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Hannah Goldberg  
*Wheaton College - Norton*

Daniel Golden  
*Wheaton College - Norton*

Victoria McGillin

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Developing Reflective Learners: Serendipity and Synergy at Wheaton College

by Hannah Goldberg, Daniel Golden, and Victoria McGillin

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Wheaton College, a small liberal arts institution located in Norton, Massachusetts, has been creating, refining, and integrating a range of initiatives designed to develop students into active and reflective learners. Some of these initiatives grew out of explicit institutional commitments to teaching and learning innovation, while others were in fact happy accidents of circumstance, or situations where an individual interesting program idea took hold, spread into other units of the College, and was itself transformed in the process.

We define reflective learners as students who are self-conscious about how they learn, insightful about the links between learning inside and outside the classroom, and capable of applying the cumulative value of their education to life and career plans. With so ambitious and lofty education, we encounter arriving students to develop academic and personal goals and values.

An admission process devised to prompt students to perform aspiring “benchmarking” and begin to link their individual life plans to institution-specific goals and values;

An advising system that invites students to develop academic and personal goals and reflective time-outs to enhance course and major selection, as well as graduate and career plans; and

An institutional experiential learning methodology to document out-of-classroom learning in a portfolio-based reflective transcript, the Wheaton Work & Public Service Record.

For Wheaton College, the student as reflective practitioner is better able to make whole the components of educational and personal experience; better able to define an integrated perspective on self as learner, citizen, and potential member of the workforce; and better positioned to understand more quickly and deeply the transforming nature of the college experience.

We especially value this integrated outcome because, like many of our colleagues at all kinds of institutions of higher education, we encounter arriving students who have led lives which are at once strangely fragmented yet structured. Even in an idyllic independent residential college, our students come to us from single-parent or blended and re-blended families, with histories of struggle with serious illnesses—both their own or those of people close to them, with learning differences that not too long ago would have kept them out of college altogether. With emotional problems for which they are being treated either with medication or by counselors and psychiatrists. Most of them are under exceptional financial pressure, as well as the squeeze of family expectations, in terms of pursuing a course of study that will make them employable as soon as they get out of college.

Small wonder that so many of us in higher education are especially frustrated these days by our often tentative ability to help our students make their lives, as Frost might say, “whole beyond confusion.” We too often present students with an isolating educational structure, with one set of people attending to their “academic” lives from Monday through Thursday (courses, libraries, computer centers, etc.), and another set of professionals concerned with social life, student government, residence halls, athletics, and the like. And students themselves often segment their learning experiences even more, working their way glumly through general education requirements, breathing sighs of relief when they leave various onerous courses behind them, reductively self-identifying themselves by choice of academic major or career path.

For Wheaton College, the two key historic events that transpired in 1986–87 and positioned us to begin our attempt to cultivate reflective learners were the founding of our Filene Center for Work & Learning and our decision to become co-educational after 153 years as a women’s college. In transforming its former Office of Career Planning into an experiential learning and life-planning office, the College attempted to explicitly build mechanisms to help liberal arts students link their studies to the world of work and public service. In the much more massive (some might say catalytic) change to co-education, we had the chance to look at our entire institutional identity, and to think about what it would mean to be a learner as a man or woman at our newly co-ed college. In preparing to make our classes and campus as a whole hospitable to both women and men, we were forced to become more sensitive to all manner of differences that went beyond gender—differences in learning styles, in lifestyles, in levels of preparation and commitment to study, in values, in life histories, in social and economic status. So, in a sense, we had a rare moment to put some of our definitions of learning up for grabs, and began to craft reflective structures for students out of our own intensive reflections on our identity.

Reflection on Experience at the Filene Center for Work & Learning: In the late 1980s, Wheaton’s Filene Center rapidly became the locus of reflective learning activity by creating its experiential transcript, the Work & Public Service Record. Long-time readers of Experiential Education, the predecessor to the NSEE Quarterly, may recall articles profiling our efforts in trying to build our pro-
ccess for learning from experience (Golden, Kimball). The Record grew through various refinements into a goal-setting and evaluative instrument, with entries comprised of reflection essays by students after particular experiences and corroborating performance reviews by supervisors. As populations of student documenters of learning increased, and as they encountered the work and learning approach in many different campus settings (full staff positions, campus jobs, public service activities), students gradually began to embrace the value of reflection on experience. In 1994, the Wheaton faculty voted to include the Work & Public Service Record in the General Education requirements of the College, thus expanding the institutional learning definition into the experiential environment. At the time of the faculty vote, close to 65% of the student body had already completed entries in the Record, and it has played an increasingly important role in supporting graduate and fellowship applicants and job hunters as a one-of-a-kind credential.

