Developing Signature Learning Experiences: A Case Study of an Institution’s Transformative Journey towards Global Citizenship and Equity

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ABSTRACT: Signature Learning Experiences are unique learning experiences created by institutions to differentiate their graduates for employers. This study is a historical account of an institution’s commitment to global citizenship and equity. In this case study, the institution uses diversity and the principles of global citizenship and equity to create a signature learning experience for students. The paper begins with a description of the context for change and looks at the changes that were implemented including a general education course; the embedding of global citizenship competencies in the whole institution; the implementation of a portfolio for students and the introduction of global citizenship and equity learning experiences abroad.

1. Introduction

Centennial College, a large community college located in a suburb of Toronto, has a very diverse student population, a strong commitment to social justice and a history of involvement in the community in which it is located. In 2004, a new President assumed the leadership of the College who was equally committed to social justice, and had a passion for making a difference in the community. The President, Ann Buller, embarked on a process to begin to harness the college’s strength in diversity and social justice to create a Signature Learning Experience for students and to create structures for a learning - centered institution. The article looks at the process the College adopted in developing the course, and creating a college environment that placed the commitment to global citizenship and equity as central to the college. The article is based mainly on the review of reports and documents related to the course, and the institutional changes that were implemented.

2. The Environment for Change

The Student Population

The student population at Centennial College is very diverse. The student population has about an equal number of males and females with females making up a slightly higher proportion. More than a third of the students come from backgrounds with a first language that is neither English nor French. The rich diversity of cultures at the College makes the learning experience a truly special one. About a quarter of the student population describe themselves as Canadian, while a fifth describe themselves as South Asian and a similar proportion as Chinese.
A tenth of the population describe themselves as Caribbean. Also present at the College are students from countries on all of the continents including Latin and South America, Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, South East Asia, Eastern Europe and Asia. In addition approximately three quarters of the student body are mature students with responsibilities and for some of them, they may be returning to school after a long time off from school (Aboagye, 2009).

The Community

The community in which Centennial exist has areas with high proportions of low income and high immigrant population. The City of Toronto has identified within its boundaries, 13 Priority Areas. These are areas the city considers to have higher social risk factors and therefore in need of support from the city. The community within which the College exists has three of these Priority Areas. They are Kingston-Galloway, Malvern and Scarborough Village. These neighbourhoods are generally experiencing a population loss; have a higher than average number of at-risk populations: visible minorities, recent immigrants and lone-parent families. The families in the Priority Areas have incomes that are generally below the city average. In addition, unemployment rates for the population aged 15 years and up are higher than the city average and youth unemployment is very high (City of Toronto, 2006).

3. New Leadership and Commitment to Change

A new President was appointed at the College in 2004. The President had been a past employee of the institution who came back with a renewed commitment to diversity and equity and had been given a mandate to leverage diversity as a strength of the institution. The President created a leadership team that was committed to creating a learning environment that was inclusive and committed to social justice. The whole process began with the creation of a diversity statement by the Board of Governors. The statement reads:

Centennial College and its Board of Governors value and embrace diversity, equity and inclusion as fundamental to our mission to educate students for career success within a context of global citizenship and social justice.

We recognize that historical and persistent inequities and barriers to equitable participation exist and are well documented in society and within the college.

We believe individual and systemic biases contribute to the marginalization of designated groups. These biases include race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, colour, ethnicity, culture, linguistic origin, citizenship, creed (religion, faith), marital status, socio-economic class, family status, receipt of public assistance or record of offence. We acknowledge that resolving First Nations sovereignty issues is fundamental to pursuing equity and social justice within Canada.

