

NASPA Award submission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **University of South Carolina's USC Connect - Integrating Learning Within and Beyond the Classroom** promotes the education of students for engaged citizenship through integrative learning. Students develop key insights that are informed from multiple perspectives as they integrate learning across within and beyond the classroom experiences. Students grapple with questions of what is significant to them, why these issues are important, and what they can do to make a difference. Finally, students apply their learning to solve problems in new contexts—a critical skill for an engaged and productive citizenry.

Data on student learning collected through USC Connect have clearly **shown the impact** that support for integrative learning can make. Students are able to articulate what they have learned beyond the classroom, how it relates to their academic work, and how they can apply learning to make a difference in their communities and future professions.

USC Connect began in Fall 2011 to serve the nearly 30,000 undergraduate students at Columbia (flagship) campus and USC's four Palmetto College campuses (Lancaster, Salkehatchie, Sumter, and Union). The initiative was built upon the university's revised general education requirements and a year of university strategic planning. Development of USC Connect was **guided by USC's mission** to equip students with the "knowledge, skills, and values necessary for success and responsible citizenship in a complex and changing world through engagement in nationally and internationally ranked research, scholarship, service, and artistic creation". USC's Carnegie designation as a highly community-engaged university is reflective of the university's work to achieve this mission. **USC Connect builds on the university focus of community engagement by adding the critical component of integrative learning.** While engagement itself is important, the skills and dispositions needed to prepare students to make ongoing contributions to society are built through intentional analysis and application of within and beyond the classroom experiences.

Theory and research have shown that undergraduate education is often a conglomeration of fragmented experiences in and outside the classroom. As described in the statement on integrative learning by the Carnegie Foundation and the American Association of College and Universities, fostering students' ability to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals of higher education. While USC has a history of strong programs in academic and student affairs, our analysis found that some students need more encouragement to engage beyond the classroom experiences and all could benefit from greater support in connecting their experiences in meaningful ways. **USC Connect was designed to meet these needs.**

USC Connect focuses on **five pathways of beyond the classroom learning**: Community service, global learning, internships, peer leadership and research. Students are encouraged to engage beyond the classroom through consistent messaging and resources that encourage engagement: presentations at orientation and in first-year seminars, an annual Get Connected Fair including academic and student affairs representatives, a searchable engagement database to identify experiences, and USC Connect by Major resources with recommendations from faculty on how to engage in ways relevant to specific areas of study.

Students are encouraged to **reflect on experiences** from the beginning including an introductory experience in the first-year seminar and a "Make It Count" campaign directed at sophomores and juniors (i.e., engage, document and reflect). Students with extensive work in community service, global learning, professional and civic engagement, and/or research who demonstrate their ability to apply what they have learned to solve problems can earn the designation of Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD). Through the GLD-required public presentation and in-depth e-portfolio,

students articulate how all the components of their undergraduate education work together to prepare them for careers and active membership in their communities. Reflection for all students is promoted through professional development opportunities for faculty and staff who incorporate new strategies into their programming for students.

From its inception, USC Connect has been a **joint venture of academic and student affairs**. Although housed in the Office of the Provost, the collaboration with student affairs is central to the success of USC Connect. The executive director reports to the Senior Vice Provost and is an indirect report to the Vice President for Student Affairs. USC Connect staff work with our partners in student affairs and other areas who lead student engagement in leadership, service, study abroad, internships and research and others responsible for orientation, first-year experiences, sophomore initiatives, and living and learning communities. **Collaboration** for USC Connect involves colleges/schools/departments, university technology services, institutional research, and communications.

While most reported success in integrative learning nationally had heretofore been at small liberal arts colleges, **USC Connect** is being implemented at a comprehensive, research institution. This is **original** in and of itself. The successful use of [e-portfolios](#) is one of the many technologies used in USC Connect. The assessment of e-portfolios is accomplished through an on-line system for distribution, grading, and data analysis. Other technologies include a [cutting edge website](#) that is mobile-friendly, the integration of Graduation with Leadership Distinction into advisement software, and extensive use of social media. The most **innovative** aspect of USC Connect is [Graduation with Leadership Distinction](#) which has proven inspirational in engaging students, staff, and faculty.

