

November 10, 2014

Chronicle of Higher Education

Now, Everything Has a Learning Outcome

By Dan Berrett: Rock Island, Ill.



Augustana College

As a member of Augustana College's golf team, Ben Groselak concentrates not just on his backswing but on the ethics and leadership skills he's learning.



Brian Katz, Mr. Groselak's adviser, says he wants the freshman to worry less about his major and more on being ready for life's inevitable turns



A college education has become a widespread expectation. Three in four high-school students say they will go to college, where they'll mark the familiar milestones: declaring a major, joining a club or two, then hoping their degree pays off in a job. But many of them have little idea of why they're really there.

Two recent critiques of higher education have faulted students for their lack of purpose, though the descriptions could hardly be more different. One worries that students are blithely coasting while the other sees them as reflexively busy overachievers.

The aimless ones study little and spend too much time socializing, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa [write](#) in *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*. Colleges cater to their whims, with less concern for academic rigor. And new graduates sputter, often living at home and struggling to find meaningful work.

The world-beaters at elite colleges, meanwhile, have another problem, according to William Deresiewicz. In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, he laments how students at places like Yale University, where he taught for a decade, commit to a passel of extracurricular activities and dutifully [plow through their assignments](#), but do so, he thinks, almost slavishly and without much passion beyond the desire to excel.

Colleges have abandoned their historical role in shaping students' character. That's a root cause of the ills the books identify. Institutions used to render normative judgments about what students should know, what sort of upstanding citizens they should become. Fast-forward a few decades, and the raw clay colleges once sought to sculpt is now a consumer base they strive to please.

As a result, too many students squander those formative years. If they manage to make sense of what their education adds up to, they do so by accident or on their own. But educators uncomfortable with that reality are trying to shift it. While colleges won't return to dictating moral development, some are now guiding students with a firmer hand. They are bolstering advising, trying to connect what students do in and outside of class, and explicitly identifying the learning that happens in various corners of campus. In sum, treating a college education as a holistic, cohesive experience.

Those conversations have taken particular hold at Augustana College, here on the Illinois bank of the Mississippi River. College leaders realized during a strategic-planning process that they needed to play a more active role in shaping their students' education, says Steven C. Bahls, the college's president. "There was too much stumbling through."

A well-regarded college that isn't at the top of the prestige pyramid, Augustana also knew it needed to make a better case that it was worth its nearly \$50,000 cost of attendance. The merits of an intensive

residential experience could no longer be accepted on faith in an era of accountability and return on investment. Value had to be articulated and made plain.

Instead of widening its market by starting graduate or adult-education programs, the 2,500-student college is casting itself as a shaper of traditional students. "The goal is a true coming-of-age experience," says Mr. Bahls, "in which we walk with the students side-by-side."

Augustana College now prompts students to see learning outcomes in experiences like training for a sports team.

What matters in this vision of college is how well students put together and make sense of the pieces of their education. To that end, colleges must curate that experience. Augustana has identified nine learning outcomes—like critical thinking and quantitative literacy—that apply to everything students touch: courses, clubs, teams, residence halls.

But curation can also obscure differences between academic pursuits and intellectual stimulation. The approach assumes that learning is ever-present and portable, with lessons ripe for the plucking. An upper-level seminar, then, is just one more educational opportunity, not so different from a debate in the dining hall. If a college declares that learning can happen anywhere, where does that leave the classroom, the professor, and the institution itself?

Serendipity may also suffer. If students must wring cognitive meaning from the homecoming committee, if even the cooking and anime clubs must serve some explicit purpose, that might sap the traditionally unpredictable, life-changing power of college. Does a more-curated approach leave room for an experience where students discover passions they never knew they had, altering them in unexpected ways?

Faculty and administrators here use the word "intentional" a lot these days. Their goal is to bring learning in its many forms to students' consciousness so they can reflect on those lessons and make them their own.

"Learning happens all the time," says Pareena G. Lawrence, Augustana's provost. It's a matter of being aware of and putting a name to it. Ms. Lawrence has overseen the recent effort to create the campuswide learning outcomes. The goals will be attached to almost anywhere and anything a student goes and does.

