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Reclaiming Moral Development through a Course Development Rubric

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[Reclaiming Moral Development through a Course Development Rubric](#)

Moral development (growth in personal and social responsibility) was originally a primary goal of higher education in the United States and continues to be cited in many college catalogs, but few institutions currently make a commitment to intentionally addressing personal and social responsibility through the core experiences of their students (Hersh & Schneider, 2005). The processes of specialization and fragmentation, along with the pursuit of value-free inquiry, have led institutions to retreat from investing in moral development as a component of robust liberal education (McNeel, 1994). As “colleges and universities are increasingly under pressure to offer educational programs of immediate economic value to prospective students” (Lake, 2003, p.21), the ubiquitous catalog goals related to moral development tend to remain only in vestigial form on most campuses as “orphan outcomes” (Schneider, 2007).

Research supports a recommitment to educating for personal and social responsibility, and some leaders are urging the academy not to lose sight of these longer term, more complex outcomes. For example, Rest and colleagues (1999) suggest that the college experience can be “very effective in fostering moral judgment development” (p. 72). Derek Bok (2006), former President of Harvard, challenges higher education to achieve at higher levels, and he concludes that moral development should be a purposefully pursued outcome for college graduates rather than simply an option for those who are interested.

“It is not the place of faculty members to prescribe what undergraduates ought to consider virtuous. But surely faculties should do whatever they can to prepare their of their own” (p. 150).

Bok’s point resonates with the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) program, Liberal Education for America’s Promise (LEAP). LEAP is a ten-year program advocating best practices in liberal higher education. In its initial report, *College Learning for a New Global Century*, LEAP’s Leadership Council identified four essential learning outcomes for all college students no matter their degree program. The report urges that these four outcomes – the third of which is centered on moral development – “should become the guiding compass for student accomplishment in the twenty-first century” (AAC&U, 2007, p. 24).

- Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World
- Intellectual and Practical Skills
- Personal and Social Responsibility
- Integrative Learning

In a recently conducted survey of college professors, students, and administrative staff, a solid majority

of all groups endorsed intentional pursuit of educational goals related to personal and social responsibility (Dey, 2008). The survey was conducted at a twenty-three institutions nationwide as part of the AAC&U's Core Commitments program. Through the Core Commitments program, funded by the Templeton Foundation, a leadership consortium of eighteen institutions is working to promote new, effective approaches to infusing curricula with elements that encourage *personal and social responsibility*. The Core Commitments program, after an exhaustive review of the literature, identified five dimensions of personal and social responsibility to be pursued through the whole student experience on campus.

- Striving for Excellence
- Cultivating Personal and Academic Integrity
- Contributing to a Larger Community
- Taking Seriously the Perspectives of Others
- Developing Competence in Ethical and Moral Reasoning

Though surveyed faculty, students, and administrative staff endorse pursuit of these dimensions, questions remain regarding means and resources. Too often, we ask of professors too much, too soon (Ashburn, 2008), and it is not at all clear that adjunct instructors (a sizable contingent) will simply intuit application of these dimensions in the classroom. A heap of formerly promising projects is created by the endemic combination of high rhetoric and low resources in the academy. If the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility are genuinely to be pursued then faculty, both the “overworked core and marginalized [adjuncts]” lamented by Jacobs (2004), need an effective tool.

Structuring a Conversation

The Core Commitments program started an important conversation. To ensure that the conversation, once started, leads to significant developments in course delivery, we now seek to *structure* that conversation.

A flexible structuring tool will encourage not only a self-aware approach to course development related to personal and social responsibility but a framework for keeping track of variables in what should be an essentially empirical process – finding the best pedagogies for specific circumstances. The LEAP report argues that key outcomes “can and should be addressed in different ways across varied fields of study” (p. 24), but that complexity must not lead the academy to reduce this aspect of pedagogy to pure art.

As a technical step forward, we propose a new sort of rubric rooted in the extant research with elements arrayed to reflect the best thinking regarding personal and social responsibility. With this sort of rubric in hand, academicians will have a tool that operationalizes commitment to the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility. Respecting diverse approaches for unique circumstances, this tool supports structured conversation not staid convergence.

A New Sort of Rubric

When reproducing texts in the mid-fifteenth century, monks needed an efficient approach to structuring

their task. They eventually employed a large red letter to mark sections of the original text. Ruber, the Latin word for red, has since morphed into the present term “rubric” (Wenzlaff, Fager & Coleman, 1999). Today, professors use rubrics to evaluate student work products, and these modern rubrics have moved far beyond a simple red marking; they feature a complex matrix that incorporate components such as specific outcomes or traits, degrees of performance, and scoring levels (Allen & Tanner, 2006; Dunbar, Brooks, & Kubicka, 2006).

