Food for Thought: A Collaborative Effort to Incorporate Food and Agriculture Disciplines into a Liberal Arts Curriculum

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Introduction

Food is perhaps the weak link in our pursuit of social, political and environmental sustainability. With a world population approaching 9 billion people, issues related to food including hunger, obesity, environmental sustainability, food safety and food security pose critical problems that demand responsible solutions.

Historically, liberal arts colleges have done little to address the social implications of agriculture-related disciplines. In response, seven faculty from a variety of disciplines adapted an interdisciplinary general education course to cultivate student learning of these issues. Over a three year period, faculty from psychology, religion, English, environmental science and agronomy have created CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship: Food for Thought.

Course Structure

Over a three year period (2008 – 2010), 12 to 15 sections of CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship were offered at Queens University of Charlotte. The course was divided into three distinct parts (Table 1). The first (3-4 weeks), Modern Citizenship and third (4 – 5 weeks), Citizen’s Forum followed a common schedule and syllabus, giving the students in all sections a common experience. The second portion (6 – 8 weeks) allowed each section to explore what it means to be an active and responsible citizen in the modern world, by focusing on issues in their sub-topic.

Table 1. Schedule and Structure of CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship. The schedule given below is for the sections, titled “Food for Thought,” that focused on issues in food and agriculture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How have the definition and cultural meaning of citizenship changed over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What are the rights and responsibilities of American citizens?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do we extend and protect our rights?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How have the economic, technological and globalizing transitions of the modern era challenged the modern practice of citizenship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How can we remain active American citizens in a rapidly changing and expanding society?</td>
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Part Two: Food for Thought (sub-unit exploration)

Topics and issues discussed include:

- Week 6: What the World Eats
- Week 7: Government and Food Policy
- Week 8: Nutrition and Hunger
- Week 9: Eating Disorders and Food Culture
- Week 10: Where Does Our Food Come From?
- Conventional and Organic Farming Systems
- Week 11: Genetically Modified Food and Biotechnology
- Week 12: Food and Worker Safety

Part Three: Citizen’s Forum

Weeks 13 – 15: Students practice modern citizenship by participating in a model Congress known as the Citizen’s Forum (Figure 1 and Table 2).

Assessment Methods

A number of assignments and assessment tools involving experiential and service learning were developed and used to assess student learning (Table 2). To determine if specific course objectives were being achieved a rubric was developed and applied to the Citizen’s Forum paper (Figure 2). Results for food and non-food (education, environment and media) sections of CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship for the last two years are presented in Figure 3.

Results and Conclusions

On the Citizens’ Forum paper, students in Food for Thought sections performed significantly better than students in other sections on 3 of 4 categories assessed with the rubric. Significantly more Food for Thought students scored 3 or higher in identifying a problem ($\chi^2=3.04$, df=1, $p=0.08$), presenting multiple points of view ($\chi^2=6.19$, df=1, $p=0.01$).

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Four sub-topics: Education, Environment, Food and Agriculture and Media were used as the context for discussing and studying examples of modern citizenship. Following best practices in teaching and learning service-learning and experiential learning activities and pedagogy was integrated into the CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship curriculum. These methods have all been proven to help students make connections to real-world problems and situations.

Course Development

The Core Program at Queens is a three-year interdisciplinary sequence of four courses designed to develop critical and civic thinking skills necessary to lead noble lives, pursue productive careers and become responsible active citizens in a global context. The second semester freshmen course CORE 122 – Modern Citizenship, was developed to give students an opportunity to experience what it means to be an active and responsible citizen in the modern world. By the end of this course students should be meet the following learning outcomes:

Students will be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the need for social and civic responsibility.
- have engaged in community service and will be able to explain the impact of Queens’ service projects.
- able to construct and evaluate arguments.
- Students will be able to understand a problem, generate ideas, and plan for solutions.
- Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of key American issues and their underlying causes and impacts.

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Figure 1. Students participating in the Citizen’s Forum

Figure 2. Citizen’s Forum paper rubric: assessed specific course objectives.