Residence halls, for example, help achieve intercultural competency and communication competency by requiring roommates to work out their differences and negotiate privacy. Sports can help develop collaborative leadership and ethical citizenship. Running the campus's organic farm can develop collaborative leadership; dealing with vendors and handling invoices might foster quantitative literacy.

The proliferation of learning outcomes beyond courses is an increasingly common phenomenon, says Jillian Kinzie, a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Institutions of all sizes and types—from California State University at Fullerton in the West to New York University in the East—are applying learning outcomes to things like advising, student-affairs departments, and

extracurricular activities. The idea is to increase opportunities for learning and to assess and improve them. At the very least, it gives the experiences a label.

The growth in extracurricular learning outcomes parallels a similar emphasis in the curriculum, says Ms. Kinzie. Taking those goals outside the classroom, colleges are trying to show specifically how nonacademic experiences contribute to learning.

There are other benefits. Documenting learning supports part of Augustana's value proposition as a small, expensive liberal-arts college with a high-touch residential experience and low student-faculty ratio. Its model looks out of fashion at a time when some expect colleges to disaggregate what they offer. Instead of producing traditional classes, they should offer other institutions' massive open online courses. Rather than charge hefty fees to live on campus for four years, they should encourage students, from anywhere, to proceed at their own pace.

"How do you aggregate where the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts?" Mr. Bahls asks. "We need to demonstrate clear value to students and their families."

Many institutions are building that case, including Augustana, which is still working to attach outcomes to the many facets of campus life.

The learning outcomes for, say, the Martini Swingers, have yet to be established. Student-affairs officials see that the club's robust following reflects leaders' skill at promoting swing dancing. They are developing their skills in collaborative leadership and communication competency.

But even Ms. Lawrence wonders about the effects of using such explicit labels. "Am I squeezing the fun out of everything?" she asks. "It could be."

The men's soccer team, for one, is still sorting out how to apply its outcomes consistently, says Eric C. Stewart, an associate professor of religion and assistant coach of the team.

"We haven't talked about this stuff this fall as much as we should have," Mr. Stewart says. The desire to win often takes over. Still, he says, the team's ethical citizenship can be seen in how it plays—and treats the other team, the referees, and its fans.

For now, deliberate curation and reflection takes place most consistently in interactions between students and their academic advisers.

During a recent advising session here, Kimberly A. Murphy, an assistant professor of biology, asked Cassie Saufley, a senior, to reflect on how her coursework, captainship of the softball team, and a recent trip of preveterinary students to Nicaragua all tied together.

Being captain, Ms. Saufley said, has taught her a lot about leadership. The two chatted easily and warmly, a rapport built over the years. Ms. Murphy described how she had observed Ms. Saufley in several different contexts, including the trip to a Nicaraguan village, where students vaccinated cattle, castrated pigs, and spayed and neutered dogs.

The students quickly ran out of supplies like vaccines and penlights. At one point, Ms. Saufley and her classmates faced a procession of ornery dogs waiting to be fixed. They had muzzles for the dogs but no gauze. So they got resourceful. To stanch the bleeding, they used maxi pads. That, Ms. Saufley said, was creative thinking.

The process of students' articulating what they've learned and tying lessons together makes for an important learning opportunity in its own right, says Janet K. Schulenberg, associate director for advising technology and curriculum at Pennsylvania State University.

"What students often don't realize is they're learning things through their cocurricular environment that are part of what higher education offers," she says. "Until you make them say it out loud and prompt them to reflect on it, they may not make that connection at all."

In the advising session here, other facets of Ms. Saufley's college life were less obviously meaningful. Like her job at Dick's Sporting Goods.

Once you're making connections, though, you're tempted to continue. The part-time job off campus, Ms. Murphy said, might fit learning outcomes like communication skills and intercultural competency.

"Angry customers—that's usually what I get," Ms. Saufley said with a smile.

"Sometimes you have to call on creative thinking, because the person wants this kind of product that we don't have," the student said, such as when a customer came in looking for kneepads to use for dancing.

"I told him I could show him our basketball and volleyball kneepads," Ms. Saufley said.

Her professor affirmed the learning outcome and jokingly added a new one: "Creative thinking—and creative selling."