And now, we propose a new generation of rubrics to be used before the first student steps in the classroom. Course Development Rubrics (CDR's) identify course components in the dual context of shared goals and best practices. In this new application of the rubric concept, leveling is not the intent but more what Brown and Knight (1994) labeled the “synergy” of assessment: “a systematic approach to assessment [that] offers a medium through which academic staff, in their role as teachers, can be brought together to reflect on the ways in which they might develop their thinking and practice” (Yorke, 1998, p. 105).

The five dimensions of personal and social responsibility espoused by the Core Commitments program could remain theoretical unless faculty members make the leap from conversation to conversion – direct application of the shared goals to course development and delivery of instruction. Through a CDR, institutional goals can be translated into specific, measurable indicators applicable to diverse courses.

Construction of the Core Commitments CDR was a multistage process. First, we identified three course components: *Logistics* (grading, policies, course description and objectives), *materials* (readings, presentation, speakers), and *activities/assignments* (in class, homework, exams). With these broad factors specified and listed as rows in the rubric matrix, we next turned to the goals being considered; the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility identified by the Core Commitments program were arrayed across the top of the matrix as column headers. The third step, arguably the most involved, demanded multiple indicators for each intersection of course component and goal. As recommended by Dodge (2001), indicators within rubrics need to be both measurable and simple. With regard to our proposed course development rubric, we firmly believe that indicators also need to be tied explicitly to best practices as evidenced by published research. Thus each indicator in the CDR matrix is action oriented, measurable, and evidence-based.

Table 1. Course Development Rubric

		FIVE DIMENSIONS OF F		
		<i>Striving for Excellence</i>	<i>Cultivating Personal and Academic Integrity</i>	C L
COMPONENTS OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT	<i>Logistics</i> • <i>Description</i>	• Objectives are clearly articulated	• Students are expected to participate	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grading • Policies 	<p>and prominently featured on syllabus.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations for student accountability are expressed. • Grading procedures are outlined and related to weight of various course assessments. 	<p>as “members of a scholarly community.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues of tardiness, leaving early, and absences are clearly addressed and consistently enforced. • Honor code is included and repercussion of breaking the code explicit.
	<p>Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readings • Presentations • Speakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple readings are required. • Additional sources are highlighted for students to independently retrieve additional information. • Mechanisms are built in that allow students to connect with leaders in the field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support is available for students in correct source citation. • Multiple sources of information are provided for topics covered so students must engage in critical evaluation.
	<p>Activities and Assignments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinction between

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In class</i> • <i>Homework</i> • <i>Exams</i> 	<p>are provided prior to students completing assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statement of honor is included on exams. • Opportunity for higher order and creative thinking are present. • Avenues for students to go beyond the minimal requirements are highlighted. • Students engage in setting goals. • Formative feedback is provided offering students an opportunity to reflect and learn from mistakes. 	<p>cooperation, collaboration, and independent work is made and modeled.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process of completing assignments is stressed along with actual product • All substantial written work is submitted through Turnitin.com.
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As depicted in Table 1, the course development rubric looks similar to other rubrics – static and two dimensional. A CDR, however, can include a third dimension. Through a web-based format, interactivity can be introduced. Faculty users could click on elements of the matrix for more information: descriptions of each dimension and each course component as well as annotated research citations with links to full-text articles. Moreover, faculty users of a web-based CDR could provide feedback based on their direct experience. Through this interactive process, the matrix will be renewed organically over time. Institutional drift – noncollaborative and unplanned change (Redmond, 2005) – will be overcome as goals and means are continually titrated to current conditions.

Conclusion

The leadership consortium of the AAC&U's Core Commitments program started a conversation of great value. In an age when cheating is cast as postmodern learning (Conlin, 2007), the academy must "take seriously and rigorously its role...as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems" (Morrison, 2002, p. 7). Through the technologically innovative CDR, we hope to structure the ongoing conversation and support measurable outcomes. The dividends from investing in personal and social responsibility are liable to be paid out over generations.

The three-dimensional CDR is rooted in extant research with elements arrayed to reflect best practices. This new tool has applications far beyond personal and social responsibility. Universities, colleges, and departments may benefit immensely from creating CDR's that reflect (and eventually build upon) local goals. Indeed, the same approach can be used to create Program Development Rubrics (PDR's) for student affairs programming beyond the classroom. The tool has value as a creative catalyst and as a means of tracking pedagogical choices for empirical evaluation.

Syllabus writing tends to be a lonely chore. A CDR will move faculty away from the annual task of updating syllabi toward a continuous process of course development amidst a community of professionals who share goals and now, through a flexible CDR, share a language. The CDR, used artfully, encourages reliable decision making processes grounded in science.

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