NYU's Morse Academic Plan:
A Case Study in Creating a Core Curriculum

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In the fall of 1995, New York University's College of Arts and Science replaced its distributional requirement with a new general education curriculum, the Morse Academic Plan (MAP).[2] After eight years, an internal academic review, and an external evaluation, we are confident that the MAP has improved the quality, rigor, and coherence of general education in the college. Implementation of the MAP has also provided an instructive perspective on the complex interplay of graduate and undergraduate education and on the relationship between the school-based mission of general education and the goals of individual departments.

History of the Reform

The MAP was conceived as a core curriculum, not in the sense of a particular canon of knowledge but rather as a core educational experience for undergraduates in their first two years. Prior to the MAP, general education took the form of a distribution requirement; students selected courses from a list of approved departmental offerings in each of ten areas. This system had several failings. First, while the quality of teaching in individual classes was sometimes high, departments frequently staffed their general education courses with adjunct faculty or graduate student instructors. Undergraduates were thus denied the opportunity to study with regular faculty in a large portion of their course work. Second, there was little agreement about the type, rigor, or volume of work—especially writing—that such courses should include. Third, the classes regularly lacked associated recitation or laboratory sections. Finally, the courses had no connection to one another, and there were no firm expectations about when students would complete them. Because they mixed students at different moments in their undergraduate careers, they were often frustrating for faculty and students alike.

Reform efforts began with a faculty task force in 1988-89. Over the next several years, ad hoc faculty committees proposed a comprehensive structure for general education. Two skill-based components of the old system (expository writing and the foreign language requirement) were retained; and two new course sequences were developed and piloted: "Foundations of Scientific Inquiry" (FSI), a three-course sequence in mathematics and science, and "Foundations of Contemporary Culture" (FCC), a four-course sequence in the humanities and social sciences. This overall program of general education was named after Samuel F. B. Morse, an early member of the college faculty. Best known as the inventor of the electric telegraph, Morse was also an eminent painter who taught fine arts at NYU. In his high achievement as both an artist and scientist, he symbolizes the range of skills and interests the MAP was designed to foster.

1. Vincent Renzi and Trace Jordan are, respectively, the assistant directors of the Morse Academic Plan for the Foundations of Contemporary Culture and the Foundations of Scientific Inquiry. This article expands on a presentation made at AAC&U's Network for Academic Renewal meeting on general education, Philadelphia, PA, February 28, 2003. Correspondence to: 100 Washington Square East #903, New York, NY 10003. For additional information on the MAP, see www.nyu.edu/cas/map.

2. The MAP has subsequently been adopted, in whole or in part, by many of the other undergraduate schools at NYU, providing a common platform for general education for the majority of undergraduates in the university.

Implementing the MAP

Whereas the distributional scheme was defined by a diversity of content, the MAP seeks instead to build students' skills and to introduce them to the modes and methods of humanistic and scientific inquiry. To assure the quality and coherence of the curriculum, each of the two new course sequences is administered by a faculty steering committee. In both sequences, only regular members of the faculty may be recruited to teach the lectures, and every class includes small recitation, workshop, or laboratory sections led by graduate student preceptors, in order to assure close attention to students' work and personal concern for their development. Because the program is aimed at students in their first two years, faculty can now direct general education courses to the needs of students early in their undergraduate careers. Likewise, they can expect students in subsequent departmental courses to bring with them a common set of general skills and academic experiences upon which to draw when undertaking more specialized work.

Some Lessons Learned

The MAP was not intended to be a static, fixed curriculum; and the faculty steering committees were charged from the outset with continuing oversight and development of the program. As a result of ongoing consideration of both intellectual issues and logistical matters, the MAP evolved considerably over its first eight years. While some of the challenges we encountered are particular to research universities, much of our experience is generalizable to the implementation of reforms in other institutional contexts as well.

Revision of the Science Curriculum. Initially, FSI was a vertically integrated sequence designed to provide a substantial experience in mathematics and science for non-science majors. The first course, "Quantitative Reasoning," sought to provide students with the mathematics needed for the subsequent courses, "Natural Science I," a course in the physical sciences, and "Natural Science II," a course in the life sciences. Each of the two science courses included a laboratory component—an important change from the science courses that had fulfilled the old distributional requirement, and one that the faculty felt was essential to achieving genuine scientific literacy. Both courses were also designed to introduce students to the increasingly interdisciplinary character of scientific inquiry. This was to be achieved by arranging each course into a series of four-week modules taught by faculty from different departments.

