sort of learning fascinates me and drives my work as a faculty member, just as it did my practice in student affairs.

College graduates who are able to make connections among disparate information and meaningfully synthesize concepts are better prepared for success in the competitive and quickly evolving knowledge economy of the 21st century. In the past 25 years, increasing numbers of stakeholders have called for American college graduates to adeptly make connections among life experiences, academic curricula, and their accumulated knowledge (e.g., AAC&U, 2002; AAC&U & Carnegie Foundation, 2004; ACPA, 1994; Joint Task Force on Student Learning, 1998; Keeling, 2004). Of the seven liberal arts outcomes examined in the Wabash National Study (WNS), six were assessed by both validated quantitative instruments and in-depth student interviews. One outcome, integration of learning, was explored only using qualitative methods because there was not a validated instrument available. (For a discussion of all seven WNS liberal arts outcomes, see King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007.)
I have developed the following definition of integration of learning, drawing from the various definitions discovered in a review of empirical research and my own analyses of the WNS qualitative data:

Integration of learning is the demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesize information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts. This includes the ability to connect the domain of ideas and philosophies to the everyday experience, from one field of study or discipline to another, from the past to the present, between campus and community life, from one part to the whole, from the abstract to the concrete, among multiple identity roles—and vice versa. (Barber, 2012, p. 593)

Despite enthusiasm about integration of learning from both educators and employers, there is a lack of detailed information about the ways in which college students develop this outcome. This chapter explores how integration of learning develops for three traditional-aged college students from their freshman to senior years and discusses how student affairs professionals can use the methods and findings to improve their work through research-driven practice.

**Theoretical Framework**

The self-authorship developmental model and the integration of learning construct serve as components of my theoretical framework. Self-authorship is a holistic model describing how individuals grow and change in the ways they make meaning of knowledge, identity, and relationships with others (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Research demonstrates that there is a developmental trajectory toward self-authorship from a reliance on externally driven ways of thinking to more internally derived meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001; Kegan, 1994). This model offers a perspective that informs inquiry into the development of integration of learning. Previous analyses indicate there is a similar developmental process in relation to integration of learning (Barber, 2014).

Integration of learning describes the process by which individuals bring together experience, knowledge, and skills across contexts. Three major categories of integration of learning have emerged from empirical research, listed here in order of increasing complexity: (a) **Connection**, the discovery of a similarity between ideas which themselves remain distinctive; (b) **Application**, the use of knowledge from one context in another; and (c) **Synthesis**, the creation of new knowledge by combining two or more insights (Barber, 2012). As students advance developmentally along the self-authorship continuum, they integrate learning more frequently and use these three categories of integration in concert (Barber, 2009, 2014).
Methods

As summarized in Chapter 1 of this volume, the WNS used a longitudinal concurrent mixed methods design in which two independent strands of data (surveys and interviews) were collected for addressing related but separate research questions. The illustrative analytic sample that I use for this chapter is comprised of three participants who completed interviews each of their four undergraduate years \( n = 12 \) interviews). The longitudinal structure of the WNS allows a rare opportunity to examine an individual's development over time in detail. Each longitudinal interview set documents a unique student's college experience over four years; each interview set is composed of four interviews totaling approximately six hours or 100 transcribed pages per student. Previous research investigating self-authorship has shown the in-depth case study approach to be useful for examining the nuances of learning and development over a period of several years (Barber & King, 2014; Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) substantive case report format provides a template for considering the findings of the current analysis of four-year student interview sets.

To illustrate integration of learning for this chapter, I selected interviews from those collected at two of the six interview campuses in the longitudinal study, Hudson College (pseudonym) and Wabash College (actual name). I chose these two campuses based on the richness of the student interview data, and because these sites offered a variety of experiences in both curricular and cocurricular settings that were intentionally designed to promote integration of learning. I visited each campus personally and collected interviews on site, which provided me a deeper understanding of their campus contexts. I chose the three individuals for this chapter using a number of criteria. I sought students who: (a) participated in WNS interviews all four years; (b) had rich conversations that offered clear examples of integration of learning; (c) discussed the same or similar experiences each year, so as to provide a common thread through the four interviews for purposes of comparison; and (d) represented diversity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and institution.

