

White Paper on General Education Revision

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with help from many sources

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Some Inspiration from Wise Voices¹:

"We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it." -- John Dewey in *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1934)

"Nothing new, no time-saving devices, -- simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and is to-day laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal, -- not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes." -- W. E. B. Dubois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1903 [1989])

"The real hope for private institutions with endowments of less than gazillions exist in the creativity of the community: increasing revenues and raising quality via new and renewed practices of the best traditions." -- Robert Weisbuch in "How Small Colleges Are Finding Ways to Survive," *Chronicle of the Higher Education Supplement* (March 2015)

Why Curriculum Revision Now?

The next eighteen to twenty-four months (2016-17 and 2017-18) offer a window of opportunity to refresh our curriculum for our 21st century students. Since the last curriculum revision in 2002, much has changed at Augsburg and in the world around us. Many developments compel us to take stock of our current general education program, decide what's working and what's not, and design better curricular pathways and experiences to promote student learning and address the lacunae in our current curriculum:

- New institutional Student Learning Outcomes (iSLOs), approved by faculty in December 2014, which name our highest priorities for student learning
- Demographic change among our students, which presses us to ensure our curriculum and pedagogies are relevant and effective

¹ With thanks to Lars Christiansen for sharing the first two quotes during the "First Word" at the September 2016 faculty meeting.

- The shifting national discussion of higher education (and the liberal arts), which has led to a [decline in belief](#) that college is necessary and/or a good investment
- Challenges emanating from students' secondary preparation, where classes are often "taught to the test" and large disparities exist in high-school rigor, require us to focus hard on creating pathways to student success in the first year and beyond
- The nearly 100 faculty who have joined Augsburg since the 1999-2002 revision process who come with new ideas, energy, and creativity
- A number of initiatives around the College that feed, support, and spur curriculum change:
 - Student Affairs work around leadership development, racial justice, interfaith dialogue, and intercultural competency, which highlights the unsystematic approach we take to these important topics in the core curriculum.
 - Improved assessment processes, which have resulted in better data with which to evaluate the effectiveness of our current curriculum
 - The forthcoming vote to become a university, which offers an unprecedented moment to look forward and be bold in our plans
 - The approaching Sesquicentennial, which offers a moment to look back, to celebrate past success, and refresh time-honored traditions
 - The increasing prominence of our "Centers of Excellence" – i.e. Strommen Center, Sabo Center, Bernhard Christensen Center for Vocation – which provide opportunities for us to more thoroughly integrate their work (around civic engagement, experiential education, vocational discernment, and career planning) across the curriculum.

Setting the Stage: 2015-16 Curriculum Review

Last year a group of faculty and staff (the "General Education Review Team"²) undertook a broad-based review of the core curriculum, gathering a wide variety of data, reading current literature on curricular trends, and engaging the campus in conversations. The process identified both strengths and challenges in [our curriculum](#). We concluded that our current general education program is less a "program" than a series of courses and experiences.³ It offers many positive opportunities for discovery in the liberal arts, skill development, vocational discernment, and experiential education, yet many of these elements appear to be unconnected, stand-alone requirements that embody little transparent logic. In addition, some of the core requirements create obstacles and inequities for students. Others are deterrents for adult or transfer matriculation. Parts of the curriculum are under-optimized and fail to achieve what the AACU has called "[the essential elements of outcomes](#)" of general education.

² Matthew Beckman (Biology), Pavel Bělik (Math), Katie Bishop (Dean's Office), Ben Denkinger (Psychology), Jacqui deVries (Gen Ed / History), Chris Houlberg (Art), Doug Green (English), Elise Marubbio (American Indian Studies), Shannon Smith (Advising), Stu Stoller (Business)

³ For an example of a thoroughly developed core program, see that of [Columbia College](#).