We acknowledge the richness and diversity of the community we serve. As our community has evolved, and our staff and student population have changed, we have implemented policies and practices to address issues of inclusion. In moving forward, we will build on this work to embed commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in every aspect of what we do. (Centennial College)
The statement of diversity was a strong policy signal that the College valued and embraced diversity. The President set out to create a set of commitments that would guide decisions at the College. The set of commitments included re-affirming the institution’s mission and revising the College’s vision statement. The exercise for revising the vision statement involved having an external consultant lead a group of over 50 college employees (including faculty, students, administrative and support staff) in a visioning exercise. The commitments also included a revision of the academic framework as well as the creation of a strategic plan. The chart shows how all the various aspects of the College’s commitment were linked together. One of the key initiatives the President supported which combines the College’s commitment to equity and social justice and also links the institution to its immediate community, was the creation of a summer program for at-risk students called “Helping Youth Pursue Education (HYPE). The program is for local youth aged 13 to 29 years old who are out of school and provides a free summer program for youth and helps them transition back to the education system. This is a six week course that introduces participants to many programs at the college.

4. The Structures and Guiding Principles for Change – The Learning Centered College

One of the main commitments of the President was a plan to transform the college into a learning centered institution. She started by creating a taskforce to work on specific parts of the learning centered institution. She also began a college-wide discussion about making the college “a truly learning-centered college; one that competes effectively in the new post-secondary education environment by putting students first in everything we do. [...] we could do this by drawing on our long-standing strengths, and by building new capabilities that would make us a leader in Canada and the world” (Centennial College, PTFL, 2005).

The concept of the Learning Centered College was developed by Terry O’Banion (O’Banion, 1997) who identified some key principles that he felt were the foundations for a learning centered college. These were that the learning college creates substantive change in individual learners; engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices; creates and offers as many options for learning as possible; assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities; defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners; and its facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners (p. 47).

For the College, the process of becoming a learning centered institution involved adopting these key principles at the college. As a learning centered institution, the college committed to a set of principles that included: to create change in individual learners; assist learners in collaborative learning activities; define the role of leaders and learning facilitators by the needs of learners; document improved and expanded learning; create accountability for learning throughout the organization; and entrench diversity and human rights principles and competencies. The process started with the revision of the College’s academic framework and
re-affirmation of the key principles in the academic framework. These principles were commitment to student success; commitment to access; pursue excellence; be inclusive; integrate technology; promote communities of learning and encourage partnerships.

The structures that were created included first and foremost the creation of the position of a Chief Learning Officer and Vice President Academic to oversee the move into a learning centered institution. Then the Centre for Organizational Learning and Teaching was set up to provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. Finally, the Human Rights Office became the Office of Equity which has since been turned into the Institute for Global Citizenship and Equity.

The President’s Taskforce had three sub-groups: the Taskforce on Learning for All; the Taskforce on Centennial Performance Indicators; and the Taskforce on Signature Learning Experience. The work of these three groups would form the backbone for a Learning Centered College.

The Signature Learning Experience

The President introduced the idea of creating a Signature Learning Experience for students and one of the sub-groups of the Taskforce was assigned the task of working out the details linked to the college’s commitment to human rights and diversity. This was designed as a special experience that will be unique to the College and set the students apart from other students.

Signature Learning Experiences are normally developed by institutions to provide students with additional learning outside their core program areas. Shulman (2005) who has studied signature pedagogies in professional education for a while, talked about the characteristics of signature pedagogies. According to him, these characteristics are pedagogies of uncertainty, pedagogies of engagement and pedagogies of formation. They are pedagogies of uncertainty because the process relies on the response of students to each other and to the instructor and neither the instructor nor the student knows exactly what is going to happen. They are pedagogies of engagement because they work best when the students are actively participating in the learning and they are pedagogies of formation because they teach students habits of mind and of heart. They can build identity and character, dispositions and values.