Campus Contexts. Hudson College is a private, coeducational institution that enrolls approximately 1,600 undergraduates. It offers two academic programs that are of interest to this study of integration of learning: the Liberal Arts Workshop and the Freshman Symposium. The Liberal Arts Workshop is an intentionally integrative program in which students participate for the three weeks immediately preceding their first year in college. The aims of this program are for students to learn to read and listen more thoughtfully, to express ideas, to review their own work critically, and to recognize the link between thinking and expressing. The curriculum of this program culminates in a written assignment that a student must pass in order to matriculate. Upon matriculating to the college, all students must
enroll in *Freshman Symposium*, a two-semester sequence focused on important cultural and intellectual ideas that the institution believes form a basis for liberal arts education.

Wabash College is an all-male private liberal arts college in rural Indiana enrolling approximately 900 students. The *Freshman Tutorial* is a program at Wabash that is of interest in terms of integration of learning; all students take this course during their first year. Each section enrolls approximately 15 students. The main objective of the *Freshman Tutorial* is to give students the skills they need to be critical thinkers, successful in a discussion-based seminar environment, and well-prepared for the intensity of college writing. This course is followed in the second year with a two-semester sequence on classic world texts called *Cultures and Traditions*, a requirement for all sophomores.

**Data Analysis.** Each interview was independently analyzed for self-authorship and integration of learning. Working from the complete interview transcripts, trained research team members assessed self-authorship level for each of the four years of the study, beginning by identifying important developmental experiences discussed in each interview. The determination of developmental impact is particularly important for understanding developmental changes. Team members determined whether an experience was “developmentally effective,” meaning whether it had a positive impact on students’ development toward self-authorship (King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Kendall Brown, & Lindsay, 2009, p. 109). By analyzing these experiences, researchers were able to identify characteristics of experiences that transformed students’ approaches to meaning making and better understand developmental mechanisms (King et al., 2009).

Self-authorship assessment was guided by the WNS theoretical framework and contemporary research, resulting in the creation of a 10-position continuum (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This continuum reflects the gradual movement of external forces to the background and the internal voice to the foreground. The continuum uses “E” to represent external and “I” to symbolize internal, including three positions within solely external voice [Ea, Eb, Ec], two positions within predominantly external voice (also called entering the crossroads) [E(I), E–I,], two positions within predominantly internal voice (or leaving the crossroads) [I–E, I(E)], and three positions within solely internal voice (i.e., self-authorship) [Ia, Ib, Ic] (see Table 6.1 for additional detail).

Examples of integration of learning were identified, and subsequently scrutinized and categorized using the constant comparative method advocated in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used grounded theory to analyze the data in order to allow the ways students integrate learning and how they make meaning of that process to emerge from the data rather than to establish a priori the characteristics and categories of this developmental process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Analyses of the interview data suggest an increasing complexity in
students’ integration of learning over time (Barber, 2012, 2014), similar to
the developmental pattern established in self-authorship research (Baxter

Finally, the assessments of both self-authorship and integration of
learning were contextualized to each individual and his or her campus.
Reviewing a particular student’s data holistically as an interview set that
spanned his or her freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years allowed

Table 6.1. Developmental Positions in the Journey Toward
Self-Authorship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Position</th>
<th>Key Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ea: Solely external</td>
<td>Consistently and unquestioningly rely on external sources without recognizing possible shortcomings of this approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb: Solely external</td>
<td>Consistently rely on external sources but experience tensions in doing so, particularly if external sources conflict; look to authorities to resolve these conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ec: Solely external</td>
<td>Continue to rely on external sources but recognize shortcomings of this approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E(I): Entering the crossroads</td>
<td>Continue to rely on external sources despite awareness of the need for an internal voice. Realize the dilemma of external meaning making, yet are unsure how to proceed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E–I: Entering the crossroads</td>
<td>Begin to actively work on constructing a new way of making meaning, yet “lean back” to earlier external positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I–E: Leaving the crossroads</td>
<td>Begin to listen carefully to internal voice, which now edges out external sources. External sources still strong, making it hard to maintain the internal voice consistently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I(E): Leaving the crossroads</td>
<td>Actively work to cultivate the internal voice, which mediates most external sources. Consciously work to not slip back into former tendency to allow others’ points of view to subsume own point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ia: Solely internal</td>
<td>Trust the internal voice sufficiently to refine beliefs, values, identities, and relationships. Use internal voice to shape reactions and manage external sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ib: Solely internal</td>
<td>Trust internal voice sufficiently to craft commitments into a philosophy of life to guide how to react to external sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ic: Solely internal</td>
<td>Solidify philosophy of life as the core of one’s being; living it becomes second nature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

me to uncover trends in student learning and development not apparent in separate annual interviews.

