Applying the concept of signature pedagogies to engaged learning

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There is always a great deal of excitement and energy on the Hill as we approach a new academic year. Enthusiasm about the months ahead is fueled by the influx of new and returning students, the launching of new projects and ideas, and the promise of growth and change. When we consider complex and intense questions about how to best engage our students and the effect of that engagement on issues related to retention and timely graduation, it creates opportunities for interesting discussions about where we are now and what directions we might consider to bring about improvement. What tools do we have at our disposal that can be reconfigured or repurposed to meet the shifting needs of our students?

The concept of signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) and the acquisition of knowledge to engage in some sort of practice is no stranger to professional schools like law, medicine, journalism and education. There is a systematic effort to impart the connections among central ideas, knowledge and principles to practice. Students are, in many cases, afforded opportunities to try their hand at application over the course of their academic program. In watching and tracking the engagement of my own students in a professional program, I can’t help but ask, “How might we utilize a signature pedagogy of engaged learning to transform or repurpose courses in general education?”

Regardless of discipline, faculty members articulate many common desires for their students. Though exact wording varies, the general ideas are captured in the American Association of Colleges & Universities Principles of Excellence, as well as in our own Initiative 2015. The principles outlined in both of these documents suggest a direct relationship between research and creative activity and a student’s ability to engage in life-long learning. What would happen if we were to connect research and creative endeavors, civic engagement, and global awareness to the general education courses that students take before digging deeper in a specific area of study? If courses became systematic inquiries to enduring questions, would this supersede mere check marks on a degree of study grid sheet?

Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens (2003) present engaged pedagogy as a best practice for learning. The principles they outline include active learning, learning as a social process, knowledge as shaped by contexts, reflective practice and capacity to represent an idea in more than one modality. This template causes us to stretch beyond a central text or set of readings that are continued page 6
assessed by a lengthy paper or exam and reach beyond KU classrooms and connect to knowledge, research and creativity in action that characterize our local, state, national and world communities. Engaging students in these learning experiences and conversations may be just the thing that attracts and keeps them at KU in order to turn out well-informed, intellectual members of a global society.

References


*The University of Kansas Initiative 2015 Report* can be found at:
http://www.chancellor.ku.edu/2015/

*LEAP Principles of Excellence* can be found at:
http://www.aacu.org/leap/principles_in_practice.cfm