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## Alverno College

### Partners in Learning

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#### Staff Collaboration in Promoting Student Learning Across the College

##### Preface

This document, a collaborative effort by a variety of departments, was developed, reflected upon, and revised several times throughout the past fifteen years. It was and continues to be important to us to articulate the staff contribution to student learning. The educational philosophy and structures at Alverno assist staff to have an ongoing role in assisting students in their development. Our offices and our programs operate as extensions of the classroom. Students practice what they're learning when they work in our departments, when they conduct business in our offices, when they have conversations with us, when they participate in the programs we sponsor, when they live in the residence hall when they participate in sports, and whenever we discover by their request or by our observation that they need some kind of assistance. We have an important role in creating an environment that reinforces student learning. It is our responsibility to develop ourselves, and to conduct our professional lives, so that the student's learning is seamless - what students learn in the classroom, they experience on campus.

Periodically we bring this document to the department heads for reflection and discussion. Our goals in discussing *Partners in Learning* are to

- explain the relationship between the curriculum and the learning-centered environment
- articulate the importance of our work to the educational process
- describe the Alverno culture, our expectations of each other, and identify future needs
- identify roles and components of the culture and their relationship to the curriculum and
- incorporate our insights, thereby continuously improving our practice

During our initial meetings, we identified a number of questions that moved our work forward. Some topics have been answered; others assist us to see our document, *Partners in Learning*, as a work in progress. The questions and themes we identified are

1. In what ways is your department student learning centered?
2. What aspects of *Partners in Learning* resonate with your department and your work?
3. In what ways does your department support the mission of the college through committees, practices, procedures, and policies? What practices are effective? What are the limitations of your current practice?
4. How does your department integrate the educational philosophy into your work with other departments? With students? In what ways could this be improved?
5. What abilities does your department find helpful in working with students? With faculty? With coworkers?
6. In what ways do the curriculum and educational frameworks inform and guide your administrative departments? If they don't, are there ways that they could?
7. What is the culture (e.g. shared language, shared experiences, shared values, shared understandings, shared practices, shared structures) at Alverno? How does this inform your department's way of operating? How does the culture support each employee? Which of the above are held in common? Which are not? What other traditions or practices might be needed to support this learning environment?
8. How would you describe the unique culture of teaching, learning, and managing at Alverno? Describe ways that your department supports and reflects our culture.
9. How does the environment of female degree students influence your department?
10. How can we assist each other to take advantage of teachable moments?

Our work is ongoing. *Partners in Learning* is distributed to all new staff employees and they participate in a workshop to discuss the major concepts of the document and what those concepts mean in their daily work. The questions and the concepts continue to inform the development of workshops and discussions so that we can more effectively work with students and with one another.

Members of the current Partners in Learning Sub-Committee represent the following departments

- Academic Services
- Admissions
- Alumnae Office
- Assessment Center
- Business Office
- Campus Ministry
- Career Education
- Human Resources
- Institute for Educational Outreach
- Professional Support Services
- Residence Life
- Safety and Security
- Student Affairs

**Alverno College**  
**Partners in Learning**

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**Staff Collaboration in Promoting Student Learning Across the College**

**“Where All Belong”**

*The title of our alma mater song is “Where All Belong.” This wonderful composition captures the essence of Alverno – a learning community dedicated to instilling in all who come here the passion and skills necessary to become lifelong learners. We see learning as a process that takes place in and outside the classroom, and which requires the full and committed participation of the entire Alverno community. We expect each other—faculty member or cafeteria worker, dean or trustee, student or president – to contribute in many ways to the overall quality of learning in that community. We also expect each of us to communicate in subtle ways the value we have for our own growth, the respect we have for the contributions and worth of everyone with whom we interact, and the belief we have in the capacity of everyone to thrive and grow. Whatever our role, we all see our responsibility to be models of learning and collaboration and to inspire commitment to the ideals we hold for creating and renewing a community where all can flourish.*

