

Explorations Assessment Report – 2015-2016 Academic Year

The fall semester of 2015 inaugurated a new version of the Explorations course, tied more closely to CNSA, where when possible each section would be taught by the advisor.

Overall, Explorations 2015 was a success, especially the transition to the closer relationship to CNSA, as mandated by the faculty. Work remains to be done on determining the pacing of the course, as well as balancing the amount of academic content and work expected from the students with the goal of maximizing the relationship building between students and their advisor.

Numbers:

- 30 sections total taught (up from 17 last year), average of 13.2 students/ section
- 20 were taught by CNSA
- 3 by faculty members not advising
- 7 by staff
- 16/30 instructors had no previous experience with Explorations.

Our recruiting numbers for faculty were quite good, given that instructor stipends were cut by 50% over the past year, and in previous semesters, Explorations had typically run with 15 – 18 sections.

Discussion:

The deepening connection with CNSA led to some significant curricular changes. The course focused on “Navigating New Communities,” where Explorations serves both as an information dissemination tool for Hendrix, but also uses Hendrix as a model to introduce to students the skills they need when entering *any* new community. A new emphasis was placed on reflective writing; the student could use the writing to get to know more clearly about herself/himself, and the advisor could come to know the goals, hopes, and struggles of their student better. In addition, outside expertise was brought into the classroom in an official capacity: Dean Wiltgen presented information about student life and responsibilities to each section in October-so that the students had had a chance to actual live Hendrix. In addition, we formalized what had happened informally in a lot of section previously by making a “resource day,” where staff and other members of constituencies could provide information; the library, internships & career discovery, study abroad, and many others participated. Other content remained much the same as in year’s past – an introduction to the ideals of the Liberal Arts, Academic Integrity & Etiquette, Career & Vocation, the General Education Requirements, and Odyssey each had a day devoted to them.

This change did leave Explorations with less traditional “Academic” content. There was no major required reading/film, and the writing assignments were reflective in nature rather than formal academic papers. In addition, due in part to the lessened stipends and the heavier advising loads for CNSA, class meetings were cut to 10 total for the semester..

At the end of the semester all instructors were given the opportunity to complete an evaluation of the course. Overall, these were *extremely* positive. On a five point scale (5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree), instructors felt:

- Being both advisor and instructor made them a better *advisor* (4.82 ave)
- Received enough preparation in workshops to be comfortable teaching the class (4.67 ave)
- Found it useful to have outside expertise (4.53 ave)
- Found Explorations a rewarding experience (4.27 ave)

Comments include:

Getting to know my advisees and dealing with topics that *should* be addressed but which I would never broach in a “content” departmental course.

To me, it feels as though Explorations has become a much stronger course through the pairing of advisors and advisees. With that pairing, it makes a tremendous amount of sense to downplay the “academic” content component, which allows us to focus on the advising component. I got to know my advisees in a classroom setting, and they got to know me better. That’s a win-win situation, and I believe that I am a better advisor because of it.

(selected comments from Instructor evaluations)

There were some concerns. The scheduling of Dean Wiltgen and the “Resource Day,” coupled with Fall Break led to a loss of momentum in many sections and the Working Group will address this for next year. In addition, there were concerns about some of the course content. Two questions on the instructor evaluation specifically address this:

- I wish Explorations had more academic content (2.47 ave)
- Continue the curriculum as is (3.80 ave)

Both questions showed a bifurcation between faculty/advisors and staff instructors, as well as between new instructors and those who had taught the course before. New instructors and those who were advising (there is a large overlap between these groups) were more positive about the course and less concerned about the relatively low amount of academic work required. It is unclear that this point how much of the concerns raised here are nostalgia for the previous course, but this will be addressed by the Working Group as we consider next year’s version of Explorations.

Finally, instructors who were not also their students’ academic advisor reported a good to great relationship with the advisor, and no significant issues were raised with this going forward. Nearly all advisors used their EPA during freshman registration and those who did were universally pleased with the outcome. It is expected that EPAs will be made available to all advisors in future years as well.