Castleton University’s Integrative Learning Pathway  
“Foundations, Connections, Directions”

Submitted for Consideration to the Davis Educational Foundation  
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After a multi-year strategic planning process, Castleton University has identified a number of institutional priorities for undergraduate education. These include expanding students’ opportunities to reflect on connections between their general education and major courses, deepening the integration of co-curricular and academic programs, and increasing our emphasis on undergraduates’ application of knowledge and skills to complex regional, national, and global problems. After many campus-wide conversations about the best way to address these priorities, we have decided to pursue a Davis Educational Foundation grant to create an Integrative Learning Pathway (ILP) in our General Education Program that provides students with opportunities to reflect on and connect their learning throughout their baccalaureate experience. The practice of integrative learning, which is promoted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, uses targeted pedagogies to teach students how to integrate and transfer their learning over time, across courses, and among academic, personal, and community settings. Integrative learning has long been at the heart of a Castleton education, but in a relatively diffuse, uncoordinated manner, and localized primarily in the beginning of our students’ academic experience. This grant will support our efforts to create integrative experiences at the upper level, to deepen integrative learning opportunities in the first year, and to enhance messaging and advising that will guide students through a more cohesive undergraduate experience, one that will inspire them to recognize the value of their liberal arts education, and to become more proactive and intentional about their academic plans. We believe this will increase retention and students’ efforts to maintain an appropriate pace to graduation, thereby containing student costs and lessening their debt burden.

Our campus has been working on various curricular initiatives that reflect integrative learning practices for a very long time, but in a piecemeal fashion. With better coordination and intentionality, these components offer substantial promise for promoting students’ development of integrative skills. For example, our First Year Seminar (FYS) Program help students connect and reflect on their learning through a specialized FYS course (a general education requirement), a Summer Reading Program, and a weekly “common hour,” emphasizing Student Life programming (e.g., activities, wellness, leadership, and community engagement). FYS faculty actively support their students’ transition to university life and their efforts to integrate their learning across these various facets of the FYS program. The FYS faculty meet as a group with an academic dean every other week to share and learn strategies for supporting first year students’ academic, social and personal development. Our signature Soundings Program, another general education requirement, offers students a wide variety of programming such as plays, lectures, concerts, dance performances, and debates. In their first year, students attend 10 events and write very brief reflective essays on each. FYS faculty are encouraged to integrate Soundings events into their courses, but some struggle with this, particularly if their seminars have a narrow focus on a particular academic discipline. Our upper class students are required to enroll in Junior Soundings, in which they are asked to reflect on the Soundings Program and its connections with other aspects of their liberal arts education through a culminating essay. We
use these culminating essays to assess students’ ability to identify and articulate connections among various facets of their undergraduate experience. A systematic direct assessment of 506 of these essays over the course of six semesters indicates that students struggle to make more than superficial connections among various aspects of their undergraduate curriculum. This course has promise as an integrative capstone, although currently this half-credit course is completed independently without the benefit of faculty guidance and peer discussion. Given our longstanding but piecemeal approach to students’ integrative learning, we see a great need to deepen the aforementioned opportunities for integrative learning, and develop a more robust upper level integrative course within our general education program.

In March of 2015, we submitted a proposal to the Davis Educational Foundation to support a variety of different curricular initiatives based on the principles of integrative learning. The project was not funded but the Foundation viewed our project as promising enough to fund one of our most important expenditures, attendance at the AAC&U Institute on Integrative Learning in the Departments in July of 2015. After a busy week of workshops, lectures, and opportunities to network, we left with a better understanding of best practices regarding integrative learning pedagogies, the development and assessment of campus-wide learning outcomes, and approaches to institutional change in undergraduate education. Our time at the Institute helped us develop an action plan that mapped out steps we would take toward the creation of an Integrative Learning Pathway in our General Education Program.

