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Reforming the Requirement-Free Curriculum

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Some prominent institutions, such as Columbia University or the University of Chicago, are famous for what they require of all undergraduates. Brown University has for the last 40 years been much loved in some circles, and disdained in others, for what it doesn't require.

Brown's "[new curriculum](#)" ^[1] -- adopted in 1969 at the height of '60s-era reforms of higher education -- requires very little. Students must demonstrate writing competence, finish a major, complete four years' worth of courses, and pay their bills. While the university has always encouraged students to consider the values of general education or science or languages or any number of other educational priorities, students have had the freedom largely to create their own curriculum.

With the new curriculum approaching middle age, Brown is the midst of what many view as a significant overhaul. The university isn't abandoning the basic concept of student choice -- and the requirements for students won't look much different. But Brown is taking a series of steps to encourage more coherence in the experience of students and in the offerings of each department. It is also trying to provoke explicit discussions and planning among students and faculty members to craft educational agendas and to evaluate whether they have succeeded.

Under [a final plan](#) ^[2] released last week, the university will:

- Aim to produce and regularly distribute to students a statement about the values of liberal education and what they mean for Brown and its students.
- Review every major, and ask every department offering majors to rethink introductory courses, add "capstone" experiences for seniors, and produce in writing a rationale for its program and major requirements as well as explanations of how its courses promote general education values and not just the requirements of majors.
- Introduce the use of e-portfolios to document both individual student progress toward meeting educational goals, and to allow for more detailed analysis of what Brown students do over the course of their time there.
- Create several new forums for academic advising, to encourage students to interact more with faculty in plotting out their programs.
- Use the above changes and others to be able to demonstrate the value of a Brown

education.

Because Brown isn't challenging the basic "no requirements" model, it doesn't have the options available to other colleges and universities of reconfiguring a list of general education courses or altering the distribution requirement list. And perhaps as a result, the changes appear to have strong support -- students have even publicly been demanding more guidance from their professors. And because parts of the plan were released for comment earlier, the final version isn't now being debated per se, but is already moving to execution, with specific dates offered for various objectives.

In fact, some experts on the curriculum say that Brown's recent history with giving students freedom is simply a more explicit version of what plenty of colleges do -- but has forced the university to be more thoughtful about how to encourage the most educationally sound choices by students.

"The fact of the matter is that even at institutions that require students to complete general education, almost every college and university offers enormous freedom and very few have required sequences," said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. "The curriculum really means a menu and the operative principle is a maximum degree of choice for students."

In this sense, Brown is more open about embracing student choice than are most colleges, but not as unusual as commonly believed in the extent of freedom given to students. Where Schneider said Brown is "providing exciting leadership," and going beyond many colleges that have many more apparent requirements on their books, is in "moving to provide an explicit statement and in plain English of what liberal education can be for their students."

When she meets with academic leaders considering their colleges' curricular plans, Schneider said, she frequently asks if they have ever written them down in a way that could be communicated to students -- and is stunned by how rarely this happens. While not all students will pay attention, colleges can't expect students to embrace a curricular vision that has never been articulated.

Schneider also said Brown was potentially playing a key role in the way it is calling on every department to consider its general education role and not just its role in training majors. There has been a false dichotomy in too many discussions of curricular reform, Schneider said, between changes in major requirements and changes in general education requirements. Even at institutions with more requirements than Brown has, she said, the major needs to be considered as part of the general education goals, not separate from it.

Katherine Bergeron, dean of the college and professor of music at Brown, led the faculty and student committee that developed the plan. She said Brown was also challenging another false dichotomy -- the alleged split between giving students freedom and articulating an educational vision.

The final plan for the curriculum doesn't just call for a statement on liberal education at Brown, but produces the first such statement -- two and a half pages and addressed to students, urging them to do specific things that the curriculum doesn't force on them (The statement, already sent

to new students, is at the end of the plan [2]).