A number of institutions have approached creating Signature Learning Experiences in different ways. Kentucky Wesleyan College, for example, has a number of Signature Learning Experiences (Kentucky Wesleyan College, 2011) embedded in their programs. Faculty of the college in a number of the departments have created “Signature Learning Experiences that allow students to explore the world around them outside the classroom.” They are “designed to help students think critically, appreciate diversity and live successfully in a complex rapidly changing world.” Northeastern University has developed signature co-op placements and experiential learning opportunities all around the world for its students. At Philadelphia University, the approach was to “create a Centre for Signature Learning that will promote, facilitate, and document the development of curriculum that is active, collaborative, real world and infused with liberal arts. […] The Center will serve as a nexus for continuous faculty development, pedagogical experimentation, and research in the area of active integrative learning. The Center will facilitate the development, refinement, and dissemination of a distinguishing pedagogy for the University” (Philadelphia University, 2011). The focus at Philadelphia was to create what they termed as engaged learning – that is learning that is built on doing things and through other experiences that allows the student to apply their learning to real-world problems collaborating with others and developing lifelong learning skills. The goals also included the following:
Developing Signature Learning Experiences

- All academic programs will include and document components of experiential learning, which may include studio, labs, research, study abroad, fieldwork, short courses, internships, preceptorships and clinical rotations, and co-curricular programs with Student Life.
- Globalize the campus and curriculum through enhanced use of study abroad, short courses, study tours, inter-session experiences, faculty exchange, international/intercultural campus events, global course content and recruitment of international students.

At Spelman College, the approach is to transform the student and faculty experience by developing an integrated learning plan that connects curricular and co-curricular experiences. The program called “My Integrated Learning Experience” or Spelman MILE aims to deliver “a more holistic education by integrating a rigorous curriculum with both applied and service learning, teamwork and leadership development, and diversity and global learning”. The Spelman MILE according to the College “will be a distinct signature program, characterized by an integrated learning experience for every student”. Spelman hopes to provide the following to their students (Spelman University, 2011):

- Global engagement, including at least one meaningful international travel experience
- Opportunities for undergraduate research and career related internships
- Alumnae connections to strengthen our sisterly bonds early on
- Leadership development focused on individual potential and best practices
- Service Learning that pairs hands-on community engagement and coursework

Another institution that is hoping to create a signature learning experience for its students is Camosun College in Canada which in 2010 introduced a Signature Learning Experience for its students (Camosun, 2010).

The Signature Learning Experience at Centennial College is unique in Canada because of its focus on diversity and social justice. It was expected to have three main components – “a required general education course that explores the nature of diversity and discrimination in our society and that allows each student to start developing basic diversity competency. The second element will be the integration of inclusive learning practices and cultural knowledge into all program areas. Eventually we will add a portfolio education element that will allow each student to demonstrate their diversity competencies in tangible ways that help them achieve their career goals” (Centennial, 2005).

The Taskforce hired two consultants to assist with their work. The consultants both had extensive background in postsecondary institutions and rich experiences in working on diversity issues. The two consultants reviewed literature on diversity and identified both the business case and the social case for creating a Signature Learning Experience based on diversity. The business case was based mainly on the identified needs of employers and what employers had articulated as important in the graduates they hire. The social justice case was based on literature that showed that curriculum was mainly Eurocentric and male-centric and there was a need to introduce other voices into the curriculum (Zine and Kersley, 2005).

The consultants conducted 10 focus groups with faculty, staff, employers and community organizations involving a total of 150 people. The conclusions from the focus groups were that:
Students recognized the merits of the Signature Learning Experience and saw its ability to make them more marketable to employers and to improve their sense of belonging to the College.

Employers and community groups talked about their need for workforces with diversity competencies as they struggle to deal with diverse workplaces, customers and partners.