Furthermore, the curriculum does not provide clear roadmaps for students to achieve our new iSLOs or offer logical places at which student learning can be assessed. Please refer to the [core curriculum checklist](#) and the [“Augsburg Arch”](#) as you consider the following list:

Strengths:

- The curriculum foregrounds experiential and community based education that has long been a strength for Augsburg
- **AugSem** is organized around learning communities and connected to courses
- Students are required to complete **their entry-level skills courses and assessments** within the first four semesters (ENL 111, MPG3, etc.)
- The **LAFs** provide an introduction to a broad range of liberal arts disciplines and are relatively easy for students to navigate
- The Search for Meaning sequence (**REL 100** and the second **Search for Meaning**) engage students in conversations about meaning and purpose, develop religious literacy, and include interfaith dialogue and perspectives
- The language requirement provides one entry-point to intercultural perspectives
- **Engaging Minneapolis** and the **Augsburg Experience**, at least theoretically, provide experiential “book-ends” to a student’s four-year experience
- **The Keystone** provides an opportunity for a culminating experience

Weaknesses:

- **AugSem** has become a catch-all for first-year initiatives, many of which faculty are not well-positioned to teach
- Many **AugSem** sections serve as a funnel into majors or professions, rather than as gateways into “big questions” and skill development
- The key elements of the **First-Year Experience** (AugSem, Engaging Minneapolis, and Many Voices) are unconnected and the goals of Engaging Minneapolis are vague
- The **LAFs** are organized around disciplines, rather than perspectives, problems or questions; students often approached them as a “check list”; the courses can appear unconnected and may not seem relevant; after completion, students often cannot explain what the “liberal arts” are and do
- Discussions of **vocational discernment** are embedded primarily in Religion courses, giving the impression that Religion “owns” the vocational conversation
- The **embedded approach** to **skills** (Writing, Speaking, Critical Thinking) has resulted in a diffused (and often invisible) model that can easily lose effectiveness when “institutional drift” happens (e.g. when new adjunct faculty teach these courses without being offered guidance.) Tagging embedded skills might solve this problem.
- The current **QF/QA/QFA** system emphasizes a developmental approach to building quantitative reasoning (which is good) but has been hard to understand and track; as a part of major requirements, it can be a surprise for students majoring in humanities and fine arts.

- Certain crucial skills are not named or emphasized in our current core, including **reading** and **information literacy**
- The **size of the core curriculum** can vary greatly by major, depending on how many skills are embedded, but overall it is bigger than the “recommended” 1/3 (of 128 credits)
- Some students see the **Augsburg Experience** requirement as an obstacle to graduation, especially those for whom it is not embedded in a major; the current structure (with a heavy emphasis on internships and study abroad) also poses barriers to some of our students (50% of Augsburg students are athletes; 50% are commuters; nearly 40% are transfers; and nearly 40% are Pell-eligible)
- The **2-course language requirement** as currently configured also poses barriers to some of our ESL students and can be an admissions deterrent for adult students; at the same, the 2-course requirement does not provide enough time to reach proficiency in a language
- Aside from the exposure gained in the language courses, students are not required to take a course that emphasizes **diverse perspectives** or develops **intercultural competence and/or global learning**
- There is no emphasis on exposing students to the “**unscripted problems**” of the world
- The current design does not represent the core curriculum as an **integrated process** – students don’t necessarily see the “logic” behind it.

Defining a Vision as We Move Forward:

Participants in the redesign process will be challenged to navigate competing interests and to synthesize large quantities of information. At the same time, they will need to stay “above the weeds” and articulate a clear and coherent vision. We would do well to identify some central guiding principles for this process. The following list provides some great places to start:

1. The General Education Review Team began with the following guiding principles.
General Education ...
 - “is more than simply a curriculum; it is possibly the most important manifestation of an institution’s educational mission.”⁴
 - should include a clear programmatic purpose, resonate with the institution’s distinctive mission, and include transparent, powerful goals and outcomes for student learning
 - needs to provide equitable access to excellence for all students⁵
 - should prepare a student for Signature Work⁶

⁴ Andrea Leskes and Ross Miller, *General Education: A Self-Study Guide for Review and Assessment* (AACU, 2005), p.3.

