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General Education in the City

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The story might seem familiar: A core curriculum had been in place, but, over time, its core became hard to find. Many of the classes counting toward distribution requirements also served as portals into majors (introduction to psychology, say), the “undertow” increasingly pulling core course content into disciplinary folds. “That was the way things were, I guess you could say, entropy-ing over a period of time,” explains Terry Halbert, Temple University’s director of general education and a professor of legal studies in the Fox School of Business.

That entropy-ing has ended, with a new general education curriculum in place at Temple this fall. The general education program, which comprises about a third of the undergraduate experience, requires students to take 11 courses in nine areas, including a four-course foundation in reading, writing, humanities and math. The curriculum is characterized in part by a focus on interdisciplinary study and a thematic approach that Halbert hopes will keep the curriculum fresh and full of what she calls “the gen ed spirit” -- even as time goes by.

The curriculum includes four themes: Community Based Learning, Globalization, Sustainability, and, most notably, the “Philadelphia Experience.” The final theme was developed organically: About half of the original 101 new general education courses designed and proposed by faculty included taking students into Temple’s urban locale. “So we started to tout it as a theme,” Halbert says. “It’s actually the strongest one at this point.”

Just over 10 years ago, in 1997, one in five students said they were coming to Temple “in spite of” its Philadelphia location, according to Halbert. In 2007, that statistic was down to 1 in 20, and 60 percent called the surrounding city a very important positive factor in their decision to attend the university.

“They’re consciously interested in our city. They come here because of it,” says Halbert. Of the “Philadelphia Experience” theme, she says, “From an educational point of view, from a purely gen ed perspective, I like it because I know that the students already find this place interesting. So it’s the hook that we can use to make it more likely that they care about what they’re doing.”

Halbert stresses a more explicit focus on teaching in the new curriculum. “Before it was all about the content, what should the content be. And now it’s at least as much about how we teach,” she

says.

New courses with Philadelphia-rooted components include one on “Sacred Space,” where students will visit the Japanese House and Garden ^[1] in Fairmount Park and the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul ^[2], and “Criminal Behavior,” where they’ll assess potential high-crime spots. There’s a “Religion in Philadelphia” course, and William W. Cutler’s class on higher education in American society ^[3] includes fieldwork assignments at Temple and other close-by college campuses.

“It gets them on their feet and out into the world. Freshmen, for the most part, they’re looking for a college experience that’s not just intellectual but fun,” says Cutler, a professor of history and also of educational leadership and policy studies.

“They’re pretty green,” he says of first-semester freshmen. “They don’t understand how higher education works. They don’t understand how it reflects larger themes and larger cultures. There are so many ways you can use the city and the environs to underscore the themes I’m going to teach.”

Speaking more broadly of the new general education curriculum, Cutler contrasts Temple's approach with standard distribution requirements, in which students are required to take a certain number of courses in a variety of disciplines or divisions. “It's not distribution, a little bit of this and a little bit of that, that's being sought after, but rather an attempt to take those pieces and make something larger out of them,” he says.

Nevertheless, the move into a more interdisciplinary realm has raised some questions. “I think there are still some faculty who are concerned about pedagogy versus content,” says Karen M. Turner, the director of Temple's broadcast journalism sequence and the Faculty Senate president. Turner recently completed a three-year term on the university's general education committee.

“The intent of the executive committee that I sat on so many years was to ensure there was that proper balance. It’s great to have wonderful pedagogy but you also have to have wonderful content, and to have that marriage,” says Turner.

“Because I sat on the committee, I saw the hard work that we all did in trying to really take something that was hard to wrap your arms around and really develop it into something concrete. It was almost like birthing. I think that it turned out fine, but as with anything there’s always tweaking that needs to be done.”

To fulfill the general education curriculum ^[4], Temple students will take three courses in common: a required four-credit reading and writing course, and a two-course sequence in the humanities. With nearly \$5.5 million in new support from centralized university funds, sections of the writing course will be capped at 20 students, and the humanities courses at 25, Halbert says. Students also select one of six quantitative literacy courses, the fourth and final component of what’s considered to be the curriculum’s foundation.

Beyond that, students take seven general education courses for “breadth.” Students select two courses from the science and technology category, and one each in arts, human behavior, race

and diversity, U.S. society, and world society.

Teaching and Learning ^[5]

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[1] <http://www.shofuso.com/>

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[4] <http://www.temple.edu/provost/gened/requirements.html>

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