Limitations. This study includes students on two campuses that are small, private, liberal arts colleges in rural settings. Both had intentionally integrative programs for first-year students established at their institutions (Liberal Arts Workshop and Freshman Symposium at Hudson; Freshman Tutorial courses and Cultures and Traditions sequence at Wabash), and both were selected for the larger WNS based on interest in and programs on liberal arts education.

The similar ages of students in the sample (all were traditionally aged college students, 18–22 years old) may also have limited the types of integration I observed in the interviews. It is to be expected that students early in college will have less complex ways of thinking than more advanced students (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1994).

Findings

I illustrate the findings using excerpts from longitudinal interviews with three students: Reese, a White woman attending Hudson College; Kayla, an international student at Hudson; and Steve, a White student enrolled at Wabash College. Each student participated in the WNS interview all four years in college.

Reese: Building on Camp Counselor Experiences. In Reese's first-year interview, she described her entry to college, and how she was connecting her previous experiences to her new life as a college student. In this conversation, Reese introduced the interviewer to her experiences with summer camp, initially as a participant and later as a counselor.

[College] kind of seems like . . . a bigger version of high school. . . . It just seems like I'm taking my home life, I'm taking my interests, and taking them with me . . . so it's kind of like taking what I've loved from my whole life and bringing that to college, but seeing what else is out there.

Reese's self-authorship orientation during her first year was assessed as Eb on the developmental continuum. She was able to integrate learning superficially, connecting her college life to her high school experiences by describing activities mirrored in both.

In her second-year interview, Reese returned to her experience at camp, this time discussing how she was applying the Hebrew language skills learned at the camp to her study of Hebrew in college. The ways in which she integrated her learning were more complex this year, as was her self-authorship orientation, which had advanced to E(I).

But I know how to read it [Hebrew]. And camp actually has taught me a lot, going into it. I know so many vocabulary words from camp. And some
phrases that the Israelis have taught me. You know piecing things together. So it's helped in the beginning of the class. And now it's starting to actually pick up to the things that I might not know. So it's good.

By her junior year, Reese described how she was applying what she had learned in camp (her “skills” with kids) to a new position teaching at a local Jewish Foundation. Note the larger scope of Reese’s integration as she began to think about how her work with children at camp influenced her thoughts about a future career path. Her developmental level has shifted to I–E as she begins to listen to the internal voice.

I’m teaching youth school at the [Congregation] Jewish Foundation. They’re four fourth graders, but it’s fun to be in charge of that and to work with them and I’ve gotten involved. . . . It was a 45-minute program and I just wanted to kind of hang out, so that was kind of like putting my skills [from camp] into action, but it was hard. . . . I think I will [go into teaching]. I like kids. I think teaching is a lot of fun and, and I definitely, I mean I would want to teach elementary school kids because I would get to teach different subjects and I don’t know if I want to tie myself down to one subject.

Finally, in her senior-year interview, Reese talked about how she used the interpersonal skills she gained as a camp counselor to build relationships with other students during a five-month study abroad trip to Israel during her junior year. She was able to build a peer support system quickly and was at ease negotiating relationships. During her time abroad, she also applied the Hebrew language skills gained from her work at camp and classroom language studies.

I make friends pretty easily, having gone to camp and things like that, when you’re put in a situation when you’re only going to be there for a certain amount of time, I think anybody does this, you negotiate this space differently. You negotiate making friends and develop trust in friendships a little bit more quickly than you normally would. So I think, just from that aspect I made friends pretty quickly and you start trusting people. Well, at least I do. You know, more quickly because if you need that support system, you need somebody that you’re going to trust or talk to about things. I think it just develops the relationship quicker, too, talking about certain things, back and forth and developing that trust more quickly allows you to have that support system.