⁵ Paul L. Gaston, *General Education Transformed: How We Can, Why We Must* (AACU 2015)

⁶ Carol Geary Schneider, “The Leap Challenge,” *Liberal Education* (Winter/Spring 2015)

2. In December 2014, the faculty approved [institutional student learning outcomes](#) (iSLOs), which should be at the center of our discussions
3. In her September 2016 Provost's Report, Karen Kaivola put our charge in these terms:

My hope is that whatever the shape of the curriculum we adopt, a new general education program for the 21st century will:

- *deepen historical strengths in experiential learning, global education, civic engagement, and vocational discernment;*
- *offer transitional experiences intentionally designed to prepare students with diverse gifts for academic success and achievement (whether they arrive as first-years or transfers);*
- *develop core skills in reading, writing, critical thinking, oral communication, and quantitative literacy, while taking into account the fact that no single course on any of these skills will suffice—students need repeated opportunities to practice these skills in the context of progressively challenging opportunities and course assignments;*
- *make space for “signature” projects, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and integrative learning;*
- *make visible the “big ideas” and questions that have sustained and informed the disciplines over time—and communicates them in compelling and accessible ways;*
- *intentionally foster and support student learning across all four years;*
- *keep us focused on outcomes that best prepare students for both workforce and world; and*
- *maintain a student-centered perspective in order to minimize the pitfalls associated with efforts to preserve traditional disciplinary turf.*

This is critically important work. It is work that only faculty can do, and it is one of the most powerful contributions faculty can make to ensuring that Augsburg remains an attractive choice for an intentionally diverse mix of undergraduate students.

4. Participants in the first focused conversation in December 2015⁷ articulated the outcomes of General Education in the following ways:
 - Skills for academic success (reading, writing, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, historical perspective)
 - A reflective sensibility
 - Skepticism of reigning assumptions

⁷ For more detailed information on the 2015-16 focused conversations, see the General Education Revision Moodle website.

- Openness to the world
 - A sense of civic agency
 - Intellectual curiosity and desire for lifelong learning
 - Appreciation of the liberal arts
 - Engagement with the College's mission
 - The ability to engage "big questions"
 - The ability to work across difference (class, race, ethnicity, political persuasion, area of interest)
 - The ability to solve unscripted problems effectively and creatively
5. In the cacophony of complaints about the state of higher education, a recent edited collection asked the question "**what matters most?**" [The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most](#) (Jossey-Bass, 2016), and points to: "Real learning, relationships, clear expectations, alignment of resource policies and practices with educational mission and student characteristics, improvement and leadership."
6. As Augsburg's Advancement Office gears up for a \$150 million campaign, they are developing the metaphor of "3-D" education (life, career, community.) Here's what it might look like if we in Academic Affairs embraced those central goals:
- **Building Lives:** see what William Deresiewicz has to say about this in *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite* (2014).
 - **Preparing for Careers:** be intentional about building career and vocational exploration into the curriculum pathways: for example, see this [recent article](#) in *The Huffington Post* (9/8/16)⁸
 - **Engaging Community:** the core curriculum could build in pedagogies borrowed from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (e.g. Public Achievement, Public Narrative, Power Mapping)

Acknowledging the Parameters:

- **Retention / Student Success:** Augsburg's recent retention numbers have not been optimal for a number of reasons, one of which may be poor curriculum design. Katie Bishop, Director of the Office of Student Success, is leading a team to identify structural issues that negatively impact student success. A curriculum redesign team will need to

⁸ *A Crucible Moment*, a [2011 report](#) by the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, rejected the false choice between job preparation and liberal education: "The call for educational reform cast only as a matter of work-force preparation mistakenly adopts a 19th-century industrial model for complex 21st-century needs. Reframing the public purpose of higher education in such instrumental ways will have grave consequences for America's intellectual, social, and economic capital."

engage her group. As an introduction, see David L. Kirp, [“What Can Stop Kids from Dropping Out,”](#) *New York Times*, April 30, 2016.