The majority of faculty and staff was supportive of the Signature Learning Experience and raised many important questions related to the pace and process of implementation. (Centennial College, 2005)

In order to proceed with the implementation of the Signature Learning Experience and in line with the movement towards a learning-centered college, it was important for faculty and staff as well to embrace the concepts that were being put forward. Following the work of the consultants, a faculty member was assigned the responsibility to research the kinds of competencies that faculty and staff would need for the College to begin to embark on a Signature Learning Experience based on diversity. His research looked at different organizational models for achieving equity (Singh, 2005). The models included:

- The status–quo organizations that implement only a limited number of equity initiatives mostly in response to legislation. (As he put it, the question for these organizations was “Is this necessary?”)
- The valuing–diversity organizations where differences are acknowledged and attempts are made to initiate equity initiatives. (The question for these organizations is whether it is “Important for the bottom line”)
- The transformative organizations – these organizations recognize that all political/philosophical approaches must be considered in the context of a human rights framework (p. 9). (These organizations embrace equity and inclusion for all social groups)

The recommendation from the document was to follow the transformative model. Describing the model in her report the President states that, “The transformative model described in the document goes beyond valuing differences to seeking to actively eliminate injustice and inequity in the whole organization and developing new competencies to reflect our diversity” (Centennial College, 2005) This was the direction that the College decided to embark on in this project.

The research made recommendations for the principles and practices to be used for the transformation of the curriculum. Some of the key areas of learning recommended for students were: critical historical context of Canada’s peoples; analysis of the structures that perpetuate and maintain inequality; theories of difference; developing social responsibility; and professional preparation. The research also looked at competencies for faculty and staff. In her final report on the work of the President’s Taskforce on Learning (Centennial College, 2006), the President summed it up by writing: “We want to create a distinctive and inclusive learning environment that will enable students to integrate and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to value diversity, promote social justice and become socially responsible in both local and global communities.”

5. Curriculum Change and Renewal

The work on the curriculum diversity framework set the context for the transformation of the college curriculum. The College was set on a path of providing students with an
education that would be transformative and would also be based on social justice and equity principles.

The College has an internal process for curriculum renewal where program faculty once every couple of years solicit input from Industry representatives on their Program Advisory Committees and other stakeholders and also conduct research in order to make changes and renew their programs. These changes were mainly changes in content and occasionally involved changes in pedagogical approaches. The journey that Centennial embarked on was one that involved a complete overhaul of existing pedagogical approaches and put the issue of diversity and inclusion in the classroom and in the curriculum at the centre of everything.

There are five essential components for social justice education according to Hackman (2005). A social justice education should provide the student with the following tools: First, content mastery which consists of the student getting factual information; contextualization and also the content of the information being analyzed on a macro and micro level. The second essential element is critical thinking and the analysis of oppression. The third is for the student to be given tools for action and social change, and fourth is tools for personal reflection and the fifth essential tool is for the student to have tools for the awareness of multicultural group dynamics. The changes that took place in the curriculum at the College allowed programs to incorporate some of these skills and tools.

The President’s Taskforce on Learning – Signature Learning Experience, the work of the consultants and the curriculum framework enabled the transformation of the college’s curriculum. Radical curriculum change in a postsecondary institution is always a source of great tension and debate.

In her article on “Leadership for Social Justice and Equity”, Kathleen Brown (2004) looks at a process for developing academic leaders who are “committed to social justice and equity” (p. 77). She identifies three pedagogical strategies that can be used to educate people in social justice and equity. They are critical reflection; rational discourse; and policy praxis. She writes that “A critical stance frames this discussion by outlining clearly the need for professors to retool their teaching and courses to address issues of power and privilege” (p. 78). She proposes a model that “promotes awareness through critical reflection, acknowledgement through rational discourse, and action through policy praxis” (p. 78).

The question of how students are educated continues to be of interest to academics. How we prepare students for the world should be of concern to all academics and the College was actively engaged in this dialogue. Merryfield, Tin –Yau Lo, Cho Po and Kasai (2008) looked at the whole idea of developing worldmindedness in students and they ask the following questions which are central to the debate on how students should be educated:

Are today’s students being prepared to understand and become engaged as worldminded citizens? Will they take off the blinders of ethnocentricism or ignorance and see the entire world? Will they learn from other cultures and care about the rest of the planet? (p. 7)

The process of change that the College embarked on was a clear commitment to educate students to be global citizens, to take off the blinders, learn from other cultures and to care about the rest of the planet.

