

Student Learning Committee (SLC)
Minutes from Meeting on October 29, 2020

APPROVED 11/20/20

Attendees: Dianna Shandy (Chair), Jeff Allen, Nancy Bostrom, Louisa Bradtmiller, Angi Faiks, Adam Johnson, Sarah Noble (Student Representative) Joan Ostrove, Patrick Schmidt, Claire Sislo, Andrew Wells

Not able to attend: Donna Maeda

I. Welcome and Introductions

- Dianna welcomed committee members and thanked them for their service to the college.
- SLC members briefly introduced themselves. In addition, a student representative, Sarah Noble '22, has been appointed and introduced.

II. Approve the Minutes

- Move to approve minutes by Adam, seconded by Patrick. Minutes approved.

III. Intro to “Engage Community” 4-Page Infographic (Nancy Bostrom)

- At the last meeting, we talked about the infographic produced by SLC. One of SLC’s responsibilities is to share assessment results related to our institutional learning outcomes
 - We do this in a variety of formats, e.g. presentations to faculty and staff, and to MCSG
 - In order to share results more broadly, last year SLC began to produce a 4-page infographic highlighting results from our “Engage Community” assessment
 - The idea is that this first infographic will serve as a template for sharing results from future SLC assessments as well, and SLC will produce one such document each year
- As a starting point for creating our first infographic, last fall Nancy shared full results from our Engage Community student and faculty surveys, and as a group, SLC selected the critical data points to include in the infographic
- This information and some draft copy was sent to Marketing and Communications. Julie Hessler revised the copy and Kelsey Fox created the layout.

Action Item for Everyone: *Please take a look at the draft and let Nancy know if you see any red flags, have concerns or suggestions, or if it’s ready to go from your perspective. She’s also interested in any specific ideas for how best to share this information. Send feedback by end of day November 12.*

IV. Overarching Questions that will inform our work this semester (Dianna Shandy)

- Potential work upcoming on the institutional retention (more to come next meeting)

- We will be taking a look at the Learning outcome: Demonstrate Intellectual Depth and Breadth.
 - This topic led to preliminary overarching ‘what if’ questions and exploring more broadly, e.g. ‘what do we mean by liberal arts? What will liberal arts mean moving into the future?’ These questions led us to interest in generating this conversation, perhaps with the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC), since there is not a consistent, cohesive way this is defined, even within our own community.
 - What, if anything, is important for students to know about liberal arts at Mac in 2020 and into the future? What should students know about the liberal arts in order to thrive at Mac?

V. Touchdowns (Nancy Bostrom) (see slides in SLC google folder)

- What is SLC’s role?
 - Nancy discussed the 4 primary objectives of SLC. (Engage, Evaluate, Collaborate, Advise).
- One of SLC’s roles is to assess the six institutional learning outcomes. We evaluate these on a rotating basis, usually one per year, with this year’s focus on Demonstrate Intellectual Depth and Breadth (DIDB).
 - How do we go about assessing this?
 - Each of our learning outcomes comes with a set of indicators that can be evaluated.
 - SLC is going to do a survey of seniors and alumni this year, and may consider collecting additional data, perhaps something like a sample of capstone projects.
- Because of this outcome’s connection to intellectual depth and by extension, to majors and major selection, over the last couple years, the AO conducted interviews and 2 surveys with sophomores.
- Today we are going to look at some results/excerpts from four questions from the fall 2019 sophomore survey
 - “What do you see as the purpose for a major at Macalester?
 - Major is important for future (152 comments)
 - It guides your academic experience (135 Comments)
 - It helps you to make a particular gain while at Mac (128 Comments)
 - To follow your interests/ do what you enjoy (73 Comments)
 - What are student’s perceptions of the role of a major in post-Mac pursuits?
 - Majority agreed that a major provides transferable knowledge, skills, and perspectives in post-Mac life
 - Many agreed there is more than one major at mac that would help them achieve their goals.
 - (first generation and Pell recipient students are less likely to agree)
 - About half agreed that a major commits them to a career path.
 - (international students, first-gen students, pell recipients, males, and US BIPOC students were more likely to agree)
 - How well does Macalester support students through their major selection process?

- About 60% agreed that Macalester adequately supported them through the major selection process.
 - A substantial number of students (BIPOC and first generation in particular) did not agree that Mac adequately supported them in their selection to choose a major
 - What information is useful at each stage of a major selection?
 - Exploring Stage (before Mac, first year)
 - General information about Liberal Arts, big picture descriptions of different majors, general info about the role of a major at Mac, learning experience in a major
 - Narrowing Stage (throughout the first year, especially spring semester)
 - The learning experience in a major, post-Mac opportunities, majors that lead to post-Mac goals, big picture descriptions of different majors
 - Deciding Stage (First year-into second year)
 - Post Mac opportunities for particular majors, “how-to” information, the learning experience in a major, different majors that could lead to a particular post-Mac goal
- Adam highlighted that, over the past 15 years, there is a measured trend of sophomores declaring majors earlier, from approximately 15% to 40%. It is happening for all students, across disciplines, no one demographic swings the data. The 2008 Recession was the last big jump in this statistic. Nancy has some additional data on why students declare early, but not definitive.
 - Louisa asked, is the often-offered simplest explanation of students already knowing their major before entering Macalester even technically accurate?
 - Adam explained that the number of students entering Macalester that are totally undecided has been declining. About half of recent grads completed a major in the “intended major” they listed as entering first years.