The USC Connect website provides substantial evidence of the **university's investment in and commitment to USC Connect**. In addition, the university bulletin identifies courses related to USC Connect pathways and officially lists Graduation with Leadership Distinction as a university honor. The Office of USC Connect has grown every year since its beginning in 2011. While originally slated for a staff of 2.5, it currently houses 5 full-time staff, a graduate assistant, and 3 part-time employees with additional funding for approximately 20 instructors to teach the support course for Graduation with Leadership Distinction.

Theory and research on integrative learning led the University of South Carolina to undertake the design and implementation of USC Connect to meet the needs of our students. We are now sharing what we have learned with others including 10 national presentations within the last 3 years and citations in two upcoming publications.

Impact on student learning and success

Expectations for student learning through integration of within and beyond the classroom experiences are articulated through four *USC Connect* learning outcomes. The outcomes include describing how beyond the classroom experiences contribute to learning (*LO1*); linking learning across within and beyond the classroom experiences (*LO2*); analyzing learning as informed by multiple experiences, perspectives, and/or disciplines (*LO3*); and applying learning to solve problems (*LO4*).

Data on student learning were collected through ratings of student work samples in the first-year seminar and assessment of seniors' e-portfolios. First-year students were rated on their ability to meet the first two *USC Connect* learning outcomes. Over three years, 579 work samples were scored on 4-point scale where 3 indicated meeting expectations. First-years student scores had a mean of 2.59 in describing how a beyond the classroom experience contributed to their learning (*LO1*) and 2.06 on connecting beyond the classroom learning with course concepts (*LO2*). Scores were relatively consistent from year to year reinforcing the conclusion that **first-year students are approaching the ability to clearly describe something they learned through beyond the classroom experiences, but are less able to connect that learning to academic course concepts.**

In comparison, 314 students who completed an e-portfolio in their senior year to earn Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD) consistently demonstrated the ability to describe learning from beyond the classroom experiences and relate it to course concepts (mean ratings of 3.31 (*LO1*) and 3.16 (*LO2*), respectively). GLD e-portfolios were rated on two additional learning outcomes with a mean score of 3.31 in analyzing learning in complex ways (*LO3*), and 2.97 in articulating solutions to problems/issues based on what they had learned (*LO4*). These results demonstrate that **with the in-depth support of the GLD process students are able to articulate the significance of what they have learned beyond the classroom and relate it to their in-class experiences (often in complex ways). Most students also successfully demonstrated the ability to apply learning to solve problems in new contexts, although results show this to be the most challenging learning outcome.**

In addition to these direct measures of student success, surveys of students completing Graduation with Leadership Distinction found that 99% of respondents felt confident in their ability to articulate their Carolina experience and 95% indicated earning GLD helped them to better understand the significance of their beyond-the-classroom experiences. Students' narrative comments were extremely positive with students citing the value of the GLD process in helping them make sense of their undergraduate experience, being able to articulate their story to potential employers, and building their skills and confidence in being able to make a positive contribution after graduation. Two examples:

-I learned that everything I did was not random. They all interestingly connect with each other. I realized I have learned so much from this school and **have the opportunity to contribute back.**

-The most important thing I have gained as a result of earning GLD is being able to express all aspects from my time at USC including in and out of the classroom experiences . . . **I learned how to make connections that I would have never thought of before increasing my problem-solving abilities and thinking outside of the box.**

See the attachment for further assessment results.

Mission and Advancement of Student Affairs

USC Connect specifically **supports the Division of Student Affairs' mission** to "collaborate with campus and external constituents to provide access, facilitate students' progress and persistence, advance learning, and shape responsible citizens and future leaders." Student Affairs has partnered with Academic Affairs in the development and implementation of both major components of *USC Connect*: purposeful engagement beyond the classroom and integrating learning across experiences.

USC Connect is overseen by a Council including the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies. The initiative builds on the university's strengths in first-year experiences and programs supporting engagement beyond the classroom (e.g., study abroad, community service, peer leadership, internships,

research). USC Connect integrates the work of Student Affairs in student learning and students' development as citizens and future leaders with students' academic work in general education and the major.

USC Connect has **enhanced collaboration and programming across offices supporting community service, internships, and peer leadership experiences (e.g. Residential Life, Leadership and Service Center, Study Abroad, Career Center)**. USC Connect pathways' directors meet regularly to coordinate services and messages to students. Systems developed for USC Connect are utilized by offices to promote their programs including the [USC Connect database of beyond the classroom opportunities](#).

Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD) has been particularly impactful. Since its inception in Fall 2013, 1,193 students across all academic years (first year through senior level) have registered to pursue Graduation with Leadership Distinction. A total of 314 student participants have completed the distinction since the first GLD ceremony in spring 2014. The distinction encourages students to take greater advantage of the offerings of the Division of Student Affairs and enhances students' understanding of the significance of these experiences in enriching their education and preparing them to be community-engaged citizens and leaders. A wide variety of **programs in the Division of Student Affairs promote Graduation with Leadership Distinction as vehicle to purposefully engage their students including** (e.g., Opportunity Scholars, Gamecock Gateway [access program supporting matriculation into USC], Center for Sustainability).

Over 300 faculty and professionals within the Division of Student Affairs are actively engaged in supporting and assessing student work in integrative learning. Roles include teaching university-wide seminars (UNIV 101, 201, and 401) and participating in the assessment of students' Graduation with Leadership Distinction e-portfolios. **Joint professional development for faculty and staff** is provided in conjunction with all roles. These shared experiences **build common purpose** and understanding of our mission to prepare students to contribute and lead in their future communities.

Meet student needs/critical campus issues

Following a university-wide strategic planning process and the revision of general education requirements that occurred from 2005-2009, USC moved to a focus on the need for meaningful student engagement beyond the classroom. We considered how we could build on our strengths in student engagement, first-year experiences, academics, and other areas to support our students in moving to higher levels of achievement, dispositions, and commitment to lifelong learning. We identified two major areas of need.

First, **limited awareness of within and beyond the classroom opportunities** stemmed from lack of system-wide coordination and communication. While many students were engaged beyond the classroom, others were not. The availability and value of opportunities involving community engagement, leadership, research, service learning, and study abroad needed to be more transparent to students, faculty, and staff. From this need USC Connect created a searchable opportunity database for students, support staff and faculty, recommendations for involvement by major, and an annual Get Connected Fair to connect students to beyond the classroom experiences within student affairs and their majors.

Second, we found **few opportunities for integrative learning to support students in meaningfully connecting within and beyond the classroom experiences**. While engagement in a wide variety of experiences clearly enriches a student's educational experience, if the engagement does not include support in analyzing and learning from that experience, it is, at the very least, a missed opportunity. More strongly stated, if an institution of higher education consistently fails to support students in integrating their experiences, they are not fully preparing their students "for success and responsible citizenship in a complex and changing world" (i.e., USC's mission). To truly enhance student learning at the University of South Carolina, USC Connect was designed to develop an infrastructure to support, facilitate and enhance students' integrative learning opportunities with the ultimate goal of developing a university culture that supports integrative learning and students' potential as action-oriented citizens and leaders.

Collaboration with Academic and Others/Sustainability of Program

USC Connect development, implementation and assessment have been truly collaborative. **Beyond leadership from both academic and student affairs, key players include university technology services, institutional research, and university communications.** While a central office of USC Connect supports development, the initiative is implemented through the work of university offices supporting beyond the classroom opportunities (Study Abroad, Leadership and Service Center, Undergraduate Research, Career Center); living and learning communities promoting student engagement and learning; and student orientation and first-year programs; and colleges, schools, and departments. Co-curricular experiences are provided by faculty and staff, often in cooperation with one another. USC Connect facilitates collaboration by providing information and **connecting parties with similar interests.** Support programs promote the integration of within and beyond the classroom learning such as, common courses (linked coursework), faculty grants, USC Connect by Major, and USC Connect Searchable Database of Beyond the Classroom Experiences. A trio of university courses are taught by both faculty and students affairs professionals: a first-year seminar (UNIV 101), a mid-career inquiry course (UNIV 201), and a senior capstone course (UNIV 401). A series of grants has supported faculty in developing integrative learning opportunities in their courses. The course requirement for GLD has further **engaged faculty in assessing their programs' links with community service, leadership, internships, global learning, and research.**

USC Connect is guided by **three advisory bodies:** The USC Connect Council (faculty and staff with some student representation), the USC Connect Student Advisory Council (SAC), and the USC Connect Pathways' Directors (primarily directors from the Division of Student Affairs). Collaboration with Colleges and Schools occurs through the Council of Academic Deans, the Associate and Assistant Deans Council, and individual and small group faculty meetings. The Director of USC Connect meets regularly with the Students Affairs' Associate Vice Presidents Council.

