

A FOUNDATIONS COURSE FOR COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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What is expected generally of college graduates today? Many employers expect their employees to independently learn new knowledge, and thus realize that the quality of a graduate's learning skills is at least as important as the amount of information a student has gathered in his or her college career. Studies have repeatedly called for improved "knowledge" and "process" skills to assist the college graduate in dealing with the new challenges of our changing society (Carnevale, 1988 and SCANS, 1991). The skills needed to learn independently or to process knowledge such as self-assessment are considered "process" skills, while those skills needed to generally build knowledge in discipline specific areas, such as the effective use of the library or ability to use technology are "knowledge" skills. Business, government, and education need employees who excel at learning new knowledge efficiently and effectively, whether they are working in groups or independently. If the students do not have the necessary skills or are weak in them, there is not always an academic mechanism in place to help them. Often, faculty members

assume that the student can create or improve the process skills on his or her own. More often, however, the students rely on their strong process skills rather than strengthening their weaker process skills. For many students this can lead to underachieving in some or many academic areas (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

An ever-increasing number of faculty from across the country believe that the students MUST learn the process skills if they are to be successful. We have been meeting together at teaching institutes organized at varying colleges to learn how to use process education in our classes while not diluting the discipline specific content that the students learn. A foundations course that introduces the process skills, but is not discipline specific makes this easier and more efficient. Once the students have taken this course, they can move to our discipline specific courses and continue to build their process skills while learning our discipline's content. In this model, time is not taken from each discipline specific course to set up the process environment, since it has been done in the foundations course.

The foundations course, designed to be two or three semester hours, is taken at the beginning of the student's freshman year. It includes learning activities developed around a set of knowledge skills. Students study the objectives for each activity, analyze the criteria which will be used to evaluate their performance, read about each topic, ask and respond to critical thinking questions, and perform exercises requiring the transfer of knowledge to new situations in a variety of disciplines. After finishing a group of related activities, the students self-assess their content mastery as well as their process skill

development. Learning and reflecting journals are integrated into each activity for this purpose. Throughout the course, students are given the opportunity to engage in problem solving projects that enhance their learning and problem solving processes. The students are expected to present verbal and written accounts of their solutions as well.

The expected outcomes for students who take this course are

1. **growth in their rate and quality of learning** from the understanding and the modeling of the learning process, the building of self-confidence, the practicing of self-assessment, and the mastering of a set of basic knowledge skills;
2. **improvement in their ability to critical think and be creative** from the discovery and the modeling of concepts and the improved understanding through the use of learning and reflecting journals;
3. **improvement in their problem solving capability** from the ability to identify, define, and understand problems and the ability to model, validate, and document their solutions;
4. **improvement in their communication skills, both written and oral** from the use of teamwork when using cooperative learning techniques in the classroom, the formal presentations, journal writing, formal report writing, and course portfolio creation;
5. **a better understanding of their and others' personal values, ethics and leadership qualities** as they relate to group problem solving, citizenship in college, and preparation for life beyond college; and

6. **an increased chance for individual success in college** from the building of a positive relationship with other students, faculty, staff, and the college community through a challenging, intense, and rewarding experience early in the college career.

In our presentation, we will present a brief discussion of the success of this type of course in the classroom, samples of activities used in the course, and a chance for those attending the presentation to play the role of student in this type of a classroom setting. In addition, we will have available a list of other faculty across the country who we know are interested in building the process skills as well as the discipline-specific knowledge, i.e. those interested in *process education*.

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