The first step in this process was the development of institutional learning goals. In preparation for this grant proposal, we worked with constituents from all over campus (First Year Seminar faculty, department chairs, faculty, members of the President’s Cabinet) to develop the following goals that describe our fundamental aspirations for all students earning a Bachelor’s Degree at Castleton University:

1. Castleton University provides a broad range of knowledge in the liberal arts as well as deep knowledge in one of our many academic disciplines.
2. Castleton University develops students’ facility with skills necessary for their academic studies, professional development, and life-long learning.
3. Castleton University helps students to clarify their values and learn how to collaborate productively with others by recognizing and respecting diverse perspectives.
4. Castleton University teaches students how to make connections between various intellectual and social domains and to apply their knowledge in critical and creative thinking and expression.
5. Castleton University prepares students to take meaningful action in their personal, professional, and civic lives.

On May 3, 2016, the Faculty Assembly unanimously endorsed these goals and our grant project. In the next academic year, we plan to work with the faculty to finalize the goals, and use them as a framework for developing and assessing the curricular changes we describe below.

Another step that informed this grant proposal was a review of our existing General Education Program. The Vermont State Colleges system requires general education programs to be reviewed every five years. One component of our most recent review in Spring 2015 was a survey of all full-time faculty about their perceptions of our General Education Program. Fifty-eight percent of full-time faculty members, representing every department, responded to the
survey. In general, faculty members were satisfied with the goals of the program, but a pattern of responses suggested that many view the program as a “loose set of requirements” rather than as a “cohesive program.” This diffusion may make it difficult for students to develop a full appreciation for the role of the General Education Program in their undergraduate experience. Interestingly, a survey of 116 of our alumni suggests that respondents believed their general education courses were irrelevant to but helped prepare them for post-baccalaureate life. This finding suggests we need to do more as a campus to help students recognize the relevance and value of general education. Our distribution requirements are structured through four different ways of knowing or Frames of Reference: Aesthetic Understanding, World Views, Scientific and Mathematical Understanding, and Social and Behavioral Understanding. Students can choose courses from many different disciplines within each Frame. While particular professors who teach in one Frame may ask students to make connections with another Frame, their major, or Soundings, this is not currently an expectation of the program, and thus students’ integrative thinking is not intentionally cultivated throughout the program. Our Frames of Reference have the potential to provide students with structured opportunities to engage in integrative thinking and problem solving. We believe an Integrative Learning Pathway that ends with an integrative upper level experience will provide that structure.

Having completed this foundational work with our campus, we are now ready to work together as a community of scholars in a more coherent integrative, data-driven fashion to create the Integrative Learning Pathway. Preparing this grant proposal has energized conversations and initiatives around integrative learning. For example, several faculty teaching in the First Year Seminar program are working together to develop proposals to embed collaborative teaching and learning in their courses; we are piloting a Summer Reading focused on the challenges and opportunities of a liberal arts college education and exploring the possibility of shared writing assignments related to our institutional learning goals. Faculty, staff and administrators have been meeting to explore ways to deepen the opportunities for reflection in our Soundings Program, and we are participating in a New England Campus Compact project, funded by the Davis Foundation, that supports integrative learning opportunities around the theme of environmental stewardship. Support from the Davis Foundation for the Integrative Learning Pathway project will provide us with the resources we need to coordinate and build on these initiatives.

The title of this grant project is “Foundations, Connections, and Directions:”

**Foundations:** The entry point for our ILP, the FYS Program, will equip incoming students with a firm foundation of 21st century knowledge and skills for college success.

**Connections:** An ILP will help students to make and reflect upon connections in their learning across the curriculum. It will target key points of contact between the General Education Program, the students’ majors or professional programs, and their wider co-curricular activities.

**Directions:** An ILP will represent a guided pathway that encourages students to navigate the curriculum intentionally, reduce time-to-degree, and leverage their major and professional program experiences toward successful preparation for a wide range of careers, lifelong learning, and engaged citizenship in a rapidly evolving global economy.
The Davis Educational Foundation Grant will support the following three initiatives, which reflect our Foundations, Connections, Directions framework:

**Foundations: Refine the General Education Curriculum.** Through this three-year phased project we shall create a signature Integrative Learning Pathway in our General Education Program that will deepen integrative learning opportunities in the first year and culminate in an integrative experience at the upper level. A secondary goal is to increase the visibility of this distinctive integrative learning framework so students recognize its value, and the role it plays in their undergraduate education at Castleton. The expectation is that these efforts will percolate out to influence other curricular initiatives that will cultivate students’ integrative learning (e.g., expansion of professional courses that focus on compilation of an e-Portfolio, the development of integrative capstones in the majors, themed clusters in the General Education Program).