The **university's commitment to the initiative** is reflected in the growth of the Office of USC Connect which has an annual budget of \$500,000 including five full-time staff (Director with faculty rank, Associate Director, Assistant Director for Student Services, Student Advisor, and Administrative Coordinator). The value USC places on integrative learning is also communicated through recognition at the highest levels, such as the President awarding student cords at the Graduation with Leadership Distinction ceremony, deans encouraging attendance at the USC Connect Faculty Conference, and the emphasis of USC Connect in university publications including UofSC Today and the annual Student Affairs' Essay Magazine (see attachment).

Originality, Creativity, including Technology

Whereas integrative learning has typically been undertaken at small liberal arts colleges or in limited ways at larger institutions, USC Connect is a broad **integrative learning initiative at a comprehensive, research institution** with nearly 30,000 undergraduate students on multiple campuses. This was our first step in originality and creativity.

The most innovative component of USC Connect has been **Graduation with Leadership Distinction.** Many institutions of higher education are seeking ways to integrate learning across academic and student affairs, but it is a tremendous challenge. We found the institution of Graduation with Leadership Distinction has inspired students, faculty, and staff alike. Students initially seek Graduation with Leadership Distinction for the recognition on their transcript and diploma. By the time they complete the process, they realize the most valuable aspect of the distinction has been gaining the ability to articulate what they have learned and what it means for their future. Initially students, faculty, and staff found USC Connect and the concept of integrative learning vague and difficult to understand. Through the specific requirements and processes of Graduation with Leadership Distinction, the meaning of integrative learning became clear.

Technology has been a major emphasis of USC Connect from the beginning. **E-portfolios have been our greatest technology success story.** In our first year, we piloted a platform that students reported was not user-friendly and limited their ability to share their learning and accomplishments. Learning from this experience, we changed platforms and have been able to develop on-line support materials that enable most students to create an e-portfolio without additional assistance. This allows students to concentrate on the most valuable aspect of their portfolios—learning and application. USC Connect e-portfolios serve as a powerful vehicle for integrative learning since students not only share artifacts, but describe, through in-depth means, their learning and plans for application. E-portfolios continue to be embraced by increasing numbers of students and academic programs.

Technology has been infused throughout USC Connect including development of a **cutting edge website** that is mobile friendly, a **searchable engagement database**, and **systematic use of Facebook, twitter, and Instagram.** Technology has been critical to expanding to meet the demand of students pursuing Graduation with Leadership Distinction. Our original face-to-face orientation was transformed **on-line** to be readily accessible to students anytime. This was followed with on-line registration and application systems. Students use an on-line system to make appointments with advisors. Students who are studying abroad or completing out-of-state internships can Skype into appointments. Faculty advisors are made aware of students' intent to pursue Graduation with Leadership Distinction and their progress on meeting requirements through the **integration of GLD with our advisement software** (DegreeWorks).

Technology is key to our assessment processes. **Blackboard Learn and Outcomes are used to assess student work.** Students submit work on-line which is automatically distributed to reviewers who review work and provide feedback through on-line rubrics. Assessment results are summarized through the same electronic system.

Additional technology innovations which have been developed over the last three years are coming “on-line” in 2016: a new a system to track student participation in beyond the classroom experiences and a new calendaring system and space reservation system.

Application of Research, Theory, Assessment

USC Connect was designed based on theory and research on integrative learning in higher education. In particular, it built on the 2004 **a statement on integrative learning published jointly by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation** which proposed that “fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education”. Since then, integrative learning has continued to gain attention as a critical component of higher education.

Huber and Hutchings’ 2005 publication *Mapping the Terrain* articulates key concepts and challenges related to integrative learning in the context of today’s issues in higher education. This includes the importance of empowering students to think through what is important to them and challenging them to think in integrative ways. Students need to be encouraged to “wrestle” with the conflict within and between curricula, perspectives and experiences rather than compartmentalizing learning from each situation. No matter exactly what type of experiences a student is considering as s/he constructs new understandings, it is the habits of the mind that are built through integrative learning that is ultimately important.

AAC&U and Carnegie sponsored ***The Integrative Learning Project: Opportunities to Connect*** (Huber, et. al., 2007) from 2004-2006. In this initiative, ten campuses developed and assessed integrative learning strategies. Most projects focused on fairly specific aspects of the curriculum such as developing first-year experiences, capstone courses, integrative learning credits for study abroad experiences, e-portfolios, or integrated learning assignments. **USC Connect builds on this previous work** by moving toward a comprehensive approach to integrative learning at a major research university of over 30,000 students.