*The mission statement of the School Sisters of St. Francis at Alverno College states: “When the School Sisters established a four-year liberal arts college in Milwaukee, the name embodied their highest hopes for the school. They wanted it to be a place where women could find a focal point, a place where they could complete their own climb to self understanding and discover their own Song of Praise.” If our students are to find that focal point, then we who serve here must be committed to the belief that this College is – a place “Where All Belong,” all flourish, and all participate in the quest for lifelong learning. If we remain fixed on this vision, then the continuous creation that is Alverno College will be a place where students truly can discover their own Song of Praise.*

Mary J. Meehan, President

**A Mission to Participate in Learning**

At the heart of Alverno College is the teaching/learning/assessment process through which students become effective lifelong learners. We believe that the success of this process depends on the efforts of or the dedication of each person who works at the College. The mission of the College includes, in addition to effecting learning in students, the creation of a ‘community of learning.’ That phrase has two words of equal weight: community and learning. We all become partners, bound together as a community, to learn together. And so, we each take full responsibility for our part in sustaining and improving that community through our personal, departmental, and total college performance. Alverno expects each employee to be an active participant in this learning community. Employees have a wide range of contact directly or indirectly with students and with one another. Our challenges toward furthering our mission include integrating the students’ classroom experience with out of class experiences, identifying how each individual’s work and its relationship to the work of other departments further this mission, and finally carrying out our shared responsibility of fostering the learning environment.

These efforts raise questions such as the following: How do the outcomes of a department connect to the mission of the College? How do we hold students accountable for integrating the abilities in their out-of-class interactions? How do we know that student learning is enhanced through the activities, programs, and services that we offer? How do we measure that learning? How do we know if we are meeting real needs through our services and activities? How do our department practices and policies recognize the diverse needs of the students and the employees?

These questions and others like them led a sub-committee of staff from across the College to examine how departments contribute to shared educational principles. The committee wanted to articulate in print how essential the **entire College** is to each Alverno student's learning experience and how the entire campus is a laboratory for students to apply their learning. This document was created as a result of our discussions and it continues to be used to

- orient new employees to the culture of our work at Alverno
- assist employees to consider their role in creating an environment in which students, faculty, and staff recognize their interdependence and their impact on each other
- provide a shared language that creates a dynamic for describing and evaluating our work together and
- offer an ongoing charge to each of us to do our best to have the Alverno culture experienced by all

**“From the attention to detail of the housekeeping staff, to the personal sensitivity of the business office personnel collecting student tuition, to the helpful and friendly greeting by receptionists and secretaries -- all contribute to the continued success of Alverno College in the fulfillment of its primary mission of assisting its students to achieve the highest possible level of learning.”**

Sister Joel Read, President 1968 – 2003  
August 1996 Memo

evaluating our work together

### **Alverno Community of Learners**

Each person associated with Alverno -- students, faculty, staff, alumnae, trustees, and volunteers -- create the *Alverno Community of Learners*. In their teaching, administrative, and support roles, individuals in this community of learning have unique opportunities to promote and assist in the personal and professional development of Alverno students. We continually make efforts to ensure that individuals and departments recognize that each student and her learning are central in all college policies and practices. This is the reason why the *Alverno College Mission* and *SOARING* are central to our work and practice. (See Appendices 1 and 2)

To assist one another to better understand how each department and each employee furthers Alverno's mission

- We **agree** with the *Alverno College Mission* and how it guides our work. Employees are expected to become part of this common understanding and practice. (See Appendix 1)
- We acknowledge that *SOARING* is a **process** that requires continual cultivation. (See Appendix 2)
- We are **intentional** about our work with each other and with the students. *SOARING*, developed and practiced by the Alverno community, sets forth our goals for working together.
- We strive to be **consistent** with our practice. We support learning by understanding, modeling, reinforcing and practicing the eight abilities. (See Appendix 3)
- We are **public** with our work and expectations. Our collaborative working style assists us to be accountable so that what we teach, we practice.
- We encourage each person to **develop** in every meaningful way as a member of the Alverno College community.

