

Reforming and Evaluating the Augustana Instructional Environment: A Multi-faceted Learning Intervention

Keywords: Structural reform/Retention/Engagement/Pedagogy/First-Year/Assessment

Abstract: The Learning Experiences Research Committee (LERC) at the Augustana Faculty has identified two structural changes that are anticipated to yield significant pedagogical benefits to both students and faculty at the Campus: (1) the adoption of a compressed Fall (September) and Winter (January) term (with the possibility of a May term as well) in order to facilitate more specialized teaching venues, international and experiential learning opportunities and cohort-based learning structures; and (2) the establishment of a common first-year experience in order to further establish social, community and pedagogical linkages to the structures already in place at Augustana. These interventions are new to both Augustana and the University of Alberta, and are significant not only from an institutional standpoint, but perhaps more importantly have been demonstrated elsewhere to positively affect students' educational and social (ie, normative) outcomes. The Faculty must now determine and analyze best practices for implementation, a corresponding evaluation plan and linkages to other retention and recruitment initiatives, data and evaluation. By examining the nature and effects of these 2 interventions, this study will improve our knowledge of the liberal education experience at Augustana, refine our capacity to positively impact student engagement, learning and outcomes, and better situate program assessment within a Faculty-wide context (see for example Carr 2000).

Introduction: Since joining University of Alberta in 2004, the Augustana Faculty (based in Camrose, Alberta) has established a profile as a unique, rurally-situated liberal education campus, offering a comprehensive suite of courses and baccalaureate degrees to over 1000 students. This profile corresponds to a larger shift in the "identity" of the Faculty that reflects the primary strengths of this small institution: (1) an emphasis upon evidence-informed pedagogical innovation, the scholarship of pedagogy and the quality of the undergraduate learning experience; (2) a campus-wide shift toward best practices in active student learning, complemented by extensive opportunities for both faculty and students in the form of international education, foreign language instruction, community service learning and related experiential learning programming; (3) a recognition of the rural location and dynamics that have helped to shape the campus' identity over the 100-year history of the institution; and (4) the acknowledgement that recruitment and retention at Augustana, while strong, are an on-going concern due to the small size of the campus population.

Statement of the Problem: The Augustana Faculty is undertaking a series of consultations and design sessions with faculty and students in the Winter Term of 2015. This work will lead to final versions and a strategies regarding implementation/adoption as part of the Spring Workshop (May 2015). In turn, the Faculty are now faced with 3 challenges, and the receipt of a TLEF grant will assist in meeting these challenges. These issues are:

- 1) Determining (beyond the opinions and preferences of current faculty and students) the best methods of implementation for both proposals, either as stand-alone or as joint initiatives;
- 2) Refining and implementing a short and medium-term evaluation framework in order to track the effects and effectiveness of the interventions on recruitment, retention and faculty-specific performance indicators; and
- 3) Using these interventions as a springboard to better link student-based data, learning outcomes, recruitment and retention data with the on-going curricular, assessment and pedagogical

development of the Faculty, as well as a means of identifying future challenges, opportunities and pathways that support the Augustana values of interdisciplinary inquiry, teaching, and learning through class-based, experiential and research-based venues.

Project Details: This project is an innovative synthesis of two theoretical perspectives: (1) the shift toward facilitating pedagogical innovation, student engagement and emancipatory thinking (Freire 2007) via structural change; and (2) the meso-level approach of historical neo-institutionalism (March and Olsen 1984; Koelble 1995; Kato 1996). This approach acknowledges that the design of social institutions affects outcomes (ie, institutions are not passive or exogenous conduits for social outcomes). Preferences (and behaviour) are then influenced through a combination of education, indoctrination and experience (all of which co-exist within the post-secondary institutions of today) (March and Olson 1984). The structural initiatives presented here are intended to serve as catalysts for broader innovation in the delivery of course content, implementation and evaluation of new programs (particularly those linked to the unique indicators) and more refined understanding of the Augustana Core, as well as the unique nature of liberal education as part of the Augustana Experience.