6. The Process for Curriculum Innovation

At the end of the work of the Taskforce, the final recommendations were made for the College to adopt a Signature Learning Experience for students that will be unique to the College. The Taskforce reported that:
A Signature Learning Experience (SLE), in simple terms, is like a promise made to students: that they will learn something unique and valuable that they can’t get at any other institution. The Centennial College SLE revolves around preparing students to work in the world, and the world to work in Canada, through a focus on social diversity in a global context.

[…] Our SLE will provide Centennial students with a more inclusive experience while they are here, and a strong foundation in skills that allow them to thrive in diverse environments once in the workforce. This will be realized through 3 main SLE components:

- A required general education course that explores the nature of diversity and discrimination in our society and that starts to build basic diversity competencies in each student.
- The integration of inclusive learning practices and cultural knowledge into all program areas.
- A portfolio education element that will allow each student to demonstrate their diversity competencies in tangible ways that help them achieve their career goals.

After the work of the Taskforce was done and their recommendations submitted to the President, a Working Group was struck to work out the details for a course on global citizenship and equity. The Working Group was made up of faculty representatives from each of the eight schools. The Group engaged in their own learning activity to understand social justice and diversity issues up-close as part of the process. The Group also created a textbook to go with the course. Throughout the development process the Group met weekly to develop the course content. This was a difficult task of bringing many perspectives to focus on the issue of global citizenship. This was groundbreaking work. As Gaudelli (2009) points out in his article, “A variety of factors may explain why global citizenship curriculum making remains largely untouched in the space of schools and in the hands of teachers and students, namely due to a lack of consistency, lack of curriculum history, and lack of epistemological clarity” (p. 77).

7. The Signature Learning Experience (SLE) for Students

The Course

The main component of the SLE is the course that was developed. The course itself provides a framework for exploring five core concepts: Personal Identity and Values; Inequality and Equity; Social Analysis; Social Action and Reflective Practice. Through the course the understanding of historical and theoretical concepts is developed as well as critical thinking and analytical skills. A Program Advisory Committee made up of internal and external members was also created to provide advice and input on the new course. The working group created a course on global citizenship and equity with learning outcomes and expectations. Once the course was developed, the Coordinator of the Working Group conducted staff consultations on the placement of the global citizenship course. The consultation consisted of 17 meetings or consultation sessions with staff, administrators and students. The consultations were to:

- Provide a forum to address concerns regarding the placement of General Education Signature Learning Experience; which General Education course would
be replaced; who would teach the course; the impact on English and General Education; Professional Development implications for courses and programs; and the impact of the diffusion of diversity learning outcomes into their programs and courses.

- Develop a transparent decision making process based on data that considers factors such as employment stability, pedagogy, faculty concerns, and academic managers concerns regarding planning and implementation.

The SLE general education course was introduced in 2006 and was called General Education 500: Signature Learning Experience. The decision was made to place the course in either the second or third semester. The course was described as:

This course provides the opportunity to develop the skills required to work and live in a diverse world. It represents a foundational, unique and critical look at the roots and impact of inequality and discrimination related to issues of social justice, the environment, technology and energy.

Learners explore personal and social responsibility in their communities, personal lives and in global and local work environments. Critical analysis of ideas and the examination of values and identities will assist learners to develop communication, advocacy and conflict resolution skills. (Centennial College, 2010)

The SLE Working Group developed a textbook called Global Citizenship from Social Analysis to Social Action. The course was piloted in Fall 2006, Winter 2007 and Summer 2007. Professional development activities were organized for faculty who were assigned to teach the course.

There are four components of the SLE:

1. GNED 500 – a required general education course entitled “Global Citizenship: from Social Analysis to Social Action”.
2. Portfolio Learning – the use of portfolios by our students to document their learning development as global citizens throughout their program of study.
3. Professional Development and Learning for All College Staff – to teach GNED 500, to support portfolio learning or to support the SLE through integration of equitable and inclusive practices in curriculum.
4. Embedding of Equity and Global Citizenship competencies across the college – to develop in each student and staff member the competencies for learning, teaching and working that value diversity and difference, and embrace and promote equity and inclusion.