### Creating a Community of Learning

To sustain and further build this learning environment, we promote shared learning experiences, shared gathering spaces, and a shared language. For example, students, staff, and faculty participate in Convocation and Community Day. Staff and faculty participate in Institute sessions to update themselves on the “state of the College,” to learn about the academic and administrative aspects of the college and to improve our work together. Students, faculty, and staff gather together for meals, for study, for meetings and for informal gatherings.

The process of facilitating learning in another person embraces every activity that goes on in the College because each activity has the potential to either enhance or inhibit that learning process. Alverno’s mission statement and how we implement it are based upon the ability and willingness of individuals and departments to build collegial working relationships internal and external to the College.

When we join this College community, we assume responsibility to build collegial working relationships to enhance our work, the work of the College, and the teaching/learning/assessing environment for students. This spirit of collaboration assists us to

- enhance an environment of mutual trust, respect, and support
- take risks as we attempt to improve constantly every process for planning, production, and service
- try things that promote quality and achieve department goals while recognizing that mistakes are essentially a step in the learning process

We learn from one another and this collaborative spirit permeates the entire College and the approach we take regarding our work with students, our hiring practices, and our care of the facility.

### Creating a Curriculum

There are many ways that our work together as staff is structured in a way similar to the way the curriculum is structured for students. For example, staff members work collaboratively. They are encouraged to continually self-assess, using feedback, experience, goals, and emerging needs as a guide for improvement.

**“In many sectors today, ‘institution’ is a bad word, but at their very best, institutions extend our capabilities. If an institution does not enhance the capability of the people who work in it as well as that of the students, or clients, it is not serving its purpose.”**

Austin Doherty, Vice President for Academic Affairs, 1978 - 1999  
Interview in Alverno Today  
Winter 1978-1979

We recognize that as all persons learn differently, so too does each Alverno employee. Therefore, learning how we work at Alverno, how we best accomplish our areas of responsibility, and how the departments in which we operate contribute to Alverno’s mission, all happen in many ways -- individual and group, formal and informal, experiential, and by observation.

Faculty, administrative, and academic support staff who work directly with students strive to create in those interactions a learning environment that reinforces the idea that what the student is learning in the classroom she likewise practices and demonstrates in those interactions. This reinforcement and

**“Faculty member or cafeteria worker, dean or trustee, student or president – we are that rare community where no matter what role we play, we are given the best possible chance of being our “best selves”. And being our “best selves” includes the obligation to serve as models of intellectual curiosity, collegiality, and a passion for creating a vibrant and ever renewing community where all can flourish.”**

Mary J. Meehan, President  
Inauguration Address, October 8, 2004

expectation provide out of classroom, campus-wide experiences for the students that are consistent with her classroom learning. Colleagues accept a unique responsibility to support “active learning” by the student. They understand that they practice, model and reinforce the abilities and the principles upon which the curriculum is founded and renewed.

### **Creating Ties to the Community**

In order to maintain a financially strong institution, and prepare students for their professions and the responsibilities of citizenship, Alverno builds relationships with businesses, foundations, alumnae, community institutions, and individuals that benefit the College and its students. We recognize and accept our responsibilities to positively represent Alverno to those members of the external community who interact with us, and to develop friends and funds in order to support the services we provide. In order to further mutual understanding with the members of the external community -- our neighbors, area businesses and organizations, the police department, and other health and safety institutions -- we maintain contact, influence, and two-way communication.

We at Alverno encourage employees to be involved in the community. The effort employees make as volunteers often creates ties to the community for Alverno. As appropriate with work responsibilities, we support employees who volunteer service to agencies and/or serve on boards. We see these contributions as reinforcing the eight abilities and our commitment to effective citizenship as an institution and as individuals.

Members of the Alverno Alumnae Association are an important resource for the College and the students. They support the work of the curriculum directly as assessors and cooperating teachers, teaching assistants, and mentors. Indirectly, these graduates embody and represent the essence of Alverno to their employers, colleagues, and friends. We depend upon them to carry Alverno practices into their community.