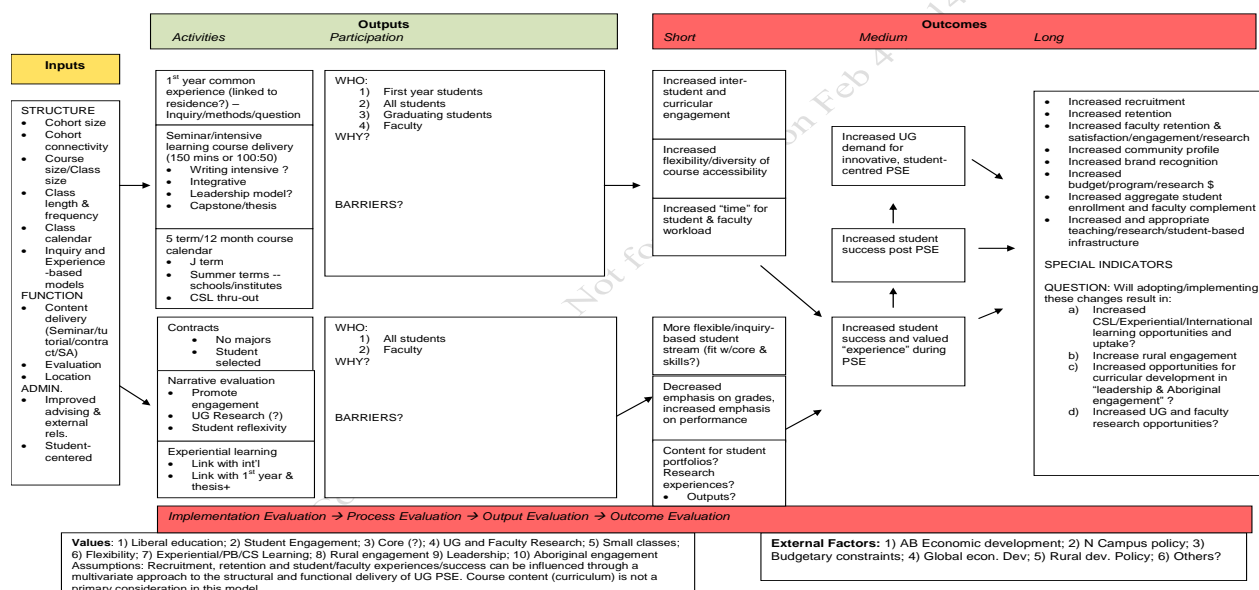
Innovation: By adopting a structural approach to pedagogical renewal, we plan to provide a new time-frame within which course content can be delivered, but more importantly to spark innovation in pedagogy, content and curriculum by creating new and more consolidated spaces within which classes can take place. The “J-S-(M)” proposal effectively restructures each semester into 2 shorter terms (one of 3 weeks, the other of 11), which creates greater flexibility for both students and faculty, as well as providing a venue for consolidated, single-course instruction (in the condensed term) as well as opportunities for field-based courses, service-learning, intensive language instruction and a common first year experience.

The possibility of a first-year experience has been raised repeatedly at the Augustana Campus, but while present within some programs, there is no over-arching experience to both inform the first year university experience, nor to build a cohort across first year students. The Association of American Colleges and Universities Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative identified both first year experiences and common intellectual experiences as high impact practices that increase both student retention and engagement. Similarly, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results demonstrate a connection between such high-impact practices and improved learning (Brownell and Swaner 2010) through both increased student effort, and the institutional deployment of resources, structure and curriculum (Kuh 2009). A discipline-specific initiative in PEI similarly demonstrated improved student-faculty interaction, increased student satisfaction, increased retention and better student reflexivity (Countryman and Zinck 2013).

Project Summary: This project will support the adoption of a modified ADDIE model targeting structural, rather than singular course-based reforms at the Augustana Campus. ADDIE is an acronym for instructional design that incorporates a process of **A**nalyzing learners, **D**esigning instruction, **D**eveloping instruction, **I**mplementing instruction, and **E**valuating instruction (Boon Teo et al. 2006). This model is ideally suited to this project, which will follow this process through: (1) a scoping review of emerging, better and best practices through: (1) a scoping review of emerging, better and best practices regarding the implementation AND evaluation of such structural changes; (2) the refinement and implementation of an evaluation framework and process based upon an earlier logic model and theory of change identified by LERC (see below); and (3) identifying the initial data needs and larger framework for more comprehensive institutional analysis linking these 2 interventions to other recruitment and assessment initiatives.