Reese demonstrated development in terms of self-authorship in college, with an assessment in her senior year of I(E), indicating active work in cultivating her internal voice. The frequency of her integration of learning increased over time as well, moving from five examples of integration in her freshman year to nine examples during her final interview. (The
Table 6.2. Student Data on Frequency of Integration of Learning and Developmental Position, by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Frequency of IOL (Examples per Interview)</th>
<th>Developmental Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>Y2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

frequency of integration of learning and the self-authorship assessment for each student, in each of the four years, are presented in Table 6.2.)

**Kayla: International Student, Researcher, and Citizen.** Kayla is an international student who attended Hudson College. She is of Korean descent, although her family has lived in India for a number of years. Kayla discussed her thoughts about coursework often during her four interviews, and this common thread provided a window into her ability to integrate learning. As a first-year student, her self-authorship assessment was Ea on the developmental continuum, indicating a reliance on authorities. In her first-year interview, she described her experience with Hudson’s Liberal Arts Workshop (also known as LAW), an intensive three-week academic session for new students in the summer, immediately before matriculation.

There were lots of parts, a lot of free writing, which is a concept I knew of before because I did that in high school. . . . But the entire LAW program sort of opened me up towards writing. . . . I just kept writing, writing, writing! So, if you just tell me to write something now, I’ll just start writing. So that, and my LAW teacher made sure that she instilled some confidence in me about my writing. I also was not a very creative person back in high school. . . . I think I’m not able to think outside of the box, because I’m just so used to like the first nine years of my education, just being used to having everything spoon fed, and, and having been told that this is what is right. And so, I’m trying to think out of the box more, but I just find myself sort of connecting two far apart, like, drawn out things together.

Kayla attended a boarding high school in India, and connected her learning experiences there (particularly, writing) to her initial experiences in the Liberal Arts Workshop at Hudson.

At the beginning of her sophomore year, Kayla’s developmental level had increased slightly to Eb. In her second interview, Kayla revisited her academics and writing in response to a question asking about her most important experience in the past year. She replied,
Most important time in terms of academics I think is the B+ I got on my final *Freshman Symposium* paper for first semester. Because it’s the first time I got a B+ after this series of C’s and D’s I got for my *Freshman Symposium*. And I think it was, even if it wasn’t an A, I worked very hard for that B+ and I knew, I could just by seeing, comparing my writing from LAW to my *Freshman Symposium* paper I could see, wow, I improved… that has helped me come over my fear of writing to some extent, that B+, so that was very significant in terms of my academic career.

Kayla was applying the skills she learned as a new student in the *Liberal Arts Workshop* to her later work in college. The confidence she gained as a first-year student grew, and she was able to recognize her progress and integrate what she learned in a new context as a sophomore.

By her third year, Kayla described integration of learning beyond application of writing skills. Her developmental assessment shifted to I–E on the self-authorship continuum as she began to listen to her internal voice. Kayla was very excited about her recent acceptance to participate in a Hudson College study abroad research trip to Tibet, a region of China. She described how she was preparing for this excursion:

It’s going to be interviewing other people and just asking them questions and sort of collecting data and things like that. So I think it’s going to be really new, maybe things I’ve learned in my *Economics of Developing Nations* class would help. Maybe my basic micro macro [economics] which I’ve forgotten most of it maybe [laughs] it might help. . . . The other three students are all Hudsonian [from Kayla’s same institution] and my Chinese professor told me about this research and she knew that I was very active in *Students for a Free Tibet* [an international student organization with a chapter at Hudson] things and so she said, “Oh I think you would bring a very interesting perspective to the group, seeing your activities back at school.” Of course I can. . . . I’m very excited.

Whereas at the beginning of her sophomore year Kayla talked primarily about building her confidence in writing and applying her newly acquired writing skills across course contexts, as she prepared for her junior year, the integration was much broader. Her study abroad research trip created an opportunity for her to draw on previous economics courses and out-of-class experiences as a member of *Students for a Free Tibet* to develop her research questions.