The Portfolio

Another aspect of the course was the development of portfolios for students. The portfolio process captures the Reflective practice element of social justice education.

Portfolios as a means of demonstrating learning and as an assessment tool have been used in several postsecondary institutions. Jon Muella (2011) defines portfolios as “a collection of a student's work specifically selected to tell a particular story about the student”. He indicates that portfolios can be used to highlight a student’s progress; to showcase a student’s work or as a cumulative evaluation of a student’s work. Below is his description of the different types of portfolios:
1. Growth Portfolios
   a. to show growth or change over time
   b. to help develop process skills such as self-evaluation and goal-setting
   c. to identify strengths and weaknesses
   d. to track the development of one or more products/performances

2. Showcase Portfolios
   a. to showcase end-of-year/semester accomplishments
   b. to prepare a sample of best work for employment or college admission
   c. to showcase student perceptions of favorite, best or most important work
   d. to communicate a student's current aptitudes to future teachers

3. Evaluation Portfolios
   a. to document achievement for grading purposes
   b. to document progress towards standards
   c. to place students appropriately

The College chose to go with a growth portfolio that documents the growth of students over the period that they are at the College. It also has an evaluative component. The Working Group in their implementation plan noted that “The model for portfolio integration can be summarized as a Transformative Education model that focuses on three components; Framework; Process; and Portfolio” (Centennial College, 2008). The framework used to guide students in the selection of artifacts was the Essential Employability Skills established by the Provincial Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. The artifacts were then connected with global citizenship and equity principles.

The purpose of the portfolio learning at the College was to provide a mechanism for showing student learning related to global citizenship and equity competencies. The evidence of their learning is seen in the global citizenship and equity portfolio. This was intended to be the defining characteristic of the SLE and it was expected that students will be able to develop themselves and be able to reflect this in their portfolios and be able to convince employers that they are uniquely prepared to enter their careers with an understanding of the critical issues that face the world of work and society in general.

The framework for the portfolio therefore focuses on the transformation of the individual student as the final product and strives for the development of the ability to engage in critical thinking and reflection resulting in the empowerment of the student as an individual and a student.

The Working Group described the focus of the portfolio as being on the learning process that prepares students for employment and empowers them to act for the greater good of society. It is expected that students would continue to build their portfolios throughout their time at the College. The initial development of their portfolio happens in the first semester and continues throughout their program, and involvement in college and community life. Program courses provide the experiences and artifacts that could be the basis of a career portfolio, as well as a personal and growth portfolio. Portfolios need to reflect the individual students, their courses and their career path. The format and the medium of the portfolios are as diverse as the students.
Portfolio advisors or coaches were introduced to assist students in putting together their portfolios. A key part of the development of the portfolios was for students to reflect on their learning and to share these reflections.

**Building Reflective and Critical Thinkers**

Through the course, students gained an understanding of historical and theoretical concepts as well as developing critical and analytical skills. Reflection is seen as an important part of the development of the student. In her article on defining reflective thinking, Rodgers (2002), examines the theory of Reflective Thinking as developed by John Dewey. She identifies four main criteria for reflection. These include:

- Reflection is a meaning–making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.
- Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.
- Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.
- Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (p.845)

The reflective piece in the course was to allow students to think about the things they had learnt and experienced in life. The course provided students with a framework for exploring five core concepts: Personal identity and values; Inequality and Equity; Social analysis; Social action; and Reflective practice. After the pilot project some of the students were able to present some of their work at various college events. The presentations documented some of transformative learning that was taking place in the classroom. Below are excerpts of comments by some of the students on their learning experience:

“The class opened me up to a lot of concepts, some of which I keep in mind even now, and probably will for the rest of my life. By the end of the class, I was sorry to see it end – it was such an amazing experience and I will never forget it.” *Anita Bouchard, Student 2008* (Centennial College, 2008)