Colleges have made the return on investment one of their chief selling points, and it has become something of a trap in a tough economy. The expectation is that everything will help make students marketable.

Some colleges are coming to grips with what, beyond the platitudes, career preparation really means, says Charlie L. Nutt, executive director of the National Association for Academic Advising and an assistant professor of education at Kansas State University. "Campuses have to do more than say, 'This course is going to help you in the job market in this major,'" he says. "It's how does your whole college experience make you a better citizen, and a better employee, and help get you where you want to be in the future?" In many cases, he says, it falls to advisers to help students pull together their college experience into an integrated whole.

But how much integration is too much? Advisers shouldn't force students to fit their experiences into a neat package, and they should promote some degree of exploration.

"We don't want to create a straight line," says Mr. Bahls. "Faculty, frankly, are the check."

The faculty members who double as academic advisers at Augustana have to negotiate the tension between guiding students toward a cohesive experience and on-time graduation while also encouraging them to take risks along college's intellectual byways. Those roles can pull them in opposite directions.

During a recent meeting, Brian P. Katz, an assistant professor of mathematics, toggled back and forth. First he tried to help Ben Groselak, a freshman in his calculus class whom he advises, consider how his education might broaden the way he thinks. That allowed Mr. Katz to emphasize why the young man had come to a place like Augustana.

The root of a liberal-arts education is that it frees the mind, the professor said. Augustana requires students to take courses in disciplines like art, history, and natural science for a reason. "One of the assumptions I wanted to make before we talk about courses," he said, "is the goal of exposing yourself to multiple ways of knowing."

He also helped his student follow the straight line.

They discussed how Mr. Groselak's being on the golf team contributed to learning outcomes like ethics and leadership. Mr. Katz asked him to think about other activities that might help him achieve his goals. "It's totally fine to do the ones you find fun," he said, "but we want to be strategic as well."

They looked at Mr. Groselak's schedule. The freshman intends to declare as a math-education major as soon as he can. Another calculus course next quarter was a sure bet. Mr. Groselak said he might also take a history course, "From Ellis Island to Post 9/11."

"Does it connect with any of your goals?" Mr. Katz asked. "Or do you see this coming from somewhere in particular?"

The professor suggested that the course might tell him something about binary worldviews that seem to be arising increasingly in political discourse.

The freshman was also interested in a psychology course. "That'll definitely help me in my teaching career," he said, "because I'll know how my students think and why they think the way they do."

A political-science course appealed to him, he said, because it could give him insight into teachers' unions and the way government works.

"These seem like great choices and good reasons," Mr. Katz said, though they were also very focused on the career he envisioned. The professor introduced a note of caution. Maybe Mr. Groselak was a bit too focused on his major and career at this early stage. "Next time we talk about this," he said, "I'm going to push you beyond, 'I see how this might relate to my job.'"

The college major exerts a gravitational pull. It can impose order on the curriculum, form the basis of an academic identity, and point the way toward a future career.

It is also a category on which much of higher education's value is judged. Studies that link majors with earnings have emerged, and the Obama administration has considered them for its proposed college-rating system.

The choice of a major can be a vexing one. Even at a traditional liberal-arts college like Augustana, students flock toward practical majors like business and education that sound like they lead directly to jobs.

That laser focus runs counter to both the philosophy and the experience of many administrators here at Augustana who champion its curated approach. "There is no one career path," says Mark Salisbury, director of institutional research and assessment. "Everything we're doing is helping students prepare to launch, but then have the nimbleness to react and respond. That really requires teaching students a way of thinking about what they're doing in college."

Mr. Salisbury's evidence of the long-term value of an Augustana education is being drawn from [a large-scale study](#) of thousands of the college's alumni. The study's title, "The Winding Path," characterizes the lives of decades of graduates. They have gone down blind alleys, gotten stuck at dead ends, and adapted.

President Bahls's own path meandered a bit. He was trained as a lawyer and worked for a corporate firm in Milwaukee before realizing he was dissatisfied. Similarly, Mr. Salisbury performed music and, later, stand-up comedy before becoming a higher-education researcher.

Still, a recent advising session at Augustana suggested how much looming pressure the choice of a major can pose.