In her final interview, Kayla talked about the experiences she had in China, and continued to integrate knowledge and skills broadly across contexts. Her developmental assessment decreased slightly from the previous year to E–I, still placing her in the crossroads phase of the journey toward self-authorship and indicating ongoing, active work on constructing a new
way of making meaning. She credited Hudson College with providing experiences that facilitated her learning and provided the following examples:

[Hudson College] has definitely influenced the way I look at things. And I guess more confident of my judgments and my opinions . . . because we have great class discussions. And I felt like there was a lot to learn from my fellow students and that kind of an environment. So it definitely influenced the way I look at things. And there's things I also learn at class. Some of my professors and also from my readings changed the way I look at things. . . . I had a professor from Zimbabwe for my international relations class and . . . it definitely helped me understand the overarching situation in Africa much better. . . . From my various outside of Hudson experiences to my internships and research trip, to everything in the classroom has helped me shape my opinions and the way I think and how I look at things.

Hudson College provided a number of experiences that facilitated Kayla's integration of learning. From the Liberal Arts Workshop and Freshman Symposium to her coursework and research trip to Tibet, Kayla's experience at Hudson offered excellent examples of institutional practices that promote integration of learning across both in- and out-of-class contexts.

Steve: Reconsidering Religion. Steve attended Wabash College and was involved in the fraternity community. A common topic through Steve's four-year interview set was religion, in particular the Roman Catholic faith. Steve was raised in a Catholic family, and upon entering college became involved with the local parish and the Newman Club, a Catholic student organization found on many campuses. In his first-year interview, he was assessed with a developmental level of Eb on the self-authorship continuum, indicating tension with trusting external authority. Here, Steve commented on how his religious beliefs connected to his coursework and cocurricular involvement.

I guess as far as my religious activities, that just kind of gives me a guideline for what I want to do. I don't want to be involved in any human cloning or anything so that's one area of biology that's out, but and as far as with the fraternity, that kind of gives me a guide of how I want to act or what I want to do in certain situations. And as far as looking for what I want to do in biology, the fraternity helps me because there is a lot of guys who have looked into a lot more stuff than I have and they're upper classmen and they can help me and tell me what they're doing to get me prepared not necessarily for what career I want, but how I can find what career I want or something like that I guess.

As a first-year student, Steve easily drew connections between his interest in biology coursework and his involvement with the Newman Club and his fraternity. However, by the next fall, Steve began to question his identity.
as a Catholic, and was not as certain about connections between faith, his coursework, and career choices. At this point, his developmental level had shifted to E(I), realizing the dilemma of external meaning making.

As far as the Newman Club, I don’t know, I’m still Catholic I guess, (laughs) but I don’t know. The more I go to church the less I want to go. I don’t know if I’m going to keep going very long so. Yeah, it still feels like there is a God, but I don’t know if He really cares if I worship him or not. . . . I go to church once a week and I don’t know. Like I still pray before meals and stuff, but I don’t know. I think it’s more superstition than if I actually believe or not. But I don’t know (laughs). But like as far as my actual beliefs though, I just like see how big the universe is and [think about] science. . . matter and mass can’t be created or destroyed and energy can’t, so I feel like for there to be a beginning. I mean there has to be a beginning, I would think. Yeah, it’s a little over my head in understanding, but I just figure there almost has to be. I mean there’s definitely something that we don’t know like physically that happens or there had to be like a higher being that started it I think, but at the same time like I don’t understand why He or She or It would make this huge universe if we were all He cared about. But, I don’t know.

Steve continued later in his sophomore interview to describe conversations he had with peers who held different beliefs from those with which he was raised in the Catholic Church.

There’s three Lutheran guys in our [fraternity]. . . . They’d always just start conversations with me about how Catholicism is wrong and then I’d kind of, we’d get ferocious and fight back and forth for a while and it was pretty fun. But yeah, so those [conversations] kind of got me thinking just how humans went from one religion to thousands just within Christianity and it’s like how can Catholicism be right? It seemed to mess things up, so I don’t know. Oh yeah and then I also took, I completely forgot about this, I took like a Christianity or Hebrew Bible class last year. There’s so much stuff that’s been translated two or three times at least. Then it’s been translated since translation, I know. I just can’t imagine everything, like all the church doctrines, no matter what religion, being what God intended, if He did indeed intend anything.