Figure 1: LERC Logic Model (Evaluation Framework)

Program: **LERC Aggregated Augustana Design Logic Model** (uses text boxes: add/change boxes and arrows as needed)



Project Goal and Objectives

Goal: To support and evaluate the short and medium-term implementation of pedagogically-targeted structural interventions at the Augustana Campus in order to support the Faculty's liberal education missions, undergraduate recruitment and retention goals, and Faculty-specific unique performance indicators.

Objectives:

- 1) To design, implement and evaluate two unique, campus-wide initiatives at the Augustana Campus that will support pedagogical innovation and renewal, new and alternative methods of course and content delivery, and provide expanded opportunities for internationalization, experiential learning and rural connections;
- 2) To identify, assess and synthesize better and emergent best practices in the implementation, administration and longer-term evaluation of structural interventions in post-secondary pedagogy;
- 3) To engage both faculty and students in the implementation and evaluation of these two interventions in order to guide future structural and/or curricular reforms and the longer-term assessment of recruitment, retention and assessment initiatives.

Method, Deliverables & Dissemination: Project results will include: (1) a scoping review of applicable structural and curricular interventions in post-secondary education (Objective 2) review (a rapid gathering of literature in order to identify the evidence base, gaps and research needs of applicable structural and curricular interventions in post-secondary education (Poth and Ross 2009; JBIEBNM 2000; Arksey and O'Malley 2005); (2) the design, implementation plan and evaluation plan/framework/indicators for the "3-11" and First Year Experiences interventions (Objective 1); and (3) significant faculty and student engagement, feedback and input into meeting Objectives 1 and 2 (Objective 3). Similarly, this project will generate a number of related outputs, including:

Year 1:

- a) Ethics approval
- b) Research Assistant Employment and Training (in each year)
- c) Scoping review
- d) Data collection and implementation plan/evaluation framework

Year 2:

- a) Best practices report for First Year Experiences (made available via Augustana Spring Workshop);
- b) Teaching and Curricular Tips for both “3-11” and First Year Experiences (made available via Augustana Spring Workshop and Fall Retreat);
- c) Pedagogy and Innovation Workshop for Augustana faculty;
- d) Evaluative framework for program assessment, data collection for evaluation
- e) Short-term retention and recruitment reports (supported by interviews, focus groups and a short survey);

Year 3:

- a) Data collection for evaluation;
- b) Short-term retention and recruitment reports (supported by interviews, focus groups and a short survey);
- c) Conference presentations to American Association of Colleges and Universities (ACC&U) and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education;
- d) Submission of 2 manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals (eg. Educational Researcher, Intl. Journal of Educational Research)

Impacts: Based upon the previous work of LERC and the existing literature examining high-impact practices, (as per the logic model above) it is anticipated that these initiatives and their evaluation will support increased student retention, increased student recruitment, increased student satisfaction, increased student engagement, improved academic performance, improved student interaction and social capital, decreased education inequities due to access and resources, increased and improved faculty-student interaction, a more supportive campus environment and an enriched educational experience (Countryman and Zinck 2013; Brownell & Swaner 2009).

Collaboration: This project represents an ongoing collaboration between faculty and administrators at the Augustana Faculty. In addition to representation from all 3 departments, there is also significant administrative representation from a variety of Directors and the Augustana Dean’s Office. As the work of this group moves from design and engagement to implementation, it will also expand to include other administrative and teaching staff, including chairs, the Registrar’s Office and relevant committees (Curriculum Committee, Outdoor and International Experiential Learning, etc.)

Sustainability: This initiative will sustain pedagogical and faculty-specific improvements in educational, experiential and integrational outcomes. The deliverables, outputs and outcomes of this project will be a significant resource for the design, delivery and evaluation of courses, programs and engagement initiatives at the Augustana Faculty. These initiatives have the potential to be adopted/adapted by other departments or faculties at the University of Alberta, potentially extending the benefits to hundreds of other students.

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