“After being exposed to the range of topics that GNED 500 offers, my thirst for knowledge has substantially increased. The SLE has helped me to tie in politics, history, social justice and debate at a level I can appreciate and understand.” *Imran Hasan, Student 2007* (Centennial College, 2008)

**Professional Development**

Another sub-group of the President’s Taskforce on Learning worked on “Learning for All”. The Taskforce on Learning for All created a set of leadership competencies for the College. It was felt that “If we are to be a learning-centered college then we must give all employees better access to their own learning opportunities and more encouragement to assume formal and informal leadership roles” (Centennial College, 2005). The College as a result created the Centre for Organizational Learning and Teaching that conducted professional development activities for faculty and staff. In addition, the Global Citizenship course was made available to faculty and staff.
Embedding Global Citizenship Competencies

The fourth component of the SLE was infusing global citizenship and equity into school curriculum recognizing the differences in programs and student profiles. (Centennial College, 2006) The College’s Centre for Organizational Learning and Teaching worked with the SLE Working Group to develop a program in which learning goals and outcomes were mapped for each school, and they created tools to be used to modify and evolve curriculum. Every program at the college undergoes a comprehensive program review every five years and as part of the process, the centre works with the program faculty to ensure that global citizenship and equity competencies are embedded in the program learning outcomes.

8. Extension of the Global Citizenship and Equity Initiative

Engaging the College Community

The commitment to global citizenship and equity was further extended into the college community with the creation in 2009, of the Institute for Global Citizenship and Equity. The Institute put together a number of initiatives to engage students, staff and faculty. The initiatives included a number of publications; conferences; workshops; a discussion forum and a social action fund to support social action projects. The publications include a magazine and an online journal.

Publications

The magazine, Global Citizen Digest is mainly for internal community members and allows faculty, staff and students to explore ideas on global citizenship and equity and share some of their thoughts as well as practices. It has explored some of the key definitions like who is a global citizen; anti-racist perspective; critical democratic perspective; deficit mentality; equity; human rights; inclusion and pedagogy. It has also allowed people to share their global citizenship and equity experiences abroad. There is also an online academic journal, Journal of Global Citizenship and Equity Education that allows people to publish academic articles on global citizenship and equity education.

Philosopher’s Café

A discussion forum called The Philosopher’s Café was also introduced. The Philosopher’s Café is a space created where philosophical open-ended issues and topics receive attention. The purpose of the café is to help transform the world one conversation at a time. Most of the topics relate to our place in the world as global citizens. The discussions rely on the tools of social analysis to explore a multiplicity of perspectives. The Café is also a place where everyone is encouraged to speak and/or weigh in on issues that affect all of us.

The concept of Philosopher’s Café as a means of engaging groups of people in dialogue has been used by other postsecondary institutions. Simon Fraser University in Canada has since 1998, organized Philosopher’s Cafés to engage the Vancouver community in dialogue. The program is organized by the Continuing Studies program at the university and has held cafés in a number places including at cafés, bistro, parks, beaches, community centres, libraries, festivals and schools. These sessions are free and open to the public. Concordia University is another Canadian institution that runs a similar program from its Continuing Education program. It is called “University of the Streets Café” organized by the Institute of Management.
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The discussions at the Café are facilitated on the basis of the Socratic Method. A discussion with the Socratic Method works on the assumption that we all have different philosophies, and that there is no universal agreement on even the basic concepts in life. The Café allows us to hear each other’s perspective. Some of the topics that have been covered in the Café include: Inclusion, Genocides, Human rights, Personal and social responsibility, International development, Religion and politics, Service Learning/International Community Development, Youth Engagement, Ethnicity, Developing a global mindset, Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning.

Conferences and Workshops

Another important avenue for engaging the College community is through conferences and workshops. The Institute hosts an annual equity conference that brings people together to engage and dialogue on issues of global citizenship and equity. These have included an Aboriginal symposium in 2009 and an international conference in early 2011 that attracted presenters from all over the world.