Reflections on Future Planning — The Wheaton Admission Process: By 1990, with our co-educational transition moving forward successfully, Wheaton’s Admission Department reviewed our admission process and refined it so that applying to Wheaton would more accurately reflect attending our college. This approach meant giving the applicant the option of submitting standardized test scores and a Personal Academic Portfolio of supplemental evidence of in-and out-of-classroom learning and achievement. It also made standard an application essay that grew out of the “Life Aims” project at the Filene Center. The essay asked students to look out 10 years into the future in the form of a letter to an old high school friend on the occasion of their upcoming reunion, and requested details of the student’s work, relationship, and community service situations.

This fictional first step in future planning had its undeniable artifact effect, as applicants tried to write to the expectations of the Admission Committee, and many quite easily imagined a future that neatly balanced rewarding careers, healthy traditional families, and ennobling volunteer work. But with close to 2500 essays overall, we have learned much of texture of the aspirational lives of late-adolescent applicants, and some are amazingly candid about their immediate and long-term concerns about the forces that will impede their movement toward a happy, balanced future life. The fictional format of the application seems to release many students to imagine futures that encompass life-threatening illnesses, failed marriages, aging and infirm parents, and even the premature death of spouses and partners. Often, students reflect on global issues, like environmental pollution, political instability, and the uncertainty of financial success in an expensive future world.

The Admission essay is a frozen moment in time, but we get to “defrost” it along the way for each student, for it becomes the first entry in their academic Advising Portfolio, the icebreaker for the first meeting with their faculty advisor on arrival. We have used the essay during the sophomore year as students approach declaration of academic major, and most students are amused by their imaginations of barely two years earlier, at times surprised by how quickly their academic and personal plans have altered. As seen below, the essay returns to become a core reflection prompt itself during the senior year as well. But well before the senior year, Wheaton students have many additional reflection prompts in both experiential and academic learning settings. And much of our advising is built on the foundations of our reflective out-of-classroom environment.

The Expansion of the Reflection Model to the Academic Sphere: Assessment, rumination, and goal setting are valuable steps in the development of a reflective learner. Wheaton students who had the opportunity to place an entry on their second transcript were not only acquiring co-curricular credentials, they were developing critical thinking skills. As valuable as these steps were for the out-of-class learning, they were slower to be accepted in relationship to the in-class learning experience. If setting goals for an out-of-class learning experience is important, imagine the impact of setting such goals for one’s classroom learning each semester or each year. If connecting knowledge gained outside the classroom with course work can be valuable, reflect for a moment on the value of having students connect the knowledge, information, and skills gained in one class with those gained in a second. It is through such discussions that a student might actually come to understand the intent and value of liberal arts classes and general education requirements. The advising relationship was the natural sphere within which students could explore the connections between their classroom learning experiences and between those experiences and their out-of-class growth.

One of our goals was to refine a developmentally sensitive and reflective model of academic advising for faculty advisors. First-year student advising at Wheaton College is delivered by faculty in concert with an academic First Year Seminar, one of 26 variations on the theme, “Great Controversies” (e.g., The Biodiversity Crisis; It’s Art Because I Say It Is; Generation X: To Have or to Be). Instructors served as advisors to their 16 students, interacting with them both inside the classroom and out. This had proven a successful model but was in need of further development. The first step for the new Advising Dean was to augment faculty advising through the addition of a peer advisor (Preceptor) for each seminar. Peers and faculty co-advised first-year students throughout the first year. The Preceptors both provided a student perspective in the advising process and a student contact in the student community for the advisors. They were also free to take on additional responsibilities, such as teaching study skills.

