

Educating Principled Citizens: A Small Private College Advances Its Long-Standing Mission Via Lessons Learned from a New Values Initiative at a Large Public University

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We tend to travel with a lot of stuff—personal items to which we hold an emotional attachment, memorabilia that represent past experiences, and personal effects that hold special meaning. Think of move-in day on any typical campus. Many families bring not one, but two cars filled with their student’s belongings. Things “essential” to success during the academic year: stereos, TVs, iPods, laptops, X-Boxes, materials to make lockers and shelving units, sports equipment, hanging clothes, and those crammed into suitcases that take a large crane to lift. While we might argue the necessity of some things college students bring with them to campus, on average, they tend to bring things they believe they need. And although these items may be what students identify as essential to college success as they arrive on campus as freshmen, they may not be the most important items that they take with them when they leave campus as graduates. As educators, it is our responsibility to help students discern what they actually do need, from the things they can live without. We must help students identify those things that they care deeply about. While students may initially identify physical items when asked what things they need to be successful, we would argue that it is the non-physical items that students must be most selective about when determining what to take with them into the world. What are the values that are so fundamental to their daily lives that they simply cannot live without them? As students acquire more and more “stuff,” it becomes increasingly important for educators to help them pare down their lists of essentials. In essence, it is our responsibility to assist students in learning how to, well...travel lightly.

Learning from Each Other

We learn from one another. Students from faculty and staff, protégés from mentors, colleagues from professional contemporaries and yes, colleges and universities learn from each other. In recent years, within higher education, much emphasis has been placed on preparing citizen leaders. Most of us who work in higher education today would like to think that we’ve

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never strayed far from this central mission...turning out better people. But as we survey the world around us, the world in which we live and the world our students have come of age in, we feel a heightened responsibility to graduate individuals who will not just acquire disciplinary expertise, but will also gain the critical thinking skills and habits of mind that will assist them in becoming better, more ethical people. People who stand ready to contribute to their professions, their communities and the society that sustain them. As colleges and universities strive to graduate these principled citizens, it is important that we recognize that we can indeed learn from one another. We can even learn from institutions that at first glance seem very different from our own.

While we may agree that student affairs professionals collaborating with faculty toward the goal of preparing principled citizens is a good idea, for many educators, an elementary question still looms large...where do we begin? The following represents how a small private liberal arts college learned from a large public university, adopting one element of the large public university's multiple component curricular and co-curricular values initiative.

The National Landscape: From the Campus Scene to the Larger World in Which We Live

On college campuses today many issues that face students threaten to impact their ability to succeed. While students today are more altruistic and open-minded about diversity, they also are less academically prepared, and are more likely to have psychological issues than previous generations of students. Debt among college students is up, given shrinking federal financial aid. Issues of academic dishonesty, high-risk drinking and other drug abuse, violence, vandalism, and sexual assaults have become prevalent within our campus communities. And while voter registration among the college-aged population has increased and there has been a slight increase in students' activism politically, actual voter turnout has not reflected that growth. However, students' altruistic focus is interesting in that their engagement in service is very local, and as a result, has far surpassed their levels of political participation. They would rather serve food in a local soup kitchen where they can see the benefit of their efforts than volunteer to work on the political campaign of a candidate that shares their passion for equality, fairness, and justice, and if elected, could develop national policies and programs designed to help eradicate poverty and homelessness, altogether.

Robert Reich, Former Secretary of Labor under the Clinton Administration, author, and current University of California- Berkeley Professor of Public Policy, speaks to the challenge of negotiating these trends within the college-aged population. Participating in a January 2001 C-Span program, "A Town Hall Meeting on America's Future," Reich responded to an audience member's question regarding the issue of civic engagement among young people.

The thing that I do with my life that I consider to be the most rewarding by far, is teaching. I'm a college teacher. I work with young people mainly between the ages of 18-22. And there is an assumption often in the population that young people today are indifferent or selfish. That's not the case. The young people I see at my university and at other universities are more involved in their communities, are volunteering more, are more concerned about what's going on around them than any generation I've ever seen. But when it comes to national politics they are deeply cynical.

He went on to state that:

It's not that they are indifferent. It's not that they are apathetic. They aren't. The danger is that they look to national politics and they see nothing in it that inspires them; no greatness,

no heroes, no sense that they could aspire to public office or to large visions of the future. And I think that's what we are lacking now. That's what we desperately have to restore.