- **Transfers:** Nearly 40% of our students transfer from community and other 4-year colleges. This will continue to be an important enrollment stream for Augsburg, so any curriculum redesign must strive to be “transfer friendly” by providing relatively seamless transfer agreements while also ensuring transfer students have opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities named in our iSLOs. Here are the baseline requirements:
 - The first two years of the core curriculum should roughly correspond to the [Minnesota Transfer Curriculum \(MNTC\)](#), so that students can transfer to Augsburg with as few lost credits as possible. Students who complete this (in conjunction with an AA degree) gain credit for all of their LAFs and Effective Writing.
 - The number of additional courses required for transfers with an AA degree should be minimized and/or carefully explained. After transferring to Augsburg, students still need to take REL 100, two semesters of a language, two wellness courses, an Augsburg Experience, and a Keystone. In addition (a pain point for transfer students), if a student fulfills the MNTC math requirement with anything other than College Algebra (e.g., Logic or Statistics), they are still required to reach MPG 3, either through the placement test or MAT 105.⁹
 - While entering first-year students form learning communities in AugSem (a “high-impact” practice), there is no parallel for transfer students. A curriculum redesign might consider the creation of a learning community for students entering as sophomores or juniors.
 - The Admissions and Advising staff will be invited to weigh in on all curricular proposals to ensure they do not create disincentives for recruiting transfers.
- **Adult Students:** One big question we face is whether **adult students** should be required to fulfill the same core requirements as our traditional-age undergraduates. Some schools (like Bethel) adopt different requirements for degree programs. We also need to consider expanding the options for Assessment of Prior Knowledge. As we move toward a university structure, our adult programs might be housed in a “School of Continuing Education,” which would allow curriculum flexibility. According to HLC standards, the curriculum for all students must advance the iSLOs, but students can achieve the iSLOS through different pathways.

⁹ Numerous students have expressed dismay in their initial intake meeting -- “But I did the math requirement of the MNTC!” “I know, but Augsburg doesn't accept that -- we have a separate math requirement that all students reach College Algebra.”

- **Pedagogy:** Effective and engaged pedagogies and course design must be a part of any new curriculum. Augsburg has long been a national leader in experiential education. Here's an opportunity to foreground that even more than we currently do.
- **Assessment:** Curriculum revision should lead to greater clarity about the key points of assessment of iSLOs across a student's four (or three or two) years at Augsburg.
- **FTE Considerations:** If new requirements are added, others will need to be removed. We need to make any revision work within the current budget. In the 2016-17 year, Interim Dean Keith Gilsdorf is leading a project called "Curricular Parameters" that will help shed light on the budgetary implications of gen ed reform.
- **Impact on departments:** If we narrow the potential courses in the core curriculum, we need to carefully examine the potential impact on departments.
- **Regulatory bodies:** A new curriculum will need to pass muster with the [Higher Learning Commission](#), as well as the [Minnesota Department of Higher Education](#).
- **Distinctiveness:** We should strive to design a program that reflects our mission, culture, history, and values. Augsburg has always addressed the tensions in society, we've been a pioneer of engaged and experiential pedagogy, and we have a reputation for being radically student-centered.

Recommendations for Action This Year (while we design a new core):

1. **Change the grading system from numbers to letters** (an AAC recommendation) – this would put Augsburg in line with most other institutions and provide for more nuanced grading – a plus for both students and faculty
2. **Sponsor a "Big Questions" Challenge:** In a campus-wide effort, the design team would ask the entire community to name the "big ideas" and "big questions" with which they are wrestling in their scholarship, communities, and the wider world. Student input would be actively sought, so that the list is relevant and compelling. Faculty would then be invited to imagine courses that address those issues. (The University of Minnesota's [undergraduate curriculum challenge](#) provides an example.)
3. Continue to work on clarifying the pathways to high levels of achievement in **Quantitative Reasoning** (a proposal is currently circulating)

4. **Signature Assignments:** continue to work toward implementation of high-impact assignments as a culmination to every major (a proposal is currently circulating)
5. Design and pilot some **“Problem-Based” AugSem courses or course clusters** in Fall 2017. Planning for these would need to be complete by the end of the Fall 2016 semester.

