

# An Undergraduate Reflection

**Educator:** Jennifer Sorensen, Director of General Science & Assistant Professor of Chemistry

**Context:** out of class; Capstone Design

**Keywords:** identity, capstone/cornerstone

**Student Activity Time:** 2-3 hours

*Senior level students reflected on their undergraduate experience and connected it to their values and future goals.*

## Introducing the Reflection Activity

As students wrap up their college career, pausing to make sense of their undergraduate experience can be a valuable exercise. In a senior capstone course, an educator assigned the “Undergraduate Reflection” to students. The purpose of this activity was to facilitate students’ reflection on their college experience, connect it to an issue they care about, and their personal goals for life after graduation.

A campus-wide requirement for the senior experience course was a reflection activity focused on specific features of students’ undergraduate experience including: core courses, major courses, co-curricular and extracurricular activities. This educator assigned a reflection activity with the prompt “how have these experiences shaped your understanding of one social, environmental, scientific, health, and/or global issue?” The educator also requested that students include two specific examples from their undergraduate experiences that informed their understanding of the selected issue.

Four prompts were also included in the assignment in order to help students recall features of their college experience and prepare a thoughtful paper response. The questions were:

1. What is your “great cause”? What is a health, environmental, or social issue you feel strongly about? How has your SU education shaped your understanding of this issue and its needs?
2. What does SU’s concern for social and environmental justice mean to you? Has it impacted you personally? How have you engaged with justice as an undergrad?
3. How has the Core impacted your major? How has your major impacted your perspective in your Core classes? How has your participation in activities outside the classroom *informed* and *been informed by* your in-class and “textbook” knowledge?
4. Describe at least two key moments or experiences at SU that have shaped you. Include these specific examples in your reflection.

In the process of and after completing this reflection activity, students were able to reflect upon their undergraduate experience (broadly), with focused attention on a specific issue of societal importance that they cared about. Students were able to identify how their education and interest in a large-scale issue were intertwined. The activity also helped students to better understand themselves, craft goals for their future, and crystallize a greater meaning for their education. The activity enabled a unique awareness of students' capacity and willingness to be good actors in society as they move out into the world.

### Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Introduce the undergraduate reflection and rubric in class.
2	Give students the assignment and provide a deadline, at least 3-7 weeks.
3	Collect, grade, and return the assignment to students.
4	Facilitate an in-class debrief discussion of insights gained through the assignment.

### In the words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

*Develop a rubric, give it to students, and grade the assignment.* I give the students the rubric right when I give the assignment. I've found that a lot of students think reflection should be an "A for effort" sort of thing and expect full credit for turning in anything. By giving them the rubric, there are clear, quantifiable components of the assignment to assess. Anything from the quality of the writing, to evidence of thoughtfulness and depth are valid items to give a quantifiable grade for. For this assignment, I'm really big on supportive evidence. It's not enough to say "I've grown as a person" or "I study better now than I did as a freshman." I probe students for specific examples and anecdotes that bring their college story to life, and allow me to peek inside their minds.

*Tell students why you are asking them to do the assignment.* I think it's really important to share with students why they are doing the assignment and what the purpose is. Otherwise, they don't have any grounding to understand why it matters. I tell my students a combination of things about the undergraduate reflection. First, that it functions as a celebration--an opportunity to celebrate how much they have grown and developed over their time at Seattle U. Second, they'll be entertained to reread their thoughts in ten years and assess whether they have continued to change! But the activity also has immediate value to students because it asks them to be self-reflective and to come up with concrete examples. Those examples are useful for writing personal statements and going on job interviews because it helps them identify specific instances of how they have demonstrated certain skills and traits in their lives as students. And finally, I hope that giving students an intentional opportunity to reflect on an issue they're passionate about is a catalyst for future action.

*What was the inspiration for the reflection activity?* I inherited an early version of this activity many years ago. The university core curriculum required a reflection in the capstone course, but as faculty, we are allowed to implement this in whatever ways best achieve the objective. The four prompts that I use were inspired by the three questions of vocational discernment from Father Michael Himes at Boston College: What are your strengths? What are your passions? What does the world need from you? The answers to those questions can be used to help us discern what we should do with our lives, so it's fitting to ask them of our seniors as they're getting ready to transition to their next phase. My goal is to get students thinking about using their education for a greater purpose, improving learning outcomes of the whole college experience, and supporting students' transferable metacognitive thinking.