Today, students see things in the world around them that conflict with the foundation of American higher education and the spirit of the mission of preparing individuals for lives of responsible citizenship. Ethical scandals involving business giants like Enron, Tyco, and Global Crossing have brought corporate credibility under great scrutiny for corrupt business practices. And the corporate world is not the only environment students see. They also see examples of unethical behavior among journalists, politicians, authors, scholars, and academics. The recent fraud, embezzlement, and bioethics violation charges against a South Korean scientist whose published claims were found to be fraudulent, and admissions of plagiarism a few years ago by world renowned historian and presidential advisor Doris Kearns Goodwin as well as historian and best selling author of *Band of Brothers*, the late Stephen Ambrose, are a few examples of unethical acts of those in prominent professional positions—all of which send clear signals to students that even people who are in positions of influence and power, in essence, cheat.

Institutions of higher education can assist students as they attempt to “travel lightly”, navigate the world in which we live, establish a solid values foundation, and set a higher standard of behavior for themselves, one that is often lacking in the world around us. In assisting students in this way, we can live up to our mission of educating responsible citizens. Anything less than that fails our students, their families, their future employers, and the communities in which they live.

The Bowling Green eXperience: A Large Public University's Initiative to Prepare Principled Citizens

Bowling Green State University is a public university with a current enrollment of 21,000 students and more than 120,000 alumni. Through an engaging *Building Community Project* in 1996, the University community spent eighteen months exploring its recent past and considering dreams for the future. This iterative process resulted in the establishment of a new vision statement and five core values. Guided by the core values of respect for one another, cooperation, creative imaginings, intellectual and spiritual growth, and pride in a job well done, the University established a bold vision for the future. The institution stated its aspiration clearly: “to become the premier learning community in Ohio and one of the best in the nation.” When Bowling Green State University President Sidney Ribeau sent an open letter on values to the institution's stakeholders in April 2000, he set in motion a monumental change that would redefine public higher education. BGSU students, he explained, “should leave their campus having grown intellectually and spiritually, committed to life-long learning, with the felt responsibility for giving, serving, and succeeding within the framework of principled and ethical interaction with others.” To ensure the fulfillment of such an audacious goal, he brought together a committee of faculty, staff, and students and asked them to lend their best thinking regarding how to advance the mission of preparing principled citizens. In his charge to the University Committee on Vision and Values, he asked the members to consider how the university might infuse character development, critical thinking, values exploration, and civic responsibility throughout the educational experience, and in so doing, better prepare BGSU graduates to face the countless ethical issues that will confront them personally and professionally.

The committee began its work in September 2000. Their work the first year involved spirited discussions on a number of issues related to the charge, including the nature of values; the role of values in higher education; a curriculum best positioned to promote values education; strategies for achieving support from faculty, staff, and students; and whether the committee

should propose incremental changes or advocate for larger, transformative change. While still unsure of how to reach the end outcome (principled citizens), committee members were in agreement that the President's charge called for the development of an ambitious agenda that would fundamentally change the educational experience at Bowling Green State University.

Signifying their understanding of the President's charge, the committee established its own mission statement, setting forth that the University's goal should be to graduate "reflective citizens of a democratic society," those who have the ability to think critically about values and act on values in a way that betters their professions and communities. The mission statement for the University Committee on Vision and Values states:

In order to prepare graduates to be reflective citizens of a democratic society and to create a richer environment in which to live and learn, the BGSU community should be one that articulates, critiques, and practices values exploration and creates diverse opportunities for values enactment. The BGSU core values are a starting point for serious consideration of values. However, we must move beyond these to ensure a critical exploration of values at all levels of the curriculum, in co-curricular activities, and in administrative practice. Our goal as a committee is to use these principles to encourage transformation of the curriculum, enhancement of co-curricular activities, and attention to personal and professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and students.