What Alternatives Do We Have for Organizing the Core Curriculum?

General Education can be foundational, integrative, and/or summative. There are two common ways in which schools set up General Education requirements: the **distribution** model, in which students sample from designated liberal arts courses that often serve as introductions to a major; or the **perspectives** model, in which students are introduced to various critical issues and “ways of knowing.” Some schools take **an integrated approach** (e.g. a distribution model that embeds certain perspectives). Almost all schools require at least a few courses to develop **skills** like writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning. Many schools also require mission-driven **“signature courses,”** and more and more schools appear to be adopting a **“guided pathways”** model, in which students take specially designed, integrative courses at critical moments (first year, second year, final year) that result in **signature work**. Some elite schools eschew a set core curriculum, but put incentives in place for students to complete it anyway – for example, students interested in graduating with honors must fulfill a set of distribution requirements. Any curriculum revision must begin with the definition of strong institutional student learning outcomes. Those were approved by faculty in December 2014 and now provide a guiding framework for our work. Curriculum revision should follow the same principles of “backward design” that many of us have found useful in our classrooms: Begin with the end in mind.¹⁰

What Resources Are Available?

There are many organizations that provide research and support for colleges and universities undergoing curriculum revision. The General Education Revision Moodle site contains documents and reports from the following organizations devoted to strengthening higher education:

- [American Association of Colleges and Universities](#) (AACU) – browse resource hub
- [The Wabash Study](#) (2008-2012)

¹⁰ A distribution model often prioritizes the classic liberal arts, while the perspectives model offers more points of entry for interdisciplinary and professional studies. The structure we choose for our general education program will also have implications for the “university question,” as we decide whether there will be a single gen ed program for a College of Liberal Arts, School of Professional Studies, College of Continuing Education (adults), or multiple gen ed tracks.

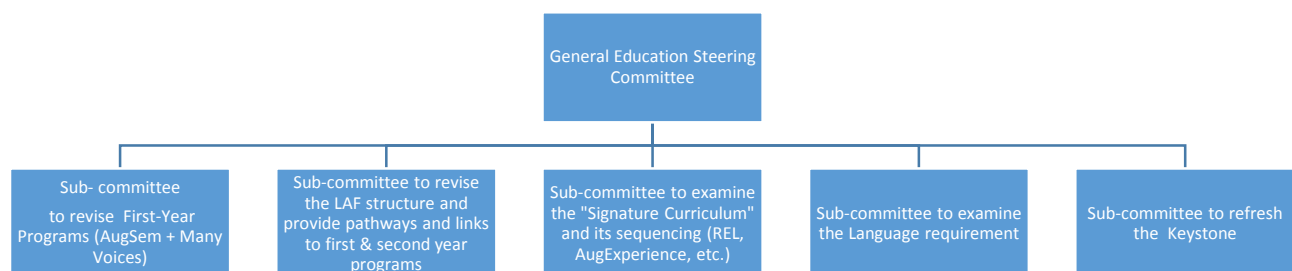
- The Lumina Foundation [Degree Qualifications Profile](#), sets out the skills and knowledge that students should achieve during their pursuit of different degrees, and [Tuning](#), seeks to determine the core material and skills for particular disciplines. About 600 colleges nationally have adopted these two efforts, and faculty members have been at their core, defining and assessing what matters in student learning.

Choosing a Process for Revision

There are several ways we might proceed. Last year, for the first time since 2008, a General Education Team was assembled to lead the review process. Several of the committee members are willing to continue, but the group is not currently well-poised to be the sole design team (the members are highly committed to other leadership positions). So, here are some possible paths forward:

Option #1: The General Education Review Team might be reassembled with additional members to serve as the centralized Design Team. They would be charged to develop 2 or 3 possible models, to bring to open forums for review in March 2017; the top 2 models could then be brought to the full faculty for further discussion in April 2017. We would aim for a vote in October or November 2017. The advantage of this approach would be a team that understands the full range of issues; the disadvantage is that there would be fewer individuals involved, at least at the preliminary design stages. The team would include 6-7 members.

