

Perspectives on Great Questions

Suggestions for General Education

Introduction

Our current diversification structure, which has been in place more or less intact¹ since the 1970s, is based on the notion that a liberal education should provide both a range of intellectual experiences and moderate depth of understanding in several widely separated areas. The model we will describe adheres to a similar set of ideals, while attempting to address some weaknesses of the current system.

We propose to leave the current quantitative reasoning requirement and the language requirement intact. As is currently the practice, the language requirement may be fulfilled by means of a proficiency test, but all courses used to fulfill other GenEd requirements must represent a “college-level experience” and may not be fulfilled with AP or IB credits. First year language acquisition courses may not count toward the fulfillment of any GenEd requirement except the language requirement.

Features and Weaknesses of the Current System: Our current diversification structure requires:

Two courses in each of the four divisions of the college

- *What is this trying to achieve?* Kenyon students will develop a “wide intellectual comfort zone” by engaging a variety of important questions from a multiplicity of perspectives.
- *By what means?* The divisions address different sorts of issues using specialized intellectual approaches that are appropriate for the disciplines within the division. On the other hand, departments in a single division consider similar sorts of questions using similar intellectual approaches. It should thus follow that students who take courses in different divisions grapple with a variety of different important questions and learn to think critically using several different approaches.
- *How well does it accomplish these objectives?* The basic idea is sound and in some ways works reasonably well. It does ensure that Kenyon students have to spread their courses broadly throughout the curriculum. On the other hand, the divisional structure may no longer be the best way to divide up the curriculum for the purposes of general education. For example, it makes sense to provide a place for interdisciplinary approaches (that sometimes cut across divisions) within our GenEd structure.
- *Specific weakness:* Those of us who are steeped in the Liberal Arts have a sense of why a liberal arts education is important. But we are not always good at articulating our understanding to students in a precise way. This is because the usual sound bites and slogans tend to trivialize a subtle and complex interaction of experiences that together do an excellent job of preparing students for the challenges they will face when they leave us. Kenyon graduates who have been out for a decade or more are fairly good at articulating how their Kenyon education has equipped them for professional achievement

¹ The Language and Quantitative requirements were grafted onto the older divisionally-based system about a decade ago.

and has enriched their personal lives. Recent graduates have a lot more trouble seeing how Kenyon has prepared them to deal with life off the hill and students currently enrolled at the college may not fully appreciate what the diversification requirements are intended to accomplish. This means we are missing important educational opportunities.

Our response: We believe that the College's approach to GenEd should deliberately be structured to help students understand what we are trying to do and why. We should be intentional and transparent in showing our students the value of the broad-based liberal education they are receiving and in helping them to articulate the way in which it contributes to their overall education. The current diversification structure is not well-suited to providing this sort of transparency.

Suggested change: Organize the GenEd requirements using clusters of specially chosen courses each addressing an important theme.

The two courses in a given division must be in the same department.

- *What is this trying to achieve?* Coherence; Synthesis; Moderate Depth.
- *By what means?*
 - Two courses in one department should provide *moderate depth* of study in one division that will challenge students to move beyond a superficial experience.
 - Moreover, the assumption is that two courses in a single department will provide a more *coherent view* of the division than two courses in different departments.
 - Finally, the idea is that the two courses will “talk to each other” allowing students to *synthesize information* from them, providing a deeper understanding and a richer intellectual experience.
- *How well does it accomplish these objectives?* This part of the requirement falls far short of accomplishing its goals. Our sense is that the requirement worked much better when virtually all courses at the College were year-long courses. This meant *de facto* that students took a *two semester sequence* of courses that together provided some depth, a coherent approach, and the opportunity to synthesize information. This is no longer the case.

Our response: We believe that the departmental structure no longer provides sufficient guidance for choosing courses that will satisfy our general education goals. Whereas some pairs of courses within a department do an excellent job of providing a coherent look at a subject, moderate depth of study, and an opportunity for synthesis, it is also easy for students to pick two courses in one department that seem to have very little to do with one another. Moreover, two courses in different departments that address similar themes or a pairing of a departmental course with a suitable interdisciplinary course may do a better job of providing the experience we expect for general education.