For each suggestion, a succinct rationale is also provided. Some of the suggestions won't surprise conservative critics who love to bash Brown -- students are encouraged, for example, to study such topics as race, gender, ethnicity and religion. But students are also urged to engage in "close reading," to focus on the history of people and institutions, and to "experience scientific inquiry." And when the statement to students encourages them to "embrace diversity," it says this is about both people and "a range of intellectual perspectives," and encourages students to seek out perspectives that "will challenge your assumptions."

That suggestion echoes one made by Ruth Simmons, the president of Brown, who in a 2005 speech [3] urged students to take more courses from professors with whom they are likely to disagree. "Familiar and appetizing offerings can certainly be a pleasing dimension of learning, but too much repetition of what we desire to hear can become intellectually debilitating," she said.

Bergeron said that reforming advising also requires a statement of values from the university, so that students have a framework for making academic choices. While "no requirements are being imposed," she said, there are still goals in the range of offerings the university provides. "We need to state more clearly our goals," she said. "We're viewing this as an opportunity for communicating with students differently."

"There are intellectual capacities everyone should try to develop," Bergeron said. And without specifying individual courses or even disciplines, Brown wants to be explicit about that, she said.

The new plan for undergraduate education also talks explicitly about assessment. The plan notes that Brown has already used a series of "indirect ways to measure student success," among them student surveys, alumni surveys, data on admission rates to graduate programs, and so forth. While embracing the idea behind assessment, and calling for more assessment, the plan takes care to promote individualized approaches. For example, the report calls on each academic department to develop a formal assessment system in order to have some way to judge its success. While it's fine if different departments take different approaches, the plan says, they must be "designed to be repeatable on a regular cycle" so progress can be tracked.

Continuing the individualized approach, the plan calls for all course syllabi to state learning goals and objectives, and to -- where possible -- detail goals and objectives for specific course requirements. "When individual instructors and departments are explicit about their learning goals, their standards of achievement, and their methods for assessing student learning, students are in a much better position to engage in meaningful reflection about their own learning," the plan says.

To encourage such reflection and to improve advising, the plan calls for the creation of e-portfolios that would include in one place a much more complete portrayal of students' Brown experience than can be found on a transcript, or that any one faculty adviser might remember. The e-portfolio would include such documents as student papers, declaration of major forms, creative works, capstone project proposals and whatever else would be relevant. Students would be encouraged to think more about their education as a whole, while advisers would have a better sense of their students' progress. Seniors would also be encouraged to produce a

"concluding statement" summing up their educational experiences.

Departments would then be asked to share sample e-portfolios for use in university-wide efforts to measure the impact of the Brown education on students, to identify patterns that encouraged more or less learning, and so forth. The target date for starting the e-portfolios is next year.

In endorsing the e-portfolio idea, the Brown plan explicitly considers and rejects the alternative way to judge progress of undergraduates -- the use of standardized tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment that have been endorsed as a key part of assessment by the Spellings Commission and others. "Such tests not only run counter to Brown's educational philosophy, they also fail to capture the full range of our students' educational experiences," the report says.

Brown's revisions come at a time when others have also been starting to explore how colleges can encourage certain behaviors, even in the absence of requirements. A recent report financed by the Teagle Foundation, [4] for example, looked at Brown and a handful of other colleges with minimal requirements -- and while generally praising the quality of education being offered, stressed the importance of advising in making these programs work.

Evidence suggests that Brown students -- while still proud not to have much in the way of requirements -- are not offended by the idea that their professors want to promote a more coherent approach to course selection, and the progression through four years of college.

A recent editorial in *The Brown Daily Herald*, endorsing the idea that students need to be forced to talk to their advisers and encouraged to listen to them, put it this way: "[I]t's easy to say Brown is meant for people who are thirsty for an education and leave it at that. But many of us, thirsty as we may be, are busy and let that which is not required slip by. In those cases, it's the university's duty as our educator to step in and force a little help on us before we proceed with the time-honored tradition of choosing our own path."

Teaching and Learning [5]

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Links:

- [1] http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/curriculum/
- [2] http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/tue/downloads/
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/03/28/simmons>
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