Alyssa Hernandez, a sophomore who had transferred to Augustana from the College of Lake County, walked in to see her adviser, Liesl A. Fowler, the registrar and assistant dean.

Ms. Fowler's office was designed to soothe, with muted green walls, harp music playing in the background, incense burning, and three lamps casting a glow. She managed to be both warm and businesslike at the same time.

The soft-spoken Ms. Hernandez said she planned to double major in public health and communications. The first subject clearly kindled her interest: She had joined an extracurricular club for public-health majors and attended programs on related topics.

Her interest in communications was less evident. She hadn't taken any courses in the subject and had yet to visit the department office. Still, Ms. Fowler started filling in the blanks of a major-declaration sheet, nudging Ms. Hernandez toward the double major. The student watched her adviser with a steady gaze.

Just before zipping up her backpack, Ms. Hernandez admitted to something. "I wish I was majoring in sociology," she said, adding that she felt particularly close to one of her instructors.

Ms. Fowler stopped. "Don't run away from that, especially if you're feeling a connection," she said. "Think about that a little bit. Don't close that door."

At the same time, she handed Ms. Hernandez the sheet to declare her double major in public health and communications.

One of the more provocative arguments being formed at Augustana is that a major is not all it's cracked up to be. It's just a fraction of an education, along with general-education courses, extracurricular clubs and experiences, dorm life, an internship, or study abroad, and maybe a sport. What matters is how students assemble the pieces.

"We know it's not what a student studies," says Ned S. Laff, director of advising at the college. "It's how they go about constructing an undergraduate education."

Mr. Laff likes to cite the work of Gerald Graff and his theory of hidden intellectualism, which holds that students often have abiding interests that remain dormant because professors fail to tap into them. The challenge, says Mr. Laff, is to help students find what truly animates them. That's rarely Chaucer or Kant, or even the job they think they want when they graduate. It's often something nonacademic, yet it can still serve as the linchpin of their studies.

Once students identify that, they start to understand why they came to college. Mr. Laff had stories at the ready. The business major who cared little for the discipline but found ways to connect it to his real passion, baseball. The medieval- and Renaissance-studies major who loved video games and found an internship to gain experience doing what fascinated her.

Once a student makes that connection, Mr. Laff says, their education truly becomes theirs. The goal at a place like Augustana is not to scrutinize which choices students make. What matters most of all, it seems, is how they make them.

What You Should Get Out of College

Everything students do at Augustana College, whether in or outside of class, is now supposed to serve at least one of the following nine learning outcomes. That's whether it's calculus, soccer, or the heavy-metal club.

DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

Demonstrate a deep knowledge of at least one specific discipline and its connections to the liberal arts, reflected in the ability to address issues or challenges and contribute to the field.

CRITICAL THINKING & INFORMATION LITERACY

Critique and construct arguments. This requires the ability to raise vital questions; formulate well-defined problems; recognize underlying assumptions; gather evidence in an efficient, ethical, and legal manner; suspend judgment while gathering evidence; evaluate the integrity and utility of potential

evidence; critique and incorporate other plausible perspectives; and determine a reasonable conclusion based on the available evidence.

QUANTITATIVE LITERACY

Interpret, represent, and summarize information in a variety of modes presented in mathematical and statistical models; use mathematical and statistical methods to solve problems; and recognize the limitations of those methods.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Collaborate and innovate, build and sustain productive relationships, exercise good judgment based on the information at hand when making decisions, and act for the good of the community.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

Demonstrate an awareness of similarity and difference across cultural groups, exhibit sensitivity to the implications of real and imaginary similarities and differences, employ diverse perspectives in understanding issues and interacting with others, and appreciate diverse cultural values.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY

Read and listen carefully, and express ideas through written or spoken means in a manner most appropriate and effective to the audience and context.

CREATIVE THINKING

Synthesize existing ideas and images, expressing them in original, imaginative ways to solve problems and challenge current understandings.

ETHICAL CITIZENSHIP

Examine and embrace strengths, gifts, passions, and values. Behave responsibly toward self, others, and the world; develop ethical convictions and act upon them; show concern for issues that transcend one's own interests; and participate effectively in civic life.

INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

Cultivate a lifelong engagement in intellectual growth, take responsibility for learning, and exhibit intellectual honesty.