At the end of their first year of work, the members of the committee submitted a report to the President, recommending several components that might comprise a values initiative. As a way of enlisting input from others and soliciting reactions to the committee's recommendations, the President released the report to the community, and discussion groups were hosted by the committee. Facilitated by trained graduate students in the Master of Organizational Development program, 373 faculty, staff and students participated in the discussion groups, which were designed to generate data by asking four questions:

1. What role should the University play in preparing principled citizens who can make informed decisions about complex moral issues?
2. What does "critical thinking about values" mean to you and what role should it play in our classes and co-curricular activities?
3. To what extent do we currently promote critical thinking about values in and out of the classroom? What more can or should we do?
4. What do you know about the University Committee on Vision & Values recommendations? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses?

Surveys on critical thinking about values were also developed and administered to full-time faculty and staff, and a random sample of students. Not surprisingly, while individuals' ideas of how to carry out the mission of preparing principled citizens differed, there was overwhelming support for a focus on critical thinking about values. With 237 of the 893 faculty surveys returned, the response rate of 27% nearly matched the rate of return on the faculty survey on merit pay conducted the previous semester (30%). That survey was on a pocketbook issue that faculty might implicitly care about. While the staff and student response rates for the survey were less than that of the faculty (23% and 9% respectively) all groups tended to respond favorably to the major objectives of the values initiative. Of the respondents 85% of faculty, 95% of staff, and 83% of students responding to the survey agreed with the importance of educating principled citizens. Additionally, 93% of students responding indicated that developing the ability to make informed decisions on social and ethical issues is an important part

of a college education. Furthermore, 90% of faculty and 95% of staff responding to the survey agreed that knowledge must be coupled with the ability to think critically about values. And, lining up in unison regarding service involvement, 73% of both faculty and students and 88% of staff responding agreed that it is important for students to be involved in service activities.

Finally, after the first year of the committee's work, four subcommittees (Co-curricular Environment, Curriculum and General Education, Faculty and Staff Engagement, and Student Engagement) were created for the purpose of developing strategies that spoke to different components of the President's charge as well as the committee's mission. A five-member executive committee then incorporated suggestions from the subcommittees and shaped them into a final report which included five recommendations.

The recommendations were finalized and formed the blueprint for the values initiative at Bowling Green State University, the *Bowling Green eXperience*. The *Bowling Green eXperience* consists of five closely linked components. The first, an intensive August orientation experience, consisting of small groups of students (25), each led by a faculty member, a student affairs staff member, and a returning student, to introduce incoming students to the university and its focus on critical thinking about values, civic engagement, and service learning. Grounded in David Kolb's model of experiential learning, the intensive orientation includes a common reading with themes related to values and value conflicts and sets forth the following set of objectives:

1. Convey expectations of membership in the BGSU learning community.
2. Create a sense of community among participants and create a climate of openness and trust through small group activities.
3. Introduce participants to service learning.
4. Introduce participants to basic "values vocabulary."

The second component of the initiative is a freshman general education course on critical thinking about values offered in a variety of disciplines to be taken by all freshmen during their first semester. Limited to 25 students and taught by the faculty member who led the students' orientation group, this class builds on the bonds created during the intensive orientation to help students explore complex moral and ethical issues. The learning outcomes for these courses are intended to ensure that students will be able to:

1. Identify, using a vocabulary common to the several courses, values embedded in or appearing in the application of the discipline;
2. Identify values conflicts within the discipline and/or between the discipline and the values of its audiences;
3. Articulate and explain one's position on particular value conflicts identified in the course.

In an effort to compliment the curricular components and reflect that students spend most of their time outside the classroom, the third component of the *Bowling Green eXperience*, included co-curricular experiences and service learning opportunities that encourage students to explore and act on their values in their day-to-day lives. These experiences include students participating in service learning projects, joining and participating in student organizations, becoming affiliated with a learning community, identifying a faculty mentor, preparing a developmental portfolio, and completing a "voice project" by getting to know an individual who is different from themselves. Recognizing that students' needs are different at each stage of their development, the fourth and fifth components of the *Bowling Green eXperience* include an

experiential junior year experience and a senior capstone course within the major, both of which weave the thread of values and civic engagement throughout the experience.