Wheaton advisors were genuinely curious and interested in who their students were. After all, they would be working with them twice weekly in the seminar from the fall semester. Any insights into those students could provide an early “read” on the flow of the seminar. Therefore, the second advising step was the introduction of an advising portfolio. We initially designed the Advising Portfolios as a folder to hold a student’s advising records. From their inception, however, they contained several critical pieces, designed to prompt more meaningful and reflective discussions between students and their advisors. Beyond a student’s high school records, test scores, and registrations, these portfolios also contained the students’ admissions essay — The Life Aims Statement. We trained faculty and Preceptors to use this as a starting point — continued on page 28
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for advising discussions. We anticipated that advisors would be most interested in
the student’s putative career choices with their road map toward the attainment of
that future. We urged that advisors use
these statements as icebreakers, as the first
step in helping students to plan a map for
their careers at Wheaton and as a reflection
point. We anticipated that advisors
would bring students back to these "Life
Aims" at selected points in their academic
career, the better to assess growth and de-
velopment over time.

In the second year of the Portfolios, we
also included the newly admitted stu-
dents' responses to a learning questionnaire
easy. On this form students assessed
their learning styles and responded to a re-
quest for a description of a recent learning experience. Combined, they afforded
advisors a glimpse into each student's con-
struction of learning. As most students
wrote about a learning experience outside
the classroom, advisors were well placed
to help the student connect a learning ex-
perience in that venue with responses to the
explicitly "classroom" focused question-
naires. Preceptors "scored" those question-
naires and both faculty and preceptors used
that information in their advising meetings
during Orientation. Wheaton advisors were
now poised to take the next critical step
toward truly developmental advising.

Advising and Reflection — A De-
velopmental Model: Since the 1950s and
the wide acceptance of Erik Erikson’s
theory of identity development, a range of
theories has attempted to explain the emer-
gence of reasoning and identity in the ado-
lescent through adult years (Loevinger). Se-
veral theories (Perry, Belenky et. al.,
Magolda) were derived specifically to ex-
plain development during the college years
with a particular emphasis on epistemol-
ogical development; that is, how college
students come to know and reason both
about the world and their relationship to
that knowledge. Along with Chickering's
vector hypothesis, these theories are all
rooted in an equilibrium until a crisis or a
novelty that cannot be accommodated by
their old system challenges them, leading to
disequilibrium and distress. The possi-
able outcomes are deterioration, compo-
mission balance, or differentiation at a new
and more complex level (i.e., development
(Mahoney). A developmentally oriented
advising process, then, is one that both
challenges the students to move into dis-
equilibrium and supports them during that
difficult period of change. "The process
of developmental academic advising refers
to those institutional systemic structures,
departmental policies, and individual ad-
visor behaviors that challenge a student's
current state of equilibrium and support
the student throughout the process of re-
equilibration. The content of development-
al academic advising refers to specific
challenges and supports necessary for op-
timal development during each state" (McGillin).

Effective developmental advisors,
thus, should be able to guide students
through an assessment of their status and
current goals, and a reflection upon that
position and any gaps between that posi-
tion and their defined life goals. Finally,
advisors should be poised to challenge stu-
dents to set new goals and support them
as they move toward those outcomes.
Once they learn the skills, students should
be well-placed to move through these
stages whenever they encounter a new and
challenging learning experience.

Teaching Academic Reflection: In
the fall of 1994 we pioneered our first ef-
forts at teaching academic reflection. Pre-
ceptors met with their advisees in the
middle of the fall semester to guide them
through a reflection exercise. We timed
this to best prepare them for their course
selection conferences with their faculty ad-
visors. In this reflection exercise, Prece-
ceptors asked students to identify their aca-
demic learning goals for the semester and
the year. We asked that they assess their
progress toward those goals and to iden-
tify any connections between what they
were doing inside their classes with their
experiences outside. This first effort
proved less successful than hoped for sev-
eral reasons. First, few students had given
any thoughts to these goals. Development-
ally, classroom learning was still some-
thing being done to them, not goals over
which they were expected to have control.
With no framework for these discussions,
students were clueless about what their
goals ought to be. e.g., many defaulted to
"getting good grades," "getting on the
dean's list," or "passing my classes." Second, mid-October was clearly still too
early for students to have formed any clear
sense of how they were doing. They had
limited information upon which to assess
their development to date. Students still
needed a context within which to begin
their academic reflections.