**Connections: Assess Students’ Integrative Learning.** In recent years we have assessed students’ ability to reflect back on and make connections across different aspects of their undergraduate experience. We know that we need to provide students with more structure in the curriculum to enhance their ability to do this, and we believe the campus-wide learning goals and integrative learning pathway will provide this structure. We also want to assess their ability to transfer and apply their knowledge and skills to complex regional, national, and global problems. Our new upper level integrative experience requirement will provide us with expanded opportunities to teach and assess problem-based learning, support students’ reflection on their learning, and to assess students’ integrative learning across the undergraduate curriculum.

**Directions: Develop Tools to Support Academic Planning.** Academic advising is a core component of the work of our faculty, supported by administrators and the Academic Support Center. We aspire to develop tools (e.g., road maps, guided pathways) to help support advisors and students as they work together to engage in proactive academic planning, with the ultimate goal of maximizing one’s undergraduate education and minimizing cost (particular emphasis on time-to-degree). We will also develop various reflection exercises (e.g., mapping) to help students develop, reflect on, and make meaning of their own integrative pathways. This will provide them with the structure they need to engage in their own planning, build connections across different aspects of the curriculum, and reflect on and refine their own educational and professional goals.

Through this 3-pronged, integrative approach, we hope to provide our students with the structure and guidance necessary to demonstrate and reflect on their progress toward our new campus-wide learning goals. In addition, this will offer us an opportunity to refine current assessment practices to better understand students’ capacities for integration and reflection.
STAGE ONE: DATA-DRIVEN REFLECTION & BUILDING CAPACITY
August 2016-May 2017

Beginning in August 2016, we plan to expand the original Integrative Learning Team (currently the Dean of Arts, Sciences, and Community Engagement, the Dean of Student Life, and three faculty members) to include an additional three faculty members from the General Education Committee. The main focus for this year is to build capacity for more integrative structures to support this work. The development of our campus-wide learning goals is an important step in the right direction. We need to continue to purposefully build alliances and shift the campus culture to create a sustainable program that has integrity. Specifically, this team would finalize the learning goals, while reflecting on many different sources of data regarding student learning (e.g. shared FYS assignments related to the learning goals, Junior Soundings essays, focus groups with juniors and seniors, culminating essays). They would also host an outside consultant, travel to other institutions, and facilitate a Faculty Learning Community about Integrative Learning. By the end of this year, we will finalize the pathway (e.g., enhance integrative components of FYS Program, develop criteria for upper level integrative experience) so that it can be implemented in Year Two.

STAGE TWO: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT
June 2017-August 2018

During this year, the ILP would be launched for the first year students (e.g., campus-wide learning goals, messaging about the ILP, proactive academic planning in the first year, and increased emphasis on integrative learning opportunities in the First Year Seminar Program). The main work of the Integrative Learning Team in this year is to work with interested faculty to assess students’ pathway reflections at the end of their first year, and develop upper level integrative learning experiences that meet the criteria established during Stage One.

STAGE THREE: PILOT AND ASSESS UPPER LEVEL INTEGRATIVE EXPERIENCE
September 2018-August 2019

In this last year, we would pilot our upper level integrative experience for students with junior-level academic standing. We would also support faculty in their efforts to assess students’ problem-based learning, reflection, and synthesis of learning across the curriculum. These data will help to develop plans for adjusting and sustaining the program. The Integrative Learning Team would continue to work together to coordinate workshops and other forms of faculty development to encourage the creation of integrative first year seminars and upper level experiences. During this year, Castleton would begin to transition from full support from the Davis Educational Foundation and begin to independently fund the professional development and other resources necessary to sustain the program. Our goal for the Fall of 2019 is for the new upper level integrative experience requirement to be in place for the first year students who began in the fall of 2017, the first class exposed to the Integrative Learning Pathway.