

CURRICULUM

Developing Ability-Based Education

In 1968, the changes began that triggered the metamorphosis of Alverno's tested teaching strategies into the ability-based curriculum of today. Economic and social trends of the late 1960s already indicated that an unprecedented number of women looked forward to livelihoods outside of the traditional women's fields of teaching, nursing, and music. And Alverno established a lay governing board composed of business and community leaders. Basic questions needed to be answered: What distinguishes the college? What does it do best? How can it do it better?

In 1968, the college also acquired a new president, Sister Joel Read. Like Sister Augustine, Sister Joel was a masterful teacher with a clear fix on the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead. She encouraged the faculty to continue its reflection on basic goals and teaching strategies, for she sensed there the beginning of a new vision for education.

Their prolonged study led to the basic premises of Alverno's ability-based education, which was launched in 1973. Students responded well to the curriculum, in which the traditional aims of a liberal arts education were defined as eight performance abilities. In 1976, faculty expanded the curriculum by adding majors in business and management and professional communication, two fields that held strong appeal for women.

In 1977, faculty adapted the ability-based approach to a weekend timeframe, creating a way for working women to earn a college degree on weekends. Weekend College was an instant success, enrolling 251 students in its first semester. In 1996, Alverno offered its first graduate program — a master of arts in education — open to both women and men. And since then the college has developed three additional graduate programs — a master of science in nursing, a master of business administration, and a master of science in community psychology.

Today, Alverno's ability-based curriculum is no longer a one-of-a-kind approach. The focus on abilities and assessment is spreading throughout higher education in America, Europe, Australia, and other parts of the world.

At Alverno, where the concept began, the renewal continues. Upon the retirement of Sister Joel Read, Dr. Mary Meehan succeeded her as president of the college. Under her able leadership, every year, refinements are made in both the expectations of students and the assessment of progress. Alverno educators of today do exactly what Alverno educators have done for more than one hundred years — they seek a better way.

Ability-Based Education: Knowledge with the Abilities to Apply It Throughout Life

When Alverno faculty planned a new curriculum in the early 1970s, they began by questioning what a college education should do for students after they graduate. What will best enable them to succeed in their careers? What insights will most enrich their lifetimes? What abilities will make a lasting difference in their homes, families, and communities? What will equip them to continue as independent learners able to adapt to and grow with a fast-changing world?

Gradually, faculty reached common agreement on what students need most for success after college. Knowledge with the abilities to apply it became the primary goal of their teaching. Working as a group, faculty

restructured the entire curriculum from start to finish to assure that every course helped students advance that goal. To unify their teaching, they organized the entire curriculum around eight abilities that require a broad range of knowledge and a great deal of practice.

The Eight Abilities

People everywhere devote significant amounts of time daily to analyzing problems, finding solutions, sharing ideas and information, making decisions, reaching agreements with others, and determining what is ethical and what is not. Such actions are the bedrock of being an informed and responsible person. The goal of learning is to do them as well as possible.

Every college hopes that its curriculum helps a student develop these abilities to highly sophisticated levels. No college takes this development more seriously than Alverno, where mastery of them has been the heart of the curriculum and the explicit goal for every student since 1973. Because of this unique emphasis, Alverno's curriculum, like that of other colleges in many ways, is quite distinctive in others.

Like every college, Alverno believes that a student is best prepared for the future when she understands a variety of subject areas — like the arts and humanities, the sciences and social sciences.

This general education is concentrated in a student's first several semesters, but extends throughout her college career. The balance of her time is spent in concentrated coursework for her major and support area (minor) and in elective courses that correspond to her special interests. In all courses, the student finds ideas that are timelessly true, questions that are forever ponderable, and information that is as up-to-date as Alverno faculty can make it.

But as valuable as it is, this knowledge alone is not enough. Woven through all classes are learning experiences designed to help students advance to successively higher levels of sophistication in each of eight abilities. A science course, for example, helps a student develop problem-solving, valuing, and communication abilities. The eight abilities give backbone to Alverno's curriculum, uniting it with a common purpose for teaching and an organizing framework for learning.

Students choose a course for both the subject matter and the abilities it offers. At each course's beginning, a student "contracts" to advance in several of the eight abilities.

Faculty have defined six levels of sophistication for each of the eight abilities. To graduate, a student must achieve the fourth level in all of them. In addition, every student must fulfill the requirements for a major and two support areas. These requirements vary somewhat from department to department, but they generally involve the fifth or sixth level of competence in those abilities that are most closely related to the student's selected major and support areas of study.