### **Creating Relationships with Higher Education**

Alverno faculty, staff and students share their expertise and experience with the hundreds of educators who come to Alverno each year to learn about the curriculum and the Alverno culture. We find that the relationships we create with these individuals and institutions assist both Alverno and other schools to further student learning. Faculty, staff, and students strengthen these relationships by their involvement in state, regional, national and professional organizations. Higher education organizations provide inservice, expertise and resources related to most Alverno departments. Individuals and departments are encouraged to participate in those organizations from which they can learn and to which they can contribute, in order to further the understandings of the services for which they are responsible.

**“Our philosophy at Alverno has always been that staff as well as faculty assume a role in educating our students. *Partners in Learning* is an explicit expression of that belief.”**

Kathleen O’Brien  
Senior Vice President  
1999-Present

### **Conclusion**

This document is a work in progress. As we look for Alverno’s future, we are guided by a commitment to

- continue to create ways to foster trust and accountability
- create shared experiences bringing together the entire Alverno community to engage in dialogues about those issues that are meaningful to students, faculty, and staff
- celebrate regularly who we are in positive ways
- assist staff to develop a better understanding of our history and curriculum and integrate the educational principles in their work
- acquaint all employees with Alverno’s educational philosophy and eight abilities
- continue to develop extensive coordinated educational opportunities for employees

## Appendix 1

### Alverno College Mission Statement

(October 2004)

Alverno College is an institution of higher education dedicated to the undergraduate education of women. The student – her learning and her personal and professional development – is the central focus of everyone associated with Alverno. Alverno extends its mission of service and strengthens its ties to the community by offering graduate programs to both women and men. Agreement regarding this mission is evident throughout the college in its publications and operating philosophy. It is the recurring theme in messages of the Board of Trustees and the president of the college, in catalogs and educational publications, and in the daily approach of faculty and staff to their work. The college's accomplishments are measured by how well we carry out this central mission.

The following major purposes provide direction in the pursuit of our mission as well as a means of evaluating the level of its attainment at any given time. These purposes are stated in the present tense to communicate our belief that creating an institution and programs appropriate to the educational needs of women in the 21st century is an ongoing work. The four purposes are:

#### 1. **Creating a curriculum**

The curriculum, designed by faculty as the major source for student attainment of educational goals, includes both a philosophy and a program of education. It is:

- ability-based and focused on student outcomes
- integrated in a liberal arts approach to the professions
- rooted in Catholic tradition
- designed to foster leadership and service in the community
- flexible, to accommodate the educational goals of women with diverse responsibilities
- affordable, to accommodate women's economic circumstances

#### 2. **Creating a community of learning**

The personal and professional development of students requires an environment in which expectations regarding learning and development hold for faculty and staff as well as for students, and in which policies, structure, and procedures support those expectations.

Faculty and staff, therefore, make explicit their goal of creating a community of learning to ensure that the institution they are responsible for serves all its members: students, faculty, and staff.

#### 3. **Creating ties to the community**

In support of its mission, Alverno faculty and staff work in partnership with business, industry, and the professions, so that Alverno's curriculum effectively prepares women to enter or continue in the world of work as it is now, as well as to contribute to where it is headed.

#### 4. **Creating relationships with higher education**

As colleagues in a diverse set of professions comprising higher education, Alverno faculty and staff hold themselves responsible to contribute to the development of undergraduate education nationally and to elicit from colleagues constructive criticism of their teaching, scholarship, and research activity.

## Appendix 2

### SOARING: Professional Culture at Alverno College

Each of us associated with Alverno – students, faculty, staff, alumnae, trustees, and volunteers – are partners in creating a community of learners. We are a welcoming, professional community that values each student’s pursuit of learning, which is at the center of all we do. This is supported, challenged and nourished by a strong community. We have seen and are gratified by the success of the developmental, transformative nature of our students’ experiences. We value the contributions made by our colleagues and make an effort to model the environment we want for our students. Our community is sustained by our desire to continue providing an environment where all are welcomed and belong.