Using “critical thinking about values” as the strategy to prepare principled citizens, the *Bowling Green eXperience* is an initiative that includes curricular and co-curricular components, and has to date, engendered for the University \$2.5 million in private and corporate gifts. Early on, the *Bowling Green eXperience* showed signs of success, as evident in the initiative’s ability, through the intensive orientation component, to connect first-year students to the institution. Assessment results of the intensive orientation component (piloted along with the five general education courses in the fall of 2002) were reported after the administration of a forced choice likert scale orientation assessment instrument. The survey included open-ended sentence completion and items that were followed by a six point likert scale (ranging from 1 “not at all” to 6 “to a great extent”). Based on the results of the orientation instrument, it appeared that the orientation component of the initiative had met its stated objectives. However, the most significant early indicator of success was found in the assessment results of the pre-pilot general education course, which indicated after one values course (taught in discipline), undergraduate sophomores’ moral reasoning skills were comparable to that of graduate students.

And finally, the results from the an essay instrument, “Thinking about Values,” designed by a Bowling Green faculty member to assess students’ critical thinking about values skills, were interesting. All five of the pilot general education courses for first-year students recorded results that indicated students’ critical thinking about values skills were greater than those first-year students enrolled in control group general education courses taught in the same discipline as the initiative’s pilot courses.

The test directed students to respond to a scenario which posed value conflicts, and construct answers in essay format, rather than relying on recognition of information to produce responses (e.g., multiple choice format). The decision to develop an institution-specific essay instrument was made because the institution believed that this format maximized the face validity of the test for the skills that we were trying to measure, via the course, and the commercial instruments available failed to do so. Although the *Bowling Green eXperience* was piloted with only 125 first-year students in 2002, today all 4,000 first-year students at BGSU participate in the first two components of the initiative.

Launch into Loras: A Small Private College’s Effort to Introduce Values Discussions to First-year Students

Loras College is a private Catholic liberal arts college of approximately 1,700 students. One of eleven diocesan Catholic colleges in the country, the vision of the institution is to develop principled thinkers and caring professionals in the Catholic and liberal arts traditions. The institution identifies four key areas to focus on within its longstanding mission: creating active learners, reflective thinkers, ethical decision-makers, and responsible contributors. In an effort to enhance the programming for incoming first-year students, as well as to create an environment conducive to developing principled thinkers in support of the institutional mission, Loras College’s Division of Student Development established an intensive orientation in the fall of 2004 through the Office of Programming, Leadership & Involvement.

Modeled after the first component of the values initiative at Bowling Green State University, *Launch into Loras* was created to support the goals of the summer orientation program and to introduce the students to the historical culture and institutional values of the College. It is important to note that while the *Bowling Green eXperience* was a program initiated and supported by the university president to provide a curricular and co-curricular values initiative, *Launch into Loras* began as a student affairs initiated intensive orientation program.

Also based on David Kolb's theory of Experiential Learning, the three-day program allowed students to move from more concrete learning experience to more abstract learning opportunities.

The objectives of *Launch into Loras* mirror the objectives of the first component of the *Bowling Green eXperience*:

1. Convey expectations of membership in the Loras learning community.
2. Create a sense of community among participants and create a climate of openness and trust through small group activities.
3. Introduce participants to service learning.
4. Introduce participants to basic "values vocabulary."

Additionally, like the *Bowling Green eXperience*, the *Launch into Loras* program seeks to make critical thinking about values, civic engagement, and service learning the unifying theme of the student's experience in and out of the classroom, thereby bringing greater coherence to his or her undergraduate education and preparing the student to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to become a principled citizen. Students are challenged to think about what is important to them, to explore their values and find ways to act on them within their daily lives. *Launch into Loras* begins the process of educating students to think critically about the private and public choices they make so that as tomorrow's leaders, they can work effectively for things they care about.

The *Launch into Loras* program seeks to:

1. build more meaningful relationships between students, faculty and staff
2. integrate students' curricular and co-curricular experience
3. prepare students to recognize and think critically about values that underlie important social, political, scientific, and professional issues
4. encourage students to act on their values
5. graduate from Loras College as individuals who are active learners, reflective thinkers, ethical decision makers, and responsible contributors to society.

