

I'm not robot!

At first glance, Alverno College appears unremarkable. With a campus of tan buildings on the south side of Milwaukee, it has just under 2,000 undergraduate students, all of whom are women, many of whom come to class on a typical day in hooded sweatshirts and ponytails. But appearances can be misleading: Alverno has been internationally recognized for its innovations in education. The reason why is both simple and revolutionary. Its students are actually learning. They aren't cramming for exams or worrying about grades (at Alverno, grades don't exist). What they're doing, says president Sister Joel Read, is "accepting responsibility for their own work." And the methods that Alverno has created to help its students do so have won the school praise from U.S. News & World Report, which consistently rates Alverno among the best liberal-arts colleges in the Midwest, and has resulted in grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "At the core of our philosophy is the idea of the student being conscious of what learning means as she goes through her life," says Sister Austin Doherty, director of the Alverno College Institute, which works with other educators who are interested in replicating Alverno's best practices. "When a student graduates from Alverno, it's not like, 'I got the degree. That's it.' It's more like, 'This was the formal setting where I focused on how to raise questions and make judgments.'" "Or, as someone once told Read in reference to Alverno's curriculum, "You put together book smarts and street smarts."Alverno arrived at its methodology first by looking inward — and then by taking chances. Founded in 1887 to educate the School Sisters of Saint Francis (the order to which both Doherty and Read belong — although today, only about 15% of the current faculty are sisters, and about two-thirds of the students are not Catholic), Alverno was established as a four-year liberal-arts college in 1946. In the late 1960s, when Read was hired as president, she and her colleagues found themselves questioning the most basic ideas about what it meant for a student to earn a baccalaureate degree. Their soul-searching prompted the defining development in the school's history: The administration abolished grades and replaced them with an "ability-based curriculum." That curriculum requires students to demonstrate competence in eight categories, including communication and effective citizenship. "Some people have the idea that because Alverno doesn't have any grades, it's really easy," says senior Rebecca Mecklenburg. "If anything, it's harder. Instead of just getting a blanket A, you have to meet all these different criteria." Not, Mecklenburg is quick to add, that that's a bad thing. Meeting the criteria means taking ownership of material — not memorizing facts, but absorbing information in a lasting, comprehensive way.Of course, without grades, measuring the absorption of such information can be tricky, which is where Alverno's elaborate system of assessment comes in. There's the assessment from professors, which Mecklenburg says is often "whole pages of feedback," along with student-teacher conferences. And then there's the self-assessment that accompanies every test and paper. After students have turned in papers on Taoism in Mecklenburg's class on Chinese culture, for example, the professor handed out a self-assessment form that noted, "Good writers realize that they will actually always do three essays: There is the essay you plan and prepare to write, the essay you write, and the essay you should have written. Tell me about the essay you should have written."Students can also develop a greater awareness of their own work by watching videotapes of their in-class speeches and presentations and by maintaining portfolios — formerly paper, now digital — of their greatest academic hits.Alverno is distinguished not only by its faculty and its student assessments, but also by the presence of outside assessors. Roughly 500 professionals — from a financial planner to a fire captain — visit Alverno a few times a semester. Assessors might watch as students make a group presentation but individually focus on a particular student. The student and the assessor would then meet. "If you teach students differently, you have to assess them differently," says Doherty. "You can't use a pencil-and-paper test to assess whether someone works effectively with other people." The outside assessors also help ground the dialogue in the real and practical. That's a priority for the faculty as well as for the students, many of whom are much older than typical undergrads and balance the demands of families and jobs. (In 1977, the college began offering alternative weekend classes for such students.)People around the world are paying attention to Alverno's new standards for undergraduate education. Each year, the Institute plays host to about 300 visitors who come from as far away as New Zealand on behalf of institutions as varied as medical schools, K – 12 schools, and community colleges. And internally, the Institute leads the way in innovation. After all, those in charge at Alverno don't simply assess the students — they continually assess the school itself. They do it by thinking about the increasingly complex world in which their students live and about the skills that will help the women of Alverno navigate that world. "Education has to be related to life," Read says. "It cannot be an abstraction."Curtis Sittenfeld (csitten@sol.i.nav.net) writes from Iowa City, Iowa. Learn more about Alverno College on the Web (www.alverno.edu).Sister Joel Read, president of Alverno College for 33 years, takes a simple, straightforward approach to life: She lives in a convent with five other sisters, drives a Chevy Cavalier, and answers her own phone. Read's conversational style is similarly no-nonsense — even when it means expressing ideas about higher education that some people would rather not hear. "When I gave talks at other institutions, I'd get the question about how they could do what Alverno does," Read says. "I'd ask them about their sports teams, and they'd tell me about all the people that they involved, the scouts they had all over the country. Then if I asked, 'Why can't you do that for the mind?' — that would stop the talk. "There's a coach for everything, from how you move your leg to how you raise your arm. They videotape the athletes; they spend all week analyzing the last game. But institutions don't do that for their students in general — they just do it for the athletes."At Alverno (where athletic teams, known as the Inferno, are a modest affair), Read has observed academic breakthroughs as exhilarating as any sports victory. "A freshman came up to me at an event," Read recalls. "She told me she had been in chemistry class, and the professor had done a derivation of a formula. The student said, 'I put my hand up, and I said, "I think there's a way that's even more effective." I walked to the front, did the derivation, explained it, and walked back to my seat.'" The student told me, 'A year ago, I would never have done that.'"It was," Read says, "like she'd had a slam dunk."Curtis Sittenfeld (csitten@sol.i.nav.net) writes from Iowa City, Iowa. Learn more about Alverno College on the Web (www.alverno.edu). 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