This past fall, we introduced a more
significant set of exercises, designed to
guide students through the process of set-
ting up their own context for academic-
reflection discussions. We expected that
all first year students participated in a set
of corollary First Year Workshops. Three
times during the fall semester and twice
in the spring, students gathered in groups
with their Preceptors and faculty advisors
for discussion. In their September meet-
ing, we expected students to connect their
public service experience on Orientation
Service Day with an article by Robert
Coles and a talk he delivered to the cam-
pus as a whole. We designed this to con-
nect the curricular with the co-curricular
life on campus and introduce students to
our expectations of their role within a
learning community. In the October
meetings, students completed two evalua-
tions that we designed to prompt an as-
essment of their goals, expectations, and
status. Students identified areas of great-
est discrepancy and discussed methods of
managing their choices (time manage-
ment). In November, students identified
a range of possible courses and co-cur-
ricular activities for the spring, plus state-
ments about why they chose each item.
They discussed the nature of such choices
in preparation for their advising meetings
with the faculty advisors. In February we
again asked that students reflect upon
their own development to date, while in
March they took the discussion of course
and co-curricular choices to the level of
major selection and four-year planning.
We are currently evaluating this sequence
of events. But even in our preliminary
view on these initiatives, it is clear that
there is a considerable empowering effect
on students when they are afforded the
opportunity to decipher their own learn-
ing styles and intellectual development,
and to bring this new insight into their
selection of academic courses of study
and decisions about graduate school and
professions.
The Big Picture — Senior Year Capstone Reflection: In their senior spring semester, all Wheaton graduating students participate in a special "back to the future" event that at once celebrates their impending commencement and, more importantly, invites them to reflect on their Wheaton learning experience as a whole.

Early in the term, Seniors are sent copies of their original Admission essay and are asked to review this document in the context of their intervening years at the College. They prepare informal responses to key qualitative questions, such as:

- Do your aspirations for career, relationships, and community commitments remain essentially the same as four years ago? Or, how have they been refined or altered?
- In what ways has Wheaton College helped you to prepare to achieve these aspirations and goals? How could we have done a better job?
- What do you yourself wish you had done differently in the course of your years here, both in and outside the classroom?
- As you prepare to leave the College, what next steps are you considering, and how can Wheaton assist you now?

Seniors are then gathered at a festive dinner, with younger alumni invited and assigned among the dining tables. We break for dessert into small group discussion sessions, co-facilitated by the alumni, faculty, and staff, to discuss the preliminary questions and the role Wheaton has played in the life-planning process of students. This reflective capstone is a valuable institutional research counterpoint to the naked statistics of our other quantitative senior survey instruments. "Back to the Future" is a synthesizing forum, a locus for speculating on and redefining earlier dreams and goals, and for linking personal growth to the educational program of the College. And it is clearly an unusual moment for students who have evaluated their education piecemeal, one course at a time, with little or no way to put the learning pieces together.

Some of our conversations are halting, uneasy, and awkward, some are trenchant, rueful, and insightful. But the event in its entirety reminds those of us who stay on after commencement that there is tremendous value to us as teachers and program managers in opening up students to the process of their own educational experience.

Certainly, not all students attain a uniform level of integrated reflective learning, nor is there any correlation necessarily between being a nimble and highly accomplished academic achiever and being someone who can see the big picture. But in an age when outside forces clamor for accountability and assessment, often with reductive or even wrong-headed measuring approaches, we have felt it crucial to demonstrate to students and to ourselves the value-added nature of higher education. Even if some of our efforts are not entirely replicable in other kinds of institutions and with other kinds of students, we are convinced that, whatever the institutional ethnography, the development of reflective learners is an essential integrative tool. It can help us as educators to wed the practical and philosophical goals of experiential learning, moral and ethical development, and servant leadership with the academic curriculum itself. Even as increasing numbers of faculty incorporate field-based learning into their teaching, to integrate theory and experience one course at a time, we would all do ourselves and our students a great service if we looked to our institutional missions (and sometimes to our actual mission statements) for even more pervasive transformational activity. Developing reflective learners can, in the end, be one important part of higher education’s contribution to a more ethical and prosperous America of citizen-learners.

References

Hannah Goldberg is Provost and Academic Vice President. Daniel Golden is Director of the Filene Center for Work & Learning, and Victoria McGillin is Dean for Academic Advising, all at Wheaton College, Norton MA.

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