In the first year of the *Launch into Loras* program, 54 participants were divided into three small groups of 18 students. Each group was led by a faculty member, a student affairs professional, and an upper-class student. The program combines small and large group discussions, a service learning project, a team-building ropes course, and a common reading. Small group meetings held throughout the experience complement the large group experiences and sessions. These meetings are designed to assist the students in exploring ideas and issues more fully, as well as ensure a safe place for personal reflection and exploration. Reflection time is built into the schedule to allow each student to reflect on his or her own values and experiences. *Launch into Loras* sessions offer hands-on experiential learning activities and opportunities for more conceptual, abstract discussions. Faculty, staff, and student group facilitators participate fully in the *Launch into Loras* program and actively engage themselves in all scheduled sessions and group activities, creating a common bond and shared experiences with the participants.

The common reading book was selected to provide the foundation for a discussion on values and ethics with the ideals of a Catholic education in mind. Students were mailed the common reading book one month prior to the program along with a study guide and list of thought-provoking questions. These questions served as the starting point for the book discussions during the program, which led to larger discussions on personal ethics and values.

Topics such as values vocabulary, values conflicts, and value preferences were discussed and students were encouraged to explore these topics by examining their own experiences as well as the experiences of others.

With the guided facilitation of the group's leaders, participants were encouraged to look at values conflicts through an academic and social lens. Students discuss various potential value conflicts, including competition versus cooperation, and community versus individuality. Furthermore, via discussions surrounding the College's Code of Conduct and Academic Honesty Policy, students were given various scenarios in which to place values conflicts into context within the academic setting. These scenarios provided new students with the opportunity to identify a potential value conflict prior to being faced with an important dilemma.

The pilot year of *Launch into Loras* proved to be successful in essentially every measure. Self-reported participant data, as a result of the forced choice likert-scale survey administered to participants immediately following the experience, indicated preliminary evidence that participants were positively impacted by the program. Approximately 92% of the participants indicated that involvement in the *Launch into Loras* program facilitated their understanding of what will be expected of them as Loras students. Participants also reported that involvement with the small group helped them to feel more comfortable discussing issues that were important to them (92%). Additionally, 85% of the participants stated that involvement in the program helped them to reflect critically on values and values conflicts. Finally, 85% of participants said they expected the *Launch into Loras* experience to influence their future actions as Loras students.

Assessment results from *Launch into Loras* indicated that although participating students entered the institution with slightly lower ACT profiles, they emerged at the end of one semester with significantly higher grade point averages, greater satisfaction with the institution, and a 10% higher first to second semester retention rate (100% vs. 90%), compared to first-year students who did not participate in the program. Another indication of the success of the program, albeit less statistically substantiated, was found in the revelations of faculty and staff group leaders who reported that the students who participated in *Launch into Loras* appeared to be more engaged in the institution, more thoughtful in their in-class responses, and more aware of the impact their behaviors had on others within the residence halls.

Following the success of the inaugural year of *Launch into Loras*, the size of the program was doubled in fall 2005 to accommodate 110 incoming first-year students. Due to the continued success of the program (piloted in 2004), in fall 2006, all first-year students participated in *Launch into Loras*. The program has grown from an enhanced orientation program to now encompassing all Welcome Week activities and providing an introduction to the Modes of Inquiry (MOI) course, a required interdisciplinary seminar for first-year students. Students are now placed in small groups with their MOI instructor, student leader, and collaborating student affairs professional. This program structure allows the initial conversations and discussions regarding values held during *Launch into Loras* to be continued throughout the students' first semester. *Launch into Loras* provides a good foundation to the Modes of Inquiry seminar, which focuses on learning to construct knowledge, working with others to solve problems, and using critical thought to evaluate arguments, stimulate creative ideas, and raise ethical questions. The *Launch into Loras* program has been embraced by the faculty and administration at Loras College due to its successful implementation and its enhanced focus on values, from the students' first day on campus. As a result, it is now an integral part of the first-year experience for all Loras students.

Conclusion

While the *Launch into Loras* program was a student affairs initiated intensive orientation at a small private college, the *Bowling Green eXperience* was a much larger curricular and co-curricular values initiative at a large public university. What these two endeavors share in common is a grounding in the fundamental belief that we as educators are responsible for creating experiences for students that foster both the skills and dispositions necessary to live and lead as principled professionals and contributing citizens. These two initiatives at two very different institutions represent the many endeavors nationwide that are focused on assisting students in their journey. While the nuances of values initiatives may vary institution to institution, public or private, they share in common the thread of assisting students as they make important ethical discernments and decisions regarding where they are going, and what values they choose to carry with them on their journey.