The curriculum was designed with the best intellectual intentions and developed with support from the National Science Foundation, but it was not a success with students or faculty. Students resented the uniform nature of the science sequence, which stood in stark contrast to FCC, where students can choose among topically distinct course sections. Faculty were frustrated by the impossibility of doing justice to their scientific disciplines in a four-week course module. And the sought-after integration of disciplinary perspectives proved elusive, resulting in a semester-long succession of fragmented and intellectually incoherent modules.

Through intensive efforts during the first year of the MAP, the science curriculum was entirely remade. Rather than attempt a broad yet shallow multidisciplinary perspective, each "Natural Science" course now explores methods of scientific inquiry by focusing on a particular topic and thus allows faculty to align their courses with their own research interests. While this reform has greatly improved students' experiences in the curriculum, it also has required substantial investment in laboratory staff and equipment, since relevant lab projects needed to be developed for each of the new topically distinct courses.

Governance and Relations with Departments. All members of the planning committees and of the FCC and FSI steering committees were faculty selected because of their interest in general education reform. In addition, the MAP proposal was discussed at open "town hall" meetings and considered by two standing committees of the faculty, each of which sought to assess the impact of the planned reforms before they were presented for approval by vote of the faculty as a whole. Though all of those involved were also, of course, affiliated with an academic department, and many had served as deans or department chairs, nevertheless, there was no formal mechanism for representing the interests of the departments. As a result, the impact of the new curriculum was assessed only in the aggregate. Since the circumstances of individual departments vary considerably, and since the MAP relies on the departments to supply the faculty and graduate students who staff its courses, it quickly became apparent

that the actual impact of the curriculum had been severely underestimated.

Several steps were taken to assure better representation of departmental interests and recognition of differing departmental resources. The FCC and FSI steering committees were re-constituted to include department chairs, a separate steering committee was created for "Quantitative Reasoning," and the college and divisional deans took a more active role in the committees' deliberations. Even as these changes have helped us to address logistical concerns, new efforts have been necessary to ensure that intellectual issues on the committees' agendas receive focused consideration. The steering committees have thus begun to form ad hoc subcommittees to address such questions.

College-Graduate School Coordination. The MAP provides more opportunities for graduate students to teach than any other program on campus. The size and shape of the curriculum, therefore, has a profound effect on the graduate school and its students. Since implementation, we have recognized that the MAP provides a unique opportunity for the professional development of graduate students as teachers-in-training; and this remains an area of flourishing collaboration.

As the college was reforming undergraduate general education, the graduate school was also undertaking initiatives to strengthen its programs. Chief among these was "Financial Aid Reform," which assures all doctoral students five years of fellowship support. Previously, the MAP had had its own budget for graduate student preceptors and recruited candidates in a process separate from the departments' review and placement of their students. While this meant that the MAP could provide support for graduate students apart from what departments could manage from their own financial aid resources, it also meant that the MAP's and departments' priorities were sometimes at odds. Moreover, staffing was made difficult by the absence of firm expectations about the number of graduate students available to the MAP each year.

Collaboration between the graduate school and the college on Financial Aid Reform provided a means for closer coordination between the MAP and the departments. In return for new financial aid resources (funded by redistribution of the MAP budget), departments committed to providing a specific number of graduate students to serve as MAP preceptors each year, together with a firm expectation about how many faculty they would release to the MAP. While some variation is irreducible (because of faculty leaves, fluctuations in the graduate student population, and volatility in undergraduate admissions), this new working relationship has made planning simpler for both the college and the departments. It has also fostered a growing sense of collaboration on the value of general education teaching to graduate students' intellectual development.[3]

Conclusion

The Morse Academic Plan has increased the involvement of regular faculty in undergraduate general education. It has concentrated general education course work early in students' careers, set common academic expectations across the general education offering, and established mechanisms for ongoing curricular development. Not only have we made improvements to the curriculum but, as an institution, we are creating opportunities to affect positive changes well beyond undergraduate general education, through new collaboration among the college, the graduate school, and the academic departments. ■

Representative Program for First-Year Students and Sophomores

First-Year Fall	First-Year Spring
• "Writing the Essay" or "Quantitative Reasoning" • "Conversations of the West" or "World Cultures" • Foreign language II • Elective/major	• "Writing the Essay" or "Quantitative Reasoning" • "Conversations of the West" or "World Cultures" • Foreign language I • Elective/major
Second-Year Fall	**Second-Year Spring**
• "Societies and the Social Sciences" or "Expressive Culture" • Natural Science I • Foreign language III • Elective/major	• "Societies and the Social Sciences" or "Expressive Culture" • Natural Science II • Foreign language IV • Elective/major

3. See, for example, an address by Catharine Stimpson, dean of NYU's Graduate School of Arts & Science, published as "General Education for Graduate Students," Chronicle of Higher Education *(November 1, 2002): B7-B10.*