Social Action Fund

The Institute also provides funding for staff and students to engage in social action projects that help both the college community and the community around the College. “The Institute’s Social Action Fund is an opportunity for faculty and their students to become engaged in social justice initiatives, inclusion activities, and to enrich the campus climate at the College... Grants of up to $700 are awarded to successful candidates wishing to sponsor events, speakers, outreach activities, social networks, or to host a variety of discussion groups. The fund has supported events such as Can-tastic, a one day fundraiser and food drive aimed at increasing awareness of the needs of food banks” (Sampson, 2011).

Global Citizenship and Equity Learning Experiences

The College in 2010 decided to add onto the SLE for students by introducing international opportunities for students, faculty and staff. The program was called Global Citizenship and Equity Learning Experience. The experience was intended to demonstrate the College’s commitment to student participation in global experiences, through internationalization of the student and staff body. Spearheaded by a committee, this group identified partners in developing countries and then identified students from each school who were then offered the opportunity to travel, work and have a global experience. In a manual on the program, the committee indicated that the College’s responsibility included building “better pathways for students to pursue international academic and professional experiences as part of their education with flexible curriculum and international standards for transfer of credit” (Centennial College, 2009). In keeping with the College’s philosophy of a distinctive learning experience, the global citizenship and equity learning experiences abroad was intended to provide applied global learning experiences, enhance academic classroom theory and skills to prepare students to participate and contribute effectively at the international level.

The projects that students have been involved in have included trips to the Dominican Republic and to Peru. On the first trip in 2010 to the Dominican Republic, each student led multiple workshops in their subject area of study. The group also engaged in activities that allowed the students to better understand the culture and history of Dominican Republic. They...
visited projects by Non-Governmental Organizations that aim at assisting marginalized groups in the country. The second trip in 2011 also involved students conducting workshops as well as engaging in eco-tourism, helping paint a Teen Pregnancy and Health clinic. There were two groups involved – one group went to Peru and the other group went to the Dominican Republic. In their description of the trip, Jacobs, Hahn and Larabee (2011) write that:

During the two-week trip, students will provide post-operative care, patient assessments, participate in patient and family health teaching, and visit rural communities as part of a mobile health clinic. They will also provide educational workshops that are both related to their program of study at the college and are designed to meet educational and sustainable needs identified by Dominican communities. Students will also visit a public and private hospital to see the differences within these institutions and are enrolled in Spanish lessons prior and during their trip. Lastly, students will participate in local construction assistance projects alongside Dominican community members, who have active roles in promoting and supporting education acquisition for their children. (p. 39)

The participating students have reflected on their experiences and shared them. A few of the reflections are shown below:

Our Workshops were based directly on our programs of student at Centennial— and we now know that we can help others using our unique knowledge, no matter what field we decided to become experts in. The experience was not only life changing, it was the best experience of my 21 year-long life (Aleks Nesterins).

During this trip, I really began to understand what sustainable development entails. Often we hear the term in classrooms and in the news, but having had the opportunity to visit the DR reinforced the value and benefits of creating sustainable partnerships. It’s great when people can go down there and provide help to people living in less-fortunate conditions, but what happens when those people leave? There must be a sustainable way for us to help the Dominicans (and others around the world) in such a way that allows them to effectively learn to help themselves (Eunice Leung).

9. Conclusion

The journey for the College to create a Signature Learning Experience for students and a Learning-centered College involved multiple stakeholders and the coming together of staff and faculty to dialogue and engage in discussion on social justice issues. It was groundbreaking work and continues to be unique in the college system in Ontario. The process involved extensive consultation of stakeholders and has been very successful in creating a unique experience for students. The College has also taken a leadership role in the area of global citizenship and equity with an academic journal which will play a key role in defining the field.
References


City of Toronto. (2006). *Census Update on Social Risk Factors in the City’s 13 Priority Areas*.