An Active Approach to Learning

The emphasis on knowledge with the abilities to apply it changes the way students learn and the way teachers teach. Classes contain fewer lectures and more discussions, projects, and other experiences aimed at more actively engaging students in their learning. Outside class, a student generally finds that she is memorizing less and developing her understanding more.

Some learning takes place off campus in the professional world. Every student takes part in at least one internship, where she has a chance to match her knowledge and ability against on-the-job demands. Some

students also use “travelships” — grants to help defray the cost of travel — to participate in workshops, seminars, and courses around the United States and abroad.

Ability-based education also encourages more student-teacher interaction. Because the faculty’s role is to help each student learn and to apply what she learns effectively, teachers generally spend more time with students on an individual basis.

Assessment: Judgment of Knowledge in Action

Alverno’s method of evaluating students, called assessment, helps a student and her teachers judge the quality of her learning, which includes subject matter integrated with the eight abilities. Unlike a test, an assessment does not just evaluate what the student knows. An assessment is a complex activity specifically designed for her to demonstrate what she can do with what she knows. This is how she earns her academic credit, as she shows increasingly sophisticated levels of ability.

The difference between traditional testing and assessment is best illustrated with an example. In American history courses everywhere, students are expected to understand the causes of World War II. An assessment at Alverno might ask her to assume the role of a U.S. senator in 1939 and deliver a speech explaining to other senators why events in Europe and Asia will inevitably involve America in a global conflict. This assessment requires understanding of the facts and their context, application of them in a specific situation, and demonstration of critical thinking and persuasive speaking ability.

Students tell us that assessment is a unique part of being at Alverno. Dozens of times on her way to a bachelor’s degree, a student has a chance to show how she is developing her knowledge and abilities by participating in assessments.

She may solve a problem in a science lab, lead a panel in a psychology class, or perform and analyze a prelude for a music history course. She may spend six weeks working on a project as an intern at a local firm or agency. She may spend six hours taking the role of a civic leader in a day-long simulation exercise. She may spend sixteen minutes presenting her point of view in a videotaped group discussion.

Sometimes a student’s assessments take place in the Assessment Center. More often, they occur right in her class or fieldwork setting. Always, she knows long beforehand what she will be asked to do. She knows the specific standards she is required to meet. Usually she also has opportunities for practice with assessments similar to the ones that contribute to her credits.

Assessors and Individual Feedback

Each assessment includes individual feedback. The whole purpose is to enable the student to see what she knows and what her abilities are, and how she can develop further. She and her assessors go over her performance carefully. Her assessors may include not only her instructor, but also other faculty and staff members. In addition, Alverno has on call about 500 trained volunteer assessors from the Milwaukee area business and professional community.

All assessors, including the student herself, make judgments on the basis of the specified standards. They cite specific, observable evidence. They look for strengths as well as areas that need developing. Over the course of her studies, each student becomes skilled enough to make self-

assessment an integral part of her learning for life. The student’s ability to self-assess is carefully nurtured with practice and feedback throughout her academic program.

The system of student assessment at Alverno College does not include reference to letter grades. In fact, one tenet of the College’s educational philosophy is that the faculty do not evaluate students comparatively using letter grades. Instead, we establish criteria for effective performance in each course that are based on college-wide standards in addition to standards for achievement within major and minor programs of study. These standards include eight abilities—Communication, Analysis, Problem Solving, Valuing in Decision Making, Social Interaction, Developing a Global Perspective, Effective Citizenship, and Aesthetic Engagement—that all students must demonstrate in different areas of study. We then provide students with significant narrative feedback describing the quality of her performance relative to those standards. A student who does not meet these standards at the level defined in each course does not pass the course. As a continuous process in which the student herself plays an active role, assessment helps both the student and her faculty judge her command of the subject matter integrated with the eight abilities.

Due to the rigor of our curriculum, we are able to confirm that a student who has successfully completed a course is held in “good standing.” This means that any student in good standing at the college has not only demonstrated the requisite understanding of the disciplines she is studying but also the abilities that constitute the core of our curriculum. Faculty distinguish quality of performance by providing a written evaluation to the student that judges the specific way the student met or exceeded those standards. At the time of graduation, those evaluations are synthesized into an extensive narrative statement that documents the quality of the student’s undergraduate or graduate work. This narrative statement is an objective evaluation of the quality of the graduate’s performance in her program of study and is an integral part of each student’s official final transcript.