Action Item: *Nancy will pull together the data we have on when students decide on a major and what drives the timing of the decision, and will send to SLC*

- Nancy shared the question; In what ways should SLC act upon, or encourage other groups or individuals to act upon/explore this information?
- Jeff shared his thoughts on the subject of liberal arts and how it is explained to prospective students and families is complicated. He explained that there is a lot of research that many students do not understand the concept of the liberal arts, some feel it leaves out the hard sciences, some feel there is a political notion behind it, and that there is research suggesting institutions should avoid the use of the term ‘liberal arts’ and rather emphasize a college as an academically rigorous institution. The bottom line is that we need to find ways to better communicate the ways we excel to students and their families.
- Angi asked if the idea of liberal arts as a contentious designation has been discussed or debated at Macalester. Or if there were other committees discussing the idea of liberal arts as a barrier to students.
- Dianna shared that there are other institutions that determined using liberal arts as a designation is less helpful. We are still a liberal arts college, but some of our peer institutions have changed to a university. Where should these conversations be held?

- Louisa highlighted that EPAG has been trying to have bigger picture discussions on questions like this. What do mean by liberal arts? What should grades mean now in 2020 and beyond? Due to the pandemic, EPAG has been in firefighting mode since March with less time for broad discussions like this, but they are necessary. She thinks EPAG could facilitate a conversation on this, in conjunction with conversations on advising and the first year course. Advising across the college is extremely uneven. Some students are getting great information, having these deeper conversations on requirements of the college, while other students are not. It's difficult in our current structure to ensure all students are having that exploration and conversations on what we mean by liberal arts in their first year.
- Andrew provided a student affairs perspective. They just finished identifying student affairs strategic priorities. If there is guidance coming from SLC or EPAG about what advising looks like, it's important for Student Affairs colleagues to be involved to advance those changes and be consistent with these efforts.
- Patrick shared (report attached below) how there should be greater emphasis highlighting that no single major or field has all the answers, and that liberal arts increases exposure to more than one facet of developing an inquiring mind.
- Dianna highlighted previous examples of tension between departments that feel that they have to "fight" for majors, and wondered what it would look like if we spoke on major choice and exploration more as a collective rather than having this fight for students to maintain departments.
- Nancy asked what can we do to provide better information to students during the major selection process? Just over half said Macalester was adequate; This is an indicator of our need to improve. We have a variety of individuals and departments who advices students, but not necessarily in a holistic, intentional way. Since advising is cross-divisional, should SLC play a role in facilitating discussions? SLC may not be the one to lead the charge on all these conversations, but we do have the information and a role to play in raising the question.
- Sarah explained the divide, among her friends and classmates when choosing a major. Some felt that they didn't have enough of a chance to explore because their major required them to jump in earlier, while other students took too much time exploring which led to its own set of limitations. Also, some of the bigger departments don't have the time to advise as deeply as others.
- Angi suggested that it seemed that it would be helpful to have an offering of some kind of program, outside of advising, that was geared for all undecided students, that covered a more in-depth understanding of liberal arts and choosing a major. Something that would be offered as less about the nuts and bolts, and more focused on opportunities.
- Joan underscored another outside driver to major declaration was the changes in the study away decision-making process. Students wanting to apply for study away need to map out their academic plan to ensure they will fit together. She also asked, how do we navigate the difference between those that explored and those that jumped into a major? For some, they may have felt locked into a major sooner than they wanted, while others felt the exploration was less focused. She noted the logistics about how there are majors that are impossible to pick up after 2 years of exploration, while there are other majors that can be completed in two years after taking a class that solidified the choice in their sophomore year. She also noted that that post-pandemic, there will likely be

another economic impact on major deciding process. When is the right moment to support this question of choosing a major?

- Joan also raised the question of timing to review the six institutional learning outcomes, which SLC discussed last year. At what point should SLC re-evaluate our mix of institutional learning outcomes?

Action Item: *Dianna is going to take this conversation and feedback to Ann Minnick who is now in charge of the majors fair this year.*

Action Item: *Nancy has additional information she can provide on these surrounding questions that she will add to the SLC shared file for review.*

Report shared by Patrick:

Learning Outcome	Traits	Description
INDEPENDENT THINKER	Independence	the ability to take teacher roles by setting topics, asking questions to originate new topics, summarizing discussion and assessing ideas
	Developing an inquiring mind	asks high-level questions, such as why-questions
	Acquiring self-assessment skills	self-assesses one's claims and arguments; the ability to recognize biases in thinking and predispositions to make certain judgments, shares or communicates critique of one's biases and prejudgments
	Learning to argue	argues effectively by making conceptual claims backed with supporting theory, reasoning and evidence; does not imply emotional and contentious argument
INTELLECTUAL MATURITY	Complexity/Uncertainty	the ability to work with complex problems, issues, and information
	Takes intellectual chances	willingness to state positions and arguments without worry of saying something wrong, making mistakes, or risking failure
CREATIVITY	Idea generation	generates new ideas, variations of or alternatives to solving problems, a novel way of analyzing or re-conceptualizing a topic or idea in the context of what the student knows and understands, interesting and creative restatements of others' ideas, unusual ideas, interesting theories
	Curiosity	the desire to learn or know more, ability to become absorbed in the topic, discovers a new line of inquiry or question of a topic and wishes to persist and sustain in exploring the topic
	Multiple perspectives in problem solving	sees a problem from multiple perspectives, compares and contrasts approaches, uses multiple disciplines
	Connectivity	ability to bring together or synthesize disparate bits of information, makes connections between already established ideas or theories, connects disciplines