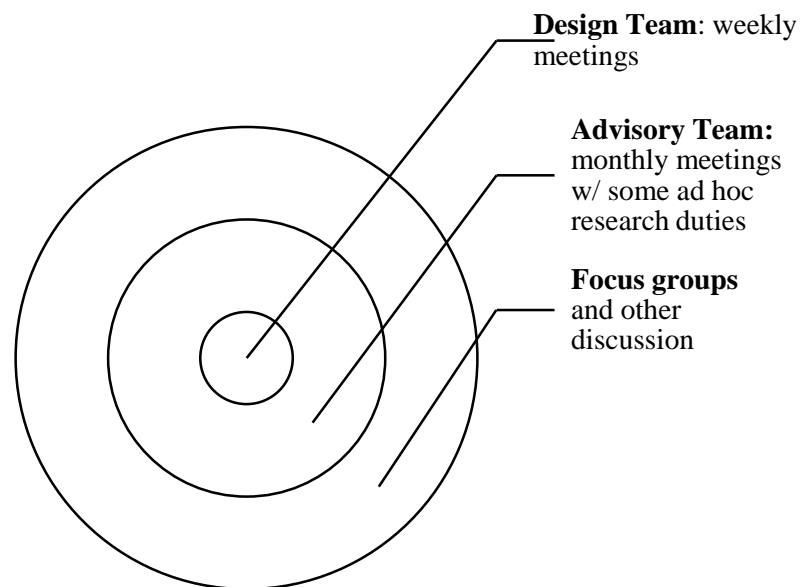
Option #2: The General Education Team might serve as a “general contractor” and appoint sub-committees to work on various aspects of the curriculum, providing parameters and guidelines. The Team would coordinate conversations among the sub-groups throughout the year. The advantage of this process would be broad participation. The potential drawback would be siloed thinking, lack of coordination, and challenges with recruiting enough participants. The proposed timeline would be roughly the same as in Option #1. (Note: We could also have some combination of #1 and #2, with one team, but various sub-committees.)



Option #3: The General Education Team (or Dean or Provost) would appoint two or three competing design teams, offering them parameters and guidelines, and commission them to each make a comprehensive proposal on a timeline similar to Option #1. The competing proposals would then be weighed in open forums and voted on by faculty. The potential advantage: a variety of perspectives. The disadvantage: challenges with recruiting enough faculty (6 per team?) who could work intensively during the year and meet the deadlines.

In each scenario, the target goal is to have proposals on the table by March 2017, so that the entire faculty can review and make comments, leading up to a vote in October or November 2017.

Note: At their meeting on October 5, Faculty Senate expressed preference for Option #1 – a Design Team that would meet weekly throughout the year -- combined with an Advisory Team that would meet with the Design Team on a monthly basis. Both groups would actively engage the campus community through open forums, retreats, and visits to department meetings. See visual below:



Transparency, Consultation, and Rigorous Debate

Finally, we acknowledge that any curriculum revision will be contentious. A process such as this always raises questions about turf and reveals fissures in our beliefs about what a core curriculum should be and do. We hope to address such concerns by creating a transparent system built on wide consultation. We also hope to set up a dynamic where the discussion is focused less on “what my department gets from this” and more on “what my department can contribute to the common vision.” Debate will be most welcome, for it can help us to articulate our rationales, expose us to alternative perspectives, and help us to forge that common vision. In the process, let’s strive to be as articulate and reflective as the social critic Neil Postman was

when considering the radically different intellectual diagnoses posited by *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*:

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egotism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny ‘failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions.’ In *1984*, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that our desire will ruin us.” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death* [1985], preface)

Opportunities to Engage in the Process:

October 5 – Faculty Senate

October 14 – Board of Regents / Academic Affairs Sub-Committee

October 19 – Student Senate (6:15 pm)

October 26 – Campus-Wide Focused Conversation (3:30-4:30 pm)

November 10 – Faculty Meeting (3:40-5:10 pm)