Suggested change: Students will be asked to choose from specially chosen two or three semester sequences of related courses from each cluster that address a specific theme,

Rationale for “Perspectives on Great Questions”

There are many different ways to engage great questions such as “what does it mean to be human?” “What is justice?” “How does the natural world work?” And “what is our proper role in its stewardship?” “To what extent and in what ways are we responsible for the well-being of others?” No single approach is sufficient for understanding and navigating the complex, multi-faceted world around us. We require our students to take courses that span the curriculum because people with exposure to a variety of different “ways of knowing,” and a guided experience with a few, are more robust thinkers, more versatile problem-solvers, more empathetic towards people different from themselves, and are well positioned to be life-long learners. Our model attempts to highlight the way that taking a variety of courses helps us engage important, timeless questions from different perspectives using a variety of intellectual approaches.

Description of the Model: Below we suggest three big themes along with intellectual approaches to exploring each of them. Our model would require that individual faculty members or groups of faculty propose specific collections of courses that together address the theme from a particular way of knowing in a coherent way. For the sake of brevity we will call one such collection a “pod.”

- Each pod comprises 1.5 units of credit. Each Kenyon student will be required to complete one pod listed under each theme.
- Faculty that propose a pod of courses will accompany such a proposal with a few sentences that appear in the course catalog and detail how the pod coherently addresses the theme, provides some depth of study, and allows students a chance to make connections between courses in the pod. If a specific way of knowing, a “modality,” is stressed, that should be specified, as well.

Theme I: The nature of humanity in the present and through time

Modalities for Addressing the Theme:

Historical approaches

Qualitative approaches to contemporary populations and people

Quantitative approaches to contemporary populations and people

Theme II: The natural world: how it works and how its structures have emerged over time.

Modalities for Addressing the Theme:

Field approaches to understanding the natural world

Lab approaches to understanding the natural world

Quantitative and computational approaches to understanding the natural world

Theme III: Human Expression and Introspection

Modalities for Addressing the Theme:

Decoding meaning through analyses of objects and texts

Finding meaning in religious traditions or through philosophical inquiry

Creating meaning through artistic expression

The Essentials: Our sense is that Kenyon courses and faculty do a good job of emphasizing the “essential abilities,” as discussed in the faculty retreat last summer. By and large, Kenyon students are getting these skills in our courses. So we do not think it is necessary to institute GenEd requirements that explicitly require students to take courses that specifically emphasize, say “visual literacy” or “oral expression.” What we don’t do well, however, is help our students identify these skills as they acquire them. Once again, we think that the curriculum needs to continue to be intentional in teaching these skills and we need to start being more transparent about how and where we emphasize them. Thus we suggest that Kenyon courses that emphasize one of the “essential skills” as a “central organizing principle” should be tagged in the way that QR courses are tagged. This will help students to be intentional about picking courses that will allow them to develop the essential skills and will make them more aware of how and to what extent they are developing those skills. Such tagging will also aid advisers as they consult with students about class selections. And it will help Kenyon students better present themselves for opportunities after Kenyon.

Several additional “building blocks” are compatible with this model:

- First year seminars (possibly as “foundational” courses in some pods),
- online of portfolios,
- experiential learning (such as service learning, internships, off-campus study)

One possible concern is the “stability” and “availability” of certain pods. Under the current system, suppose a student takes course A in the history department and plans to fulfill the diversification requirement with course B. Then the person who teaches course B goes on sabbatical so it isn’t going to be offered, as the student thought it would be. Well, the student just finds another course in History to fulfill the Social Science requirement. Because pods will be designated “units” students won’t have this flexibility. Thus, courses that form part of an approved GenEd pod must be courses that will certainly be offered on a very regular and predictable basis.