

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 7 Fall 2012

Article 2

October 2012

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Recommended Citation

Cassidy, Kim "Developing Partnerships: Creating and Growing the 360° Program at Bryn Mawr College," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 7 (2012), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss7/2>

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS: CREATING AND GROWING THE 360° PROGRAM AT BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

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A 360° course cluster joins together a set of discipline-based courses around a single topic, theme, issue or research question. This linkage promotes interactive educational experiences both in and out of the classroom designed to challenge both students and faculty to bring into dialogue and to integrate these different perspectives to address the topic of the 360° in rigorous and meaningful ways. The 360° model is iterative by design: each individual course influences the others within the same cluster to allow for learning to occur both incrementally and cumulatively.

I designed the 360° program in close collaboration with a group of faculty who were excited by the idea of this approach. We constituted ourselves as the 360° Steering Committee and modeled the idea for the program on the Mosaic program at Dickinson College called as well as on a co-curricular program that Bryn Mawr offered in the late 1980's and early 1990's involving study, travel and then reflection and sharing upon return. Finally, we brought the idea to larger faculty groups for input and tried to be responsive to their ideas and concerns. In designing the 360° program, we wanted to create a flexible space where faculty could be creative and design an educational experience based on pedagogical excellence as opposed to structural limitations. At the same time, we wanted to be sure that each 360° had an intellectual integrity and rigor that adhered to the goals of the program despite the wide variety of surface forms it might take. Early on, we spent a great deal of time defining these characteristics. Those deliberations produced a list of criteria for what it means to be a 360°.

Each 360° must:

1. **Be unified by a focused theme or research question.**
2. **Offer an interdisciplinary experience for students and faculty.** Reflecting the fact that many interesting questions are being explored at the edges or intersections of fields and require multiple perspectives to answer the queries being raised, the program emphasizes inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary work. The 360° program invites each cluster to develop its own explicit definition of these concepts, with the understanding that, as faculty members engage problems using different approaches, theories, data and methods, they will be explicit about the ways in which they seek intersections among their disciplines. Once they have designed the cluster, the participating faculty work with each other and the students involved to evaluate, use and combine different disciplinary perspectives in meaningful ways. Rather than a “parade” of faculty from different disciplines talking to the students from their individual perspectives, a 360° entails engagement among the fully developed perspectives of the various faculty members, so that all of the courses have an impact on one another.
3. **Engage students and faculty interactively in non-traditional classroom experiences.** Essential to the program is a component that extends beyond the traditional walls of the classroom. This occurs through data gathering, research trips, community-based partnerships, artistic productions, and/or intensive laboratory activity.

4. **Provide students and faculty with the opportunity to reflect explicitly on their different perspectives.** Key here is the mutually informative quality of faculty and student reflection on their interdisciplinary interactions. These connections are first shaped by collaboration among faculty members, and then explored among the faculty and students participating in the cluster.
5. **At the conclusion of the experience, share its work in some form with the entire community.**

Using these defining characteristics, the 360° Program can then become an umbrella for a wide range of learning and teaching experiences, realized in a range of configurations to meet the scholarly and pedagogical goals of this highly flexible program. A 360° varies in the number of courses involved, the time frame (they need not take place during traditional classroom hours, or semesters), and the enrollment requirements (students may take courses only within the 360° cluster during a given semester, or they may enroll in other non-360° courses during that same time period, courses may or may not be open to non-360° students).

As the program enters its third year of pilot implementation, I have watched more than fifteen 360° clusters develop and eight actually launch. Each has been different in its evolution and its final form. By following what excites them about their topic and the possibilities for interaction with the other courses in the cluster, faculty stretch the 360° structure in exciting ways. The possibilities and creative potential almost become intoxicating.

Through the work that we have done using both quantitative and qualitative assessment, we have seen that the program doesn't just look exciting on paper, it has been highly successful. As is evident in the articles in this volume, both students and faculty have had incredible experiences. Students are pushed to take courses in disciplines where they might not otherwise venture, they are asked to integrate their different experiences in very deep and challenging ways, they are transformed by their experiences of their coursework that then takes them beyond the classroom walls, and they treasure the unique interactions they have with their faculty and student colleagues. Faculty are also challenged to understand how the courses come together and to design experiences that foster students' ability to make these same (and new) connections. Faculty have new thinking partners with whom they can test and expand their own ideas. Accustomed to having their classroom be their exclusive worry and responsibility, they are challenged to adjust to the rhythm and experiences in other courses. Finally, in a culture where we do not enter each other's classrooms, faculty get a chance to watch someone else teach and learn from what they see.

While teaching and learning in a 360° cluster is very exciting, it also presents many difficulties and challenges, some of which are brought to light in the essays in this volume. Without support and, at times, intervention, these challenges could result in a failure to achieve the learning goals of the program and of the particular project. We have found that involving TLI student consultants has been tremendously important in responding to these challenges. In most cases, the work of the TLI consultant has not only fixed the "problem," but has actually provided opportunities and ideas that wind up enhancing the experience, making it even more productive and enjoyable.

As is probably evident from the essays in this volume, student consultants are uniquely positioned within the 360° to facilitate communication among the participants. These exchanges turn out to be critical. By their presence with both students and faculty, there is an expectation of reflection and discussion. This expectation opens the channels of communication sooner, allowing students and faculty the chance to catch problems as they are forming, and mutually arrive at solutions before the problem and resulting behavior has become too entrenched.

The student consultant is also in the perfect place to identify or give voice to an issue. Faculty working together in the 360° may be quite reluctant to identify a problem with a course or a colleague. Given the close faculty-student working relationship, students in the 360° may be reluctant as well. Both faculty and students may also feel under some pressure to be successful. Everyone (from the institution to the individual participants) is investing a lot of resources into this pilot program, the participants are the pioneers who have the privilege of developing it, and there are high hopes for their success. Thus, participants may not want to admit that there is a problem, as more than just their own hopes are riding on the experience. The student consultant may be the only one who has just enough (but not too much) distance from the relationships among the participants and the expectations for the program to be able to honestly and productively name the issues and open the door of communication for their resolution.

For both students and faculty, one of the most challenging elements of the 360° program is drawing connections between the discipline-based courses, both intellectually and practically in terms of consistent expectations, style, logistics, etc. The student consultants have been quite helpful in building coherence and integration across the 360°, and they are typically the first to notice that the connections need improvement. They often have the best sense of what will be helpful in building integration for the student participants, and they also can then provide the conduit or mechanism for the conversations to take place. As you can see from the essays, sometimes this conduit is figurative, but sometimes it is literal, in that the student consultant is the one to create the elements of the 360° that make the integration possible.

Because this is a pilot program, we have also been quite invested in assessing its effectiveness, as well as learning about the key ingredients to its success. The student consultants have provided an excellent way to achieve both formative and summative assessment. They sit within and outside the 360° and this makes them a unique partner for assessment. The fact that they have been involved in the 360° and know the participants makes them an authentic partner for asking questions and engaging discussion. At the same time, they have enough distance from the experience and its outcomes that they can take a more objective stance toward those experiences. Assessment information that we receive from student consultants has been among the most valuable in understanding the program.

As I have watched the 360° program take shape and have hoped that it will fulfill its amazing potential, I feel lucky to have the TLI and its student consultants as partners. They have fulfilled an important role in the development of this program that comes from their unique position within the 360°. Without such partners it is hard to imagine how we could have achieved the same kinds of interactions and the same ultimate success.