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Essentials Committee

The “Seven Arts” of Liberal Arts Education Model: Areas of Inquiry

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How many “arts” are there in “liberal arts”? Martianus Capella, a scholar in Late Antiquity, first came up with the idea of the “Seven Arts”: grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. If we look at Eastern traditions, there are the “Six Arts” of Confucius’ time: rites (religious and social rituals), music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics.

As we consider the essentials of an ideal liberal arts education, we are certainly not going to require our students to attain mastery of mathematics or be excellent charioteers. Yet we believe that it is important for us, as teachers, to demand our students to acquire a key set of skills and mental capacities during their college life. They are only going to be in college once in their lives; these precious four years represent a great opportunity for them to learn, to grow, and to be shaped by the most important ideas and intellectual discoveries that are what make human civilizations a miracle in the universe. We shall direct their attention towards the most essential aspects of learning, including things that a liberally educated person should be well versed in, such as practical aspects of political and economics, and principles and practices of moral reasoning.

It is important to note that our model is about areas of inquiry, rather than a “core curriculum.” There is a lot of flexibility in our model; what we wish to give students is not a set of fixed courses they have to take, but areas of inquiry that will lead to the making of habits of the mind.

Decisions on which courses would meet the various requirements below would be made on a course-by-course basis. Instructors would be free to list courses under several categories, but students would be able to use a single course to satisfy only a single Breadth-of-Inquiry requirement.

The model, as it currently stands, includes some requirements which it would be difficult to have 400 students/year fulfill with current course offerings. However, we decided to include these requirements in this initial draft on the theory that our inspiration was the committee’s original discussion of “What should a liberally educated person have studied?”

First: Breadth of Inquiry (one course per area except as noted)

Human Sciences (two courses):

Would include any classes using scientific ideas, theories, and/or methods of inquiry to examine human societies or behavior. More theoretical courses in Econ and Poli Sci would likely fulfill this requirement, as of course would courses in many other disciplines.

Liberal inquiry must include an examination of the behavioral and societal framework in which humans live and work.

Natural Sciences (two courses):

Would include any classes using scientific ideas, theories, and/or methods of inquiry to examine the natural world. This would typically not include mathematics courses.

It is essential that a liberally educated person understand scientific inquiry; this is how we know the world around us.

Human Experiences (two courses):

Would include courses in human history, broadly construed. Certainly includes history courses taught, for example, in the Classics Department, but would also embrace historically-oriented courses from all disciplines.

History is indispensable for perspective on all other areas of inquiry. It deepens understanding and (ideally) helps fight hubris.

Practical Politics, Policy, and Economics:

Would include courses where concrete questions of, well, Politics, Policy, and Economics were discussed. Despite the title, this is not meant to be an “Economics and Political Science” requirement. Courses in Sociology, Women’s and Gender Studies, and many other disciplines deal with questions of public policy.

We hope and trust that all liberally educated people will be engaged citizens. We should give them some experience wrestling with the civic issues of our time.

History/Critical Analysis of Literature:

Would include courses from English, MLL, and Classics (as well as other departments) where close reading of literary texts is emphasized.

For all of the liberal arts’ strengths, literary study has traditionally been its beating heart, and Kenyon’s as well.

History/Critical Analysis of the Fine/Performing Arts:

“Close reading” of the visual arts, or dance, or music, or film, or...

Study of the arts provides a way of considering how humans create and convey meaning in ways that differ from how meaning is created and conveyed through texts.

Artistic Expression:

Exposure to the practice of art-making, broadly construed, including creative writing, art, music, dance, drama, filmmaking, etc.

Seeing art from the “inside” is an entirely different experience from history and criticism.

Moral Reasoning:

Would include courses in which moral judgment and moral reasoning, broadly construed, are a central organizing principle. Certainly courses in ethics and many religious studies courses would count, but so would others from throughout the curriculum.

We touch on these issues in many classes and hope that all of our students will pick up on these issues by “osmosis” but we need to make it more explicit and more intentional.

Abstract Reasoning:

Would include courses about the principles and practices of abstract reasoning. The model we have in mind is courses in logical deduction, usually associated with philosophy and mathematics. Frankly, this may well be difficult to implement with current courses and staffing, but who can argue that learning to argue logically is a bad thing?

Second: Disciplinary Learning

Major in a department (ordinarily capped at 11 courses; includes senior exercise).

We concur with everyone on the committee that depth is also a worthwhile, probably essential, part of a liberal education.

Third: First Year Seminar

First year seminar in any department or program (one course, ideally year-long but probably impractical).

This would be a specially-designed course, not just a disciplinary introductory course with the “Seminar” label thrown on. Certainly there would be some course-specific content, but the emphases would be on writing and on reading, studying, talking, and thinking like a college student (a la “Getting the Work Done”).

This course would not satisfy any of the “Breadth of Inquiry” requirements.

Fourth: Diversity (one course each; these requirements are cross-cutting, i.e. these courses may “double dip” with other requirements)

Cultural Diversity:

The history, principles, or arts of non-Western and/or non-majority traditions.

The Liberal Tradition:

The history, principles, or arts of the Western liberal tradition.

Interdisciplinary Study:

A course which uses ideas, methods, and modes of inquiry from more than one discipline.

300- or 400-level writing intensive course:

Because writing doesn't stop after the first-year seminar.

300- or 400-level course outside of the major:

Because one should have some idea of what depth means outside of one's major.

Fifth: Language (at least 2 courses or exemption by examination)

Because learning another language is a vital entree into learning another way of thinking.

Sixth: Quantitative Literacy (by examination; by the end of sophomore year?)

Because a basic level of comfort with numerical data is essential for civic engagement.

Seventh: ~~Charioteering~~ Physical Activity

Physical activities such as one season of varsity (or club?) athletics, or two PE classes, or two dance classes.

“...in corpore sano.”

	Courses
Breadth of Inquiry	
Human Sciences	2
Natural Sciences	2
Human Experiences	2
Practical Politics, Policy, and Economics	1
History/Critical Analysis of Literature	1
History/Critical Analysis of the Fine/Performing Arts	1
Creative Endeavor	1
Moral Reasoning	1
Abstract Reasoning	1
Major	11
First-Year Seminar	1
Cross-Cutting Requirements	
Cultural Diversity	(1)
The Liberal Tradition	(1)
Interdisciplinary Study	(1)
Advanced Writing-Intensive Course	(1)
Advanced Course Outside Major	(1)
Language	2
Total	26 (+5 cross-cutting)