

“Reimagining General Education” Report of the Working Group on Curricular Essentials

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Overview: The curriculum is the single most important responsibility of Kenyon’s faculty. It determines not only what we teach our students and the education that they receive, it shapes nearly every aspect of what we as a faculty do at Kenyon: our organization into departments and divisions, our structures of governance, the relations between the academic and other divisions of the college, and finally, the relations between the college and its many different stakeholders – students, parents, alumni, donors, and the broader public. The curricular choices we make about how to develop the intellectual, civic, and moral qualities of our students, in short, define who and what Kenyon is.

Our group has spent the past several months discussing Kenyon’s curriculum thinking about the ideal of a liberal arts education and exploring various ways of delivering that ideal to our students. We have been guided throughout by a vision of how best to develop in our students the essential qualities of mind that mark a liberally educated person:

- the intellectual facility to analyze, interpret, and communicate information and ideas critically;
- a coherent breadth and depth of knowledge across the range of human experience;
- a liberal worldview informed by openness to inquiry and reasoned argument; and
- a sense of moral and civic engagement with the broader community.

We view a faculty-wide discussion about the current curriculum and the degree to which it continues to meet the educational mission of the College as a vital opportunity for critical self-reflection. It will enable us to proactively engage in the broader debates surrounding the liberal arts and, most important, define who we are as an educational institution.

Why Curricular Assessment and Review?

We find that, on the whole, Kenyon educates its students very well. According to the National 2012 Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), our students are highly satisfied with their educational experiences at the College. When the survey asked students whether they would enroll at Kenyon if they could start over again, the mean score on a scale of 1 (definitely no) to 4 (definitely yes) for first year students was 3.68; for seniors it was only slightly lower at 3.44. Likewise, when asked to rate their overall educational experience from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent), the mean score for first years was 3.70; for seniors 3.68. In addition, our students do well in their post-graduate careers and our alumni are loyal to the college.

Moreover, our current curricular structure, especially with regard to distributional and general education requirements, contains a number of significant strengths. It is simple, easy to understand, ensures intellectual breadth, and enables faculty advisers to focus less on how to juggle courses to meet various requirements and more on how the content of courses contributes to the student’s intellectual development. This system of guided choice also provides students with considerable flexibility in the courses they take and provides departments and individual faculty with considerable flexibility in the courses they offer.

What are we responding to?

Even as we do things well, there are good reasons why a critical assessment of our current curriculum is appropriate. Some of these reasons emerge from broader national debates about the value of the value of a liberal education and

especially the degree to which it prepares students for meaningful careers. In the 2012 NSSE, for example, the mean score of first year students when asked whether they acquired job or work-related skills was 2.27 on a 1 to 4 scale, or between “some” (2) and “quite a bit” (3) on the scale; for seniors the mean score was 2.58. But the purpose of liberal arts education is not simply or even mainly about employment. It is intended to help students lead “examined” lives. When the 2012 NSSE asked whether Kenyon helped them develop or clarify a personal code of values or ethics, the mean score for first years on the four point scale was 2.74 (again between “some” and “quite a bit”) and for seniors 2.91. Given that these responses fall toward the middle of the spectrum, there is clearly room for faculty to consider whether the curriculum accomplishes all that we want to do in educating our students.

The most important reason why a critical reassessment of the curriculum is appropriate is that due to changes in our own curriculum over the last 40 years, the current distributional requirements for general education (2 courses in a single department in each of the four divisions of the college) are no longer as effective as they once were in doing what they were meant to do: systematically provide students with intellectual coherence and depth of knowledge within the four divisions. The distributional requirements were originally created in the early 1970s, when departments offered year-long introductory sequences and departmental curricula were often more formally structured than is currently the case. Thus, 2 courses within a single department could reasonably be expected to generate both coherence and depth. Over time, departments have generally developed more flexible curricula, meaning that the 2 course requirement no longer assures either coherence or depth within a discipline, much less the larger academic division of which it is a part. Moreover, the rise of interdisciplinary approaches within the College and in the academy at large, provide general education opportunities that were not available when the current system was put in place.

These issues have emerged from a series of discussions over the past several years, including the College’s self-study and reaccreditation, faculty retreats and discussion of the “essentials”. Our committee was formed as a result of discussions among CPC, CAS, and the Executive Committee about how best to respond.

Guiding Principles

In the course of our committee’s discussions, we found the following principles useful.

- The debate about general education should focus on the qualities of mind that mark a liberally educated person.
- We should conceive of general education as all courses that a student takes outside of their major discipline.
- We as a faculty should be intentional about the choices we make regarding the general education of our students – about what we require, about what we recommend, and what we leave up to student choice.

The role of different curricular models:

- **Three very different approaches to general education.** (*Or four, really, since the status quo will be a part of the discussion.*) Our group discussed different ways of thinking about general education at Kenyon. For the purposes of discussion we have developed three models that emphasize very different things. (These documents can be found at http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Math/schumacher/public_html/Curriculum.htm.)
 - **What these models are for:** We reiterate that these models are not intended as “proto-legislation;” instead they are designed to generate discussion by offering alternate approaches to how one might

structure general education at Kenyon. The idea is to focus on how models reflect different educational priorities and how these priorities may be embedded in the curriculum.

- **Three things to think about:**
 - Each of these models each takes a different approach to general education and so entails different trade-offs between competing values such as student choice and intellectual coherence. By looking at the problem of general education from several different perspectives (including the status quo) we hope to help make the tradeoffs inherent in different curricular structures more apparent.
 - There are many ways to structure a curriculum. We do not believe that these are the only ways in which we might structure the curriculum at Kenyon. Our discussions should therefore be thought of as a process of discovery in which we think about how we want to structure the Kenyon education.
 - Finally, our group discussions revealed that some features of the different models – such as the requirement of a disciplinary minor or interdisciplinary concentration in addition to the major – are intrinsic to particular models. Other features, including freshman seminars, student portfolios, specialized courses such as the QR, writing courses, and so on, can be incorporated into a wide array of different curricular models, including the current curriculum. We call them LEGO BLOCKS because of the way they can be combined in different ways to help us shape our curriculum.

THE BIG GOAL: Though a change in graduation requirements may be the final result of our discussions, it is not the main goal. By thinking deeply and critically about what we do, we hope to be better teachers, better advisors, and we hope that a Kenyon education will be even better than it is now.

NEXT STEPS: The next steps will be to continue the faculty discussion of these issues at a one-day retreat this August. The retreat will enable a deeper and more focused discussion of general education at Kenyon and permit our committee to develop its final recommendations about how best to reimagine general education at the College.