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Duke undergraduate curricular reform vote tabled indefinitely after years of work

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Duke University was trying to do something different with a proposed new undergraduate curriculum ^[1], emphasizing less what students should study than how. But the plan was perhaps a little too different, and it's been tabled until the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences faculty can reach a greater degree of consensus.

In many ways, said Suzanne Shanahan, an associate professor of philosophy, co-director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke and chair of its curriculum review committee, "the nature of opposition was largely as expected. But it also makes clear it is not in fact the right time for Duke to launch a new curriculum. A curriculum without strong consensus makes no sense."

Shanahan said her committee began work some five years ago on the new curriculum with a basic question: Is it time? Because Duke's current curriculum serves students well, it's something the committee came back to again and again, she added. Would something "aspirational" that might better leverage Duke's current strengths make more sense?

The university's formal charge ^[2] to Shanahan's committee in 2014 was to clarify and simplify the logic of the curriculum, create more opportunities for exploration and creativity, and "rethink our vision for disciplinary as embodied by the curriculum."

Duke's current curriculum, Curriculum 2000 ^[3], has been in place for nearly two decades, and while there's little antipathy for it, there's also little enthusiasm, as many of the faculty members who helped create it have since left. Others have criticized it as thorough but essentially a series of boxes to be checked. Students must successfully complete two courses in each of five areas of knowledge: arts, literatures and performance; civilizations; natural sciences; quantitative studies (including one course in math, statistics or computer science); and the social sciences. They must also take two courses in each of six modes of inquiry: cross-cultural; ethical; science, technology and society; foreign language; writing; and research. Additional requirements included two small-group learning experiences after their first year, such as independent studies, and a first-year writing course (Writing 101).

The proposed curriculum, called Blue Print, also emphasized areas of knowledge, methods of

learning and classroom innovation but sought to streamline requirements, promote student decision making and create something distinctively Duke. It decreased the graduation requirement to 32 courses from the current average of 35 to discourage precollege credits, such as from Advance Placement courses, but otherwise put students in the driver's seat. A credit/no-credit option -- similar to a pass/fail, to be decided up to 96 hours after a grade is posted -- for up to one course per semester, up to four courses, was introduced to encourage intellectual risk taking, for example.

A first-year "Frameworks" requirement involved a taking a group of thematically linked courses in the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences that would promote shared learning experiences (including common course materials and activities) and intellectual inquiry. These clusters also would involve coordination with residential life, capstone projects for an end-of-year showcase, and explicit opportunities for students to reflect on their intellectual lives and goals. Students would have the option of participating in Duke's existing Focus seminar program instead, but the idea under Blue Print was that both freshman programs would have evolved together over time. Sophomores would have to complete a "Foundation" sequence of one course corresponding to Writing 101, one course in a second language and one course in quantitative inquiry (computer science, math or statistics) prior to declaring a major.

Blue Print also would require a secondary field of study. More than 80 percent of Duke's undergraduates already pursue a secondary specialty, but the "Focused Inquiries" requirement would have pushed that figure to 100 percent. Pathways to such study include six courses designed around a theme, or a summer or semester-long program and three additional courses on campus. Existing majors, minors and certificates were also an option.

Last, and key to making Blue Print something unique to Duke, students would be required to have a mentored scholarly experience, such as an independent study, work in a lab, co-authored publication or performance. "A central objective of Blue Print is for students to experience the wonders of, and actively participate in, the creation of scholarship all over campus," the plan says. Shanahan has taken undergraduates to Jordan to interview Syrian and Iraqi refugees as part of the university's existing Duke Immerse program, for example, and imagined that as one kind of mentored experience.

"Twenty-first century global socio-economic, technological and environmental changes are prompting a fundamental paradigm shift in higher education," reads the final Blue Print plan. "How knowledge is constituted, created and shared is rapidly evolving, because the demands of work and citizenship are changing. The diverse, global knowledge economy into which our students will graduate will demand unprecedented flexibility, creativity, collaboration and empathy. Duke students are no longer just preparing for jobs, they are inventing new ones."

With information on "anything and everything available as never before," it continues, "the ability to evaluate, assess, contextualize, understand and communicate plural perspectives will be more important than ever. Duke's international reputation and proud tradition of pedagogical innovation has uniquely positioned the University to lead in this evolving environment. Indeed, the challenge of this moment represents an extraordinary opportunity for Duke to reimagine what the liberal arts and sciences will become, both locally and nationally, and to use this moment it rethink its own curriculum."

Over the course of this academic year, though, faculty members have voiced concerns about elements of Blue Print. Some foreign language professors opposed Blue Print's single-course requirement. Currently, students must take one advanced course, or up to three if they have no existing proficiency.

"To require one semester of foreign language instruction is ludicrous," Beth Holmgren, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures, said at a meeting last month. "They need more encouragement. Language instruction is important, particularly now. We need to go against the mainstream in America, which apparently is to make it all English, all the time."

Indeed, while U.S. higher education has moved away from foreign language requirements in recent decades, some more selective institutions are now increasing their requirements [4].

Other faculty critics of Blue Print said it was at times difficult to understand, or worried that students involved in a separate first-year seminar program might miss out on some of the breadth requirements. Some said students could use their newfound freedom to build a preprofessional course of study that ignored the liberal arts, or that it paid insufficient attention to building writing skills.

"From the beginning I have supported this proposal because I believe that at Duke the curriculum should be the most important magnet in attracting students," Alex Rosenberg, a professor of philosophy, said at the March meeting. "The current curriculum doesn't. However, my faculty has asked me to vote no, and I believe it's because they don't understand it."

A vote on Blue Print was planned for this month's meeting of the Trinity faculty. But Valerie Ashby, dean of the college, said prior to the planned vote that a meeting with deans revealed lingering differences over whether the curriculum needed to be tweaked or overhauled, and that conversations among faculty members had grown argumentative -- to the point that committee members endured "verbal attacks," according to information from Duke [5].

"We need to take a moment to regroup more productively, more collegially," Ashby said.

Sherryl Broverman, associate professor of the practice in biology and global health and interim chair of the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences Council, said there's no fixed timeline for curricular review but that "We need to pause this process for a while to bring us toward a stronger consensus."

Shanahan said the committee hopes Duke will pursue elements of Blue Print going forward, namely a curriculum "that creates opportunities for all students to develop vibrant scholarly community in their first year -- to be introduced to the wonders of what Duke has to offer straight away."

Student autonomy or "self-authorship" is also key, she said. "Ideally, students charting their intellectual path by combining curricular and co-curricular experiences would become a signature of their academic experience." Mentored research, broadly defined, also should be a feature of every student's experience, she said.

One additional foundation of Blue Print worth preserving? What some have called inclusive

excellence. “The structure was meant to give all students, irrespective of background, interests or goals, a shared experience, common footing and equal chance of success as they define it,” Shanahan said, noting Duke is ever more diverse.

Teaching and Learning [6]

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Links:

- [1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/10/undergraduate-curricular-reform-efforts-harvard-and-duke-suggest-theres-no-one-way>
- [2] <https://admin.trinity.duke.edu/arts-sciences-council/imagining-duke-curriculum>
- [3] <http://admin.trinity.duke.edu/curriculum/trinity-curriculum>
- [4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/11/02/princeton-proposal-would-require-all-students-even-those-already-proficient-study>
- [5] <https://today.duke.edu/2017/04/overhaul-undergraduate-curriculum-put-hold>
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning>

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