When a student has successfully demonstrated the required level of integration of knowledge and ability, she is awarded what we call a validation. The validations a student receives when she has successfully completed an assessment indicate that she has met the detailed rigorous standards set by the College. The record of courses taken, completed validations, and a detailed profile of the student’s strengths and accomplishments become part of each student’s permanent records. Because this method provides much more information than a grade and fosters continuous learning, it is approved by accrediting bodies and accepted by graduate schools and employers. In fact, educators from across the country and around the world regularly visit Alverno to learn about this innovative and effective approach to helping students learn.

Assessment may sound a little challenging. But along with the challenge comes support. In fact, students and faculty agree that assessment is one of the most powerful and helpful supports for learning they have ever experienced.

The Effects of Ability-Based Education After College

Considerable research has been conducted to determine the long-range effects of Alverno’s curriculum. That educational research, conducted by the college’s Educational Research and Evaluation department, shows that graduates consistently develop the abilities that are the goals of Alverno’s teaching. Moreover, graduates find that these abilities make

a positive difference in all aspects of their lives: home, community, and career.

Annually, about 89% of Alverno graduates are employed within six months of graduation, and the vast majority put their degrees to work in areas related to their college studies. About 16% of Alverno graduates have been admitted to or are attending a graduate or professional school within six months of earning their baccalaureate degree. They find that their abilities equip them well for the challenges of independent research and learning that are part of graduate-level education.

Alverno's 8 Core Abilities

Communication

The effective communicator makes meaning by interacting with people, ideas, texts, media, and technology. She integrates a variety of communication abilities (reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as information technology and quantitative literacies) to meet the demands of increasingly complex communication situations.

Analysis

The competent analyzer is a clear, critical, and independent thinker. She combines data, experience, reason, and expertise to make and reexamine judgments.

Problem Solving

The competent problem solver defines problems and integrates a range of abilities and resources to reach decisions, make recommendations, or implement action plans.

Valuing in Decision Making

The responsible decision maker is reflective and empathic in approaching the value issues in her life. She habitually seeks to understand the moral dimensions of her decisions and accepts responsibility for the consequences of actions taken in all facets of her life. She understands and is sensitive to a variety of perspectives and experiences that impact decision making.

Social Interaction

The capable interactor works well with others to achieve goals, manage conflict, and build relationships. She understands how context and culture influence the ways in which she chooses to interact. She actively engages in one-on-one communication and in small- and large-group discussion, and she effectively uses conflict-management skills.

Developing a Global Perspective

Developing a global perspective involves gaining an understanding of multiple viewpoints through increasing knowledge of how questions and problems are informed by historical, political, economic, social, and cultural systems. A student demonstrates her global perspective by making informed judgments on issues of global concern, and by refining her own ideas using views and values held in diverse contexts.

Effective Citizenship

The effective citizen is an informed participant in civic life.

Aesthetic Engagement

The aesthetically engaged student makes informed artistic and interpretive choices. She integrates the intuitive and kinesthetic dimensions of her participation in the arts with broader social, cultural,

and theoretical frameworks. She articulates the relationship between her aesthetic sensibilities and her experiences within and outside of the arts.

Alverno and Its Curriculum Reflect Diversity

One of the most exciting features of Alverno College is the diversity of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences reflected among students, faculty, and staff. Alverno faculty and staff have embraced the idea that the most meaningful teaching and learning experiences take place in an environment that respects and values the multiple perspectives that individuals bring to the Alverno community.

The Alverno curriculum is designed with an eye toward helping the student learn to live in a multicultural society. The eight abilities she must master help her to understand, communicate, and work effectively with persons of diverse cultural experiences. The broad liberal arts background required of each student enables her to look at the world from new and different perspectives.

Course offerings make explicit connections between today's student and the world in which she lives. A recent course, for example, addressed the issue of hunger both locally and from a global perspective.

The Multicultural Advisory Council, composed of the Special Assistant to the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of Students, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and other faculty and staff, consistently creates, implements, and reviews practices and programs within the college that are responsive to this diversity. In conjunction with others on campus, it sponsors campus events and serves as a resource and link to the internal Alverno community and to the external Milwaukee community. Along with the International & Intercultural Center, the Multicultural Advisory Council serves our diverse student body, made up of students from both the United States and around the world.

In every aspect of life, Alverno celebrates the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of our world, our nation, our city, and the Alverno College community.

Degrees Offered

Alverno College offers the following degrees:

- Bachelor of Arts
- Bachelor of Music
- Bachelor of Science
- Bachelor of Science in Education
- Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- Associate of Arts
- Master of Arts in Education
- Master of Business Administration
- Master of Science in Community Psychology
- Master of Science in Nursing