This represented a marked shift for Steve in his view of religion. He was integrating learning, but in a more complex way that allowed him to see a number of critical views from courses and peers alongside his earlier view of the Catholic Church. He appeared to struggle with these new perspectives and continued to go through the motions of attending Mass and praying before meals, even as he questioned his belief structure.

In the summer between his sophomore and junior years, Steve spent a month in Ecuador visiting Quito, the rainforest, and the Galapagos Islands.
as part of a Wabash College program. As he began his third year in college, his self-authorship level was I(E), nearing the end of the crossroads phase. In the following excerpt from his third-year interview, Steve continued discussing his views on faith, Catholicism, and the existence of God, saying,

I stopped going to church the beginning of the spring semester of last year so I was pretty into it my whole freshman year, but I don't know. . . . The more I went, the longer I was at Wabash, the more I thought about just important things as opposed to just doing stuff. So the longer I was here the more, they [Wabash] want us to “think critically” [which] is our motto or whatever. So I just started thinking more about stuff, the different things and then listening to my priest, especially my priest back home. I had a lot of contact with him when I was in high school, just the more I thought about some of the stuff that he would tell me it just seemed more like propaganda than anything. And then also I've taken a few classes about like the history of the church and it just seemed like it was so corrupt back in the day, I just don't see how you could salvage a church that was so corrupt to make it something good. . . . So I figure I can be a good person, maybe even a better person, without church. I don't feel I need the church to tell me to be a good person to help people in need so I feel like it's a waste of money and time to go to church. . . . I try to think a lot and talk to a lot of people about whether or not God exists. Not that anyone would really know, but just to make a decision for myself what I believe because I really don't know what I believe right now, but I know that or I believe that if God does exist, the Catholic Church is not what He wants (laughs). So I hope you're not Catholic or anything. [Interviewer: Oh yeah, I am Catholic.] Oh sorry, but that's just my personal feeling. [I: But I take no offense.] Okay, cool.

This excerpt illustrates the growing complexity in Steve's integration of learning. He drew on his courses in church history, and also invoked Wabash's mission to educate men “to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely” as he considered his view of Catholicism. He was confident in his opinion, and comfortable expressing a perspective differing from that of the interviewer.

By the time Steve had his fourth interview, he no longer considered himself Catholic. At this point in time, he was entering self-authorship, with a developmental level of Ia, indicating a trust in his own internal voice. In the following excerpt, Steve reflected back on the evolution of his view on faith over his time as a college student.

I took a course about some of the corruption of the church in the Middle Ages, and just the more I looked into these things, I was like, maybe these aren't in place for spiritual reasons, but more for just to control people and get them to pay money. . . . Even bringing it up with my parents and other people, just nothing really brought me back and made me want to do it anymore. It
kind of sucks because I go to church with my parents, with my mom, just something to do with them and I mean, I kind of wish I believed it, I guess, because, it was pretty nice [to] believe you’re going to go somewhere after you die and—but, for me, sometimes I wish I did but at the same time, I don’t want to. Why believe that I’m lying to myself and just go to church just in case? If I’m going to go, I actually want to believe in the things I’m believing in. Does that make sense?

In this excerpt, Steve synthesized a new view of religion and spirituality for himself, drawing from his experiences with his home parish priest, new college priest, his course on church corruption, and his exposure to nonreligious peers. He combines elements learned from each venue, combining these into a new agnostic worldview (even though he in some ways mourns this loss of faith).

Discussion

Although it is difficult to fully illustrate the scope of the longitudinal data from three students’ interview sets in a single chapter, the examples provided here from Reese, Kayla, and Steve demonstrate that students have a greater capacity to integrate learning as they progress through college and develop a more internal self-authorship orientation. Curricular and cocurricular programs (including study abroad, discussion-based academic courses, undergraduate research opportunities, and conversations with peers in student residences) played a key role in fostering these abilities. As such, the faculty, staff, and administrators who direct these initiatives have both an opportunity and a responsibility to guide student learning and development.

