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The Four Tools of Clusters

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Office of the President

The Four Tools of Clusters

November 18th, 2016 by Don Bix

As I see it there are four tools currently available that we could adapt to build the clusters:

1. First-Year Seminar
2. Open Laboratories
3. Gen Ed Direction Courses (if themed and possibly with certificates)
4. Integrated Capstone Experience (Junior or Senior Year)

Together these tools would provide a pathway for students from introduction through conclusion of a cluster-based educational environment. When combined with or built around a major field of study this approach would provide integrated breadth as well as depth.

The concept behind these four tools posits that students would enter into a First-Year Seminar experience that introduces them to cluster learning including a challenge question, an interdisciplinary project experience, an overview and exploration of learning and research methodologies and an understanding to theirs and other clusters. Since we already have First Year Seminars, which are laid out in a very similar manner, interested faculty could use it as a tool to kick off our students' cluster experiences.

Open laboratory environments with project-based learning experiences are a tool that facilitates engaged scholarship and brings together disciplines and individuals who want to create a multidimensional learning experience. This tool is not restricted to faculty, but is an opportunity for faculty, staff, alumni, retirees, and community members to work together on an integrated learning project/challenge. Requests for proposals for projects (and hopefully in the future, curricular design) go out regularly and with some version of block or adaptive scheduling hopefully coming on line in the future, there could be large periods of multiple "blocks" that could be used to explore this project-based learning approach and create opportunities for collaborative activities as well as field trips etc. Later when graduate programs expand, hopefully there will be involvement of graduate students as well, but for now, more senior students could be involved in a mentoring and project lead capacity.

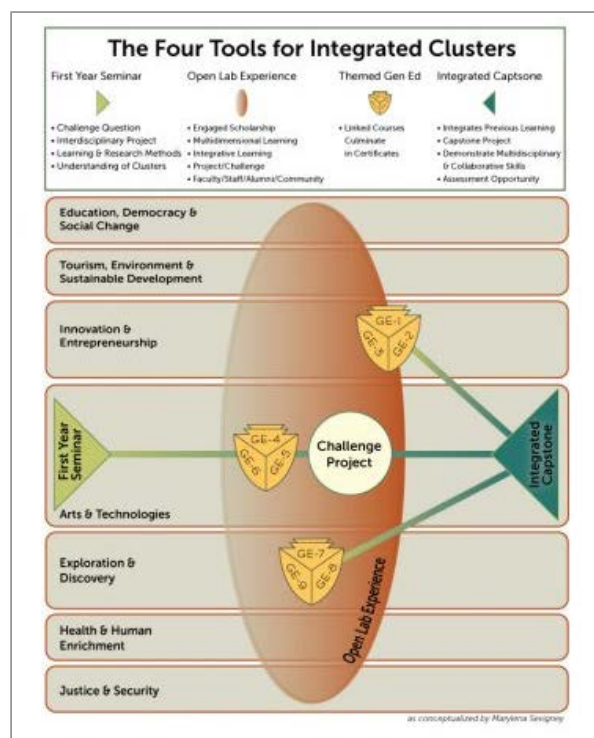
We have already created a process for general education at Plymouth that has a great deal of flexibility and could be adapted as another cluster tool. If we themed Gen Ed courses together we could create linked course combinations that would lead to a certificate granted upon completion of the sequence. It wouldn't mean that students had to take the sequence or even that courses couldn't be interchanged in the sequence, but students would have that option. Sequences that spanned a cluster such as Innovation and Entrepreneurship or Tourism, Environment and Sustainable Development could provide an integrated perspective along with a major while still meeting the existing guidelines of our General Education program. In some cases an individual class can achieve that goal, but often that is not the case. Moreover, while individual Gen Ed courses have many elements that relate to a student's major area of concentration, students often do not see the connections, context or relatedness and there is often not enough critical mass to establish that coherence in an individual course. On a related issue, we are not able currently to assess the outcomes of our Gen Ed program and we are required to do so by our mid-term review (2018). I'll say more about how this approach could be part of an assessment mechanism below.

Finally, an integrative capstone course would be the last part of a student's undergraduate education occurring in either the last part of the student's junior or senior year. It would be the bookend for the First-Year Seminar and integrate the depth and breadth of learning over the last four years. It would provide a great opportunity for

assessment, which as I noted earlier, is a real concern with the mid-term review of our General Education program. Currently, we cannot assess outcomes and my discussion with NEASC indicates that this will be a problem for us in 2018 if not sooner. I really do believe I can get their approval on this pathway approach and the ability to make some analysis of outcomes with an entry-level assessment in First-Year seminar, open laboratory-based project experiences, themed Gen Ed with certificates and a concluding integrative assessment. I also think there is the potential to open a door to substantive change with this approach because as we start considering these courses in relation to each other it is likely to create constructive course changes and interesting collaborative teaching opportunities.

In summary, a student entering the university with an interest in art, might find their passion solving a First Year Seminar challenge, with an introduction to the various clusters, and learning opportunities, followed by a series of Gen Ed courses spanning, for example Arts & Technologies (such as writing, digital media, gaming, graphic arts, graphic design, etc.), or a course sequence in Innovation & Entrepreneurship and/or sustainability/resiliency (or other clusters) and would finish by completing a capstone project challenge utilizing the acquired multidisciplinary and collaborative skills.

I think these tools could help us move in a direction that builds on a curriculum with connected breadth, context, and relatedness as well as depth in a discipline. I have suggested these four tools built on what we mostly already have, because I believe if we can get started on this pathway to the future, we will better see the possibilities ahead – leading to awesome ideas and substantive and exciting changes. In this regard, I have no desire to take any prerogatives from faculty, but to create an environment, suggest some developmental tools, and sketch out an approach where really incredible things can happen that evolve from all of us working together. As always, these blogs are my thoughts, but derived from discussions and input from many of you.



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