Our students’ successes encourage us to continue exploring the best ways to foster learning and improvement in our work. We have a history of successful innovation and exemplary service. We are confident that thoughtful, good administrative decisions support the creative energy of our community.

To do our best work we remain committed to

**S**teewardship – We respect each other and care for all resources entrusted to us.

**O**wnership – We take responsibility for producing quality work through individual and collaborative efforts.

**A**ction – We take pride in our work and adapt leadership, expertise, and working styles to promote continual learning, improvement of performance, and ongoing success.

**R**eflection – We encourage each person to reflect, develop, grow, and share equal responsibility for quality performance.

**I**nteraction – We invest in open and respectful interactions to sustain our collaborative style of working and decision making.

**N**etworking – We respond to and support each other to meet challenges, to collaborate in improving our services, and to create a positive learning and work environment.

**G**rowth - We promote holistic development that is made richer by those who learn and work together.



## Appendix 3

### Alverno Abilities

These abilities are embedded in the disciplines and developed through them.

#### Communication

Make connections that create meaning between yourself and your audience. Learn to speak, read, write and listen effectively, using graphics, electronic media, computers, and quantified data.

#### Analysis

Think clearly and critically. Fuse experience, reason, and training into considered judgment.

#### Problem Solving

Define problems and their causes, and use a range of abilities and resources to reach decisions, make recommendations, or carry out plans.

#### Valuing

Recognize different value systems while holding strongly to your own ethic. Recognize the moral dimensions of your decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions.

#### Social Interaction

Know how to get things done in committees, task forces, team projects, and other group efforts. Elicit the views of others and help reach conclusions.

#### Developing a Global Perspective

Act with an understanding of and respect for the economic, social, and biological interdependence of global life.

#### Effective Citizenship

Be involved and responsible in the community. Act with an informed awareness of contemporary issues and their historical contexts. Develop leadership abilities.

#### Aesthetic Engagement

Engage with various forms of art and in artistic processes. Take and defend positions regarding the meaning and value of artistic expressions in the contexts from which they emerge.

## Appendix 4

### Where All Belong

Alverno College Alma Mater Song adopted October 8, 2004

From high atop a mountain with hearts and minds ablaze  
To our cherished alma mater we sing our song of praise.  
From high atop a mountain we hear our voices blend  
We know that on our paths in life our learning never ends.

Alverno, Alverno, our beloved school  
We sing with voices strong guided by an inner light to a place where all belong.

We come from many distant shores  
We come to grow and give  
We bring together histories that teach us how to live.

Alverno, Alverno, our beloved school  
We sing with voices strong guided by an inner light to a place where all belong.  
Forever we will honor you in this place where all belong!

The creation of the Alverno Alma Mater Song, *Where All Belong*, was a true labor of love, accomplished through the collaborative work of a small and diversely talented committee.

Musically, we wanted a song that featured popular rhythms and chords, and a memorable tune that would be fun to sing. *Where All Belong* is written in the key of A major, intentionally focusing on A for Alverno. At the end of the refrain, the repetition of the pitch A, while all sing “where all belong” emphasizes this “home” base that is Alverno. The song ends with new music, invoking a hymnic feel, summoning a sense of the sacred.

As to the lyrics, it was crucial that the song be an affirmation of the lives, experiences, histories, and values of the entire Alverno community, reflecting a deep belief in inclusion, diversity, and using education to make the world a better place. It was also important to honor our historical and spiritual roots. St. Francis of Assisi climbed Mt. Alverno, in Italy, and fasted, prayed, and meditated on the meaning of life and the wonders of creation. This led to his famous writings titled “Song of Praise” which have inspired countless others seeking solace and self-discovery.

Our “Mt. Alverno” is thousands of miles from our Italian namesake. We are not high atop a mountain; nevertheless, we come to learn, and we, too, find solace and self-discovery.

Michael Kamenski, Assistant Professor, Music Department  
Jill Moore, Associate Professor, Professional Communication Department