Qualitative research methods are strong tools for examining the complexities of student learning and meaning making. The examples in this chapter also highlight the value of studying the entire four-year interview set for an individual student, and the impact that this format can have for research-driven practice in student affairs. Investigating each year’s interview separately provides discrete data about personal development and learning, but greater depth and intricacy is possible when analyzing the student’s full college story. For example, in Reese’s case, her experiences at summer camp, mentioned briefly in her freshman year, eventually are revealed to serve an essential role in integrating learning across contexts, influencing her experiences with career choice, interpersonal relationships, study abroad, and foreign language classes. Student affairs professionals often have the opportunity to work with individual students over several years, allowing for an opportunity to recognize ongoing developmental storylines, understand a student’s personal background and family context, and promote the integration of learning.
Implications for Research-Driven Practice

The student interview sets explored in this chapter also raise a number of implications for educational practice for faculty and administrators alike. In seeking to promote integration of learning among students, I offer the following recommendations for college educators.

**Study Away.** Examples from these three students support the notion that study abroad experiences can promote integration of learning by introducing multiple perspectives. All three of the students featured in this analysis participated in a formalized study abroad program. In the 2011–2012 academic year, just over 9% of U.S. undergraduates took part in a study abroad experience (Institute of International Education, 2013). Sobania and Braskamp (2009) suggest that cross-cultural study domestically (i.e., “study away”) can be effective in introducing multiple perspectives as well. Student affairs professionals should work with faculty and administrators to make such programs accessible to more students, both in terms of finances and scheduling.

**Engage With Diverse Others.** Student experiences shared in this chapter indicate that diverse peers provide a context to evaluate one's own beliefs and struggle to integrate the new perspectives with existing beliefs. Steve's recollection of his “ferocious” yet “fun” debates with his Lutheran fraternity brothers illustrates this point, and the importance of a diverse campus community for fostering integration of learning both in and out of class. This underscores the importance of developing the structural diversity of our campus community in terms of visible difference such as race, ethnicity, and national origin, as well as less visible forms of diversity like sexual orientation, faith, politics, and socioeconomic status.

In terms of research-driven practice, student affairs professionals must continue to strive for increasing diversity in all aspects of campus life. Although structural diversity is not always within the control of student affairs professionals, interactional diversity, cocurricular diversity, and curricular diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999) are areas in which student affairs departments, including residence life, fraternity/sorority affairs, first-year experience, and campus recreation, can make substantive contributions.

**Prioritize Mentoring in Education.** Several of the students in this analysis described the importance of class discussions and faculty-led programs to their learning; however, the majority of these interactions were short-lived. By contrast, Kayla's interviews provide excellent examples of the power of an ongoing faculty partner in advancing student development and creating opportunities for integration of learning. In addition, the longitudinal approach to this analysis illustrates the importance of a consistent mentor throughout the college experience; one can grasp a much more complete picture of student learning when engaged with the student's interview set spanning four years.
Frankly, the lack of such sustained relationships is distressing. The absence of substantive and ongoing guidance or partnership for students in this analysis (as well as in the larger WNS data) indicates a need to prioritize mentoring in our work as educators. Student affairs professionals are well-positioned to heed this call, and utilize the resources of campus networks and professional associations to encourage faculty, staff, and alumni to place a greater emphasis on student mentoring. As students encounter new knowledge, diverse peers, and different perspectives that may conflict with their existing beliefs, worldviews may be disrupted. In Steve's words, such new learning can “mess things up.” College educators possess the skills and expertise to help students process multiple points of view, as well as work through the discomfort of dissonance rather than dismissing it, and ultimately integrate learning.

Conclusion

Integration of learning is an essential educational outcome for U.S. college and university students in the 21st century. This chapter provides empirical data on the process of integrating learning for college students in an effort to uncover patterns in the development of integration of learning over a four-year undergraduate career.

My research with the WNS (building on my experience as a student affairs professional) has confirmed for me that the analysis of a student’s four-year interview set is a powerful approach that provides a wider lens to study how college students learn and develop over time, while allowing for a substantial investigation of a contextualized experience. Student affairs professionals can use this research to support their practice and prioritize how best to spend precious time and resources to best support student learning. In building on the established developmental framework of self-authorship, this research also contributes to the data describing the journey from an externally defined point of view to a perspective that is increasingly internally conceived. Lastly, this approach capitalizes on a unique opportunity for analysis of longitudinal qualitative data.

Note

1. All student names are pseudonyms.

References


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