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The Journal of General Education, Volume 55, Numbers 3&4, 2006, pp. 161-185  
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jge.2007.0006>



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## CURRICULAR WARS

**Susan Steele**

When most faculty members think about curriculum, they think about course content. They think about defining the body of knowledge their students should command if they are to be counted as reasonably educated members of their society. Should they be able to identify Herodotus and Pericles or Sequoia and Chief Joseph? Are the Federalist Papers a cornerstone of American democracy? Or is the model of American democracy found in the structure of the Iroquoian Federation? Although Alan Bloom would have been, and Lynne Cheney still would be, loath to acknowledge it, this absorption with curricular content is a bond they share with faculty members. It is the source of the arguments about the literary canon: Are some literary works essential to the educational process, and others, peripheral? It is at the core of disagreements about courses in Western civilization: Are they absolutely fundamental to the undergraduate curriculum or an anachronism? It permeates debates about the construction of general education: What bodies of knowledge must be part of a student's intellectual experience?

Although I have to admit to considerable skepticism, I acknowledge that there may be a perfect curriculum, a perfect distillation of essential knowledge. However, we will not be entering the debate over its character, not because I am skeptical about its existence but because I want to focus rather on the administrative aspect of the debate—the politics and process of curricular change, regardless of its content. The administrative reality is simple: If curricular change is to be effective for the students who take the courses, the faculty members who develop and offer them, and the institution that is committed to both, content is a very small part of the equation.

This position is to be clearly distinguished from that taken by those who would argue that the curriculum could be content free, that

the only critical things to teach are how to work in teams, how to use technology, and how to find information. In the absence of something to work on, to use technology for, and to find information about, these are empty tasks, not worthy of precious educational time. The fundamental administrative point, thus, is not to remove content from the curriculum but, rather, to ensure that whatever the content, it can be successfully delivered and received.

A disclaimer might be in order. My discipline, linguistics, is an unarguably minority discipline—a fact that linguists decry but do not deny. The ignorance expressed about language in general and linguistics in particular by even the most intelligent and highly educated of our colleagues is immense, a reality that has likely made me a little cynical about debates over the content of the curriculum. From the perspective of disciplines outside what is generally taken to be the mainstream, a disproportionate amount of energy is devoted to debate over a relatively small portion of what could be under discussion. I mention my disciplinary background and its probable impact on my views simply in the spirit of full disclosure.

Let us begin with a case study. In the mid-1980s, the dean of Arts and Sciences at a large public research university established a committee of faculty members to rethink the general education curriculum. The college's general education program had been in place for 10 years, during which time the institution had grown and changed tremendously. The committee, which was broadly representative of the college, was charged to think big. Although it was a point of contention afterward, many faculty members involved at this stage believe that they were explicitly instructed not to worry about the implementation of the curriculum, because that task would fall to the administration.

After 18 months of heavy debate, a proposal emerged. In some respects, it was very traditional: it included a three-course sequence in Western civilization and requirements in literature, the arts, the sciences, and the social sciences. In other respects, the proposal reflected changes then in the air. The requirements in literature, arts, sciences, and social sciences were not simple distribution requirements, where any course in the designated disciplinary areas could be selected by a student. Courses were to be constructed according to a set of guidelines and submitted to a faculty body for review as

to whether they met these guidelines. If not, they would not be approved as satisfying a general education requirement. Further, by requiring two composition courses, second-year proficiency in a second language, and a mandate for all undergraduates in the college to take a mathematics course at or above the level of college algebra, the proposal demonstrated a recommitment to ensuring the basic preparation of the student body.

In still other respects, the proposal was ahead of its time. It encouraged the development of interdisciplinary courses in all areas of the general education curriculum—remember this was the mid-1980s and this is a large research institution. And it included a requirement that all students in the College of Arts and Sciences take both a course in non-Western civilization and a course focusing on gender, race, class, or ethnicity. Such requirements have since become commonplace, but at the time of this debate, this aspect of the proposal was so controversial that the committee member who championed it was summoned by the dean and told that she personally had just ensured that the proposed curriculum would be voted down by the faculty of the college.

The proposal was narrowly passed by the Arts and Sciences faculty in a college-wide referendum. The university provost and the dean assumed that the other colleges (professional colleges like architecture, business, and engineering, as well as agriculture, because this is a land-grant institution) could be persuaded to similarly adjust the requirements for their students, once the Arts and Sciences faculty had voted affirmatively. Given the relative size of the college and the fact that it would likely provide the bulk of any general education curriculum, this was not an unreasonable assumption. The College of Arts and Sciences included 50% of the total number of undergraduates and almost the same proportion of the faculty. But the provost and the dean were wrong. In contrast to the situation of the Arts and Sciences staff, faculty members in these other colleges were, by and large, not involved in the deliberations about the character of general education, for few of them taught courses aimed at anyone other than their majors. Hence, negotiations were carried out at the decanal level. The deans of some of the colleges simply refused, arguing that their accreditation requirements did not leave room in the curriculum for this array of course work. The deans

of other colleges were superficially more compliant. Their colleges adopted parts of the general education structure—seldom the gender, race, class, or ethnicity requirement and even less often the language requirement. But they regularly interpreted the other requirements through their own prism. For example, one of the colleges adopted all the curricular categories identified in the Arts and Sciences proposal, with the exceptions noted, but constructed the program so that all but three courses within this structure would be met by requirements in the major.

The general education proposal included a mechanism to establish an oversight committee, composed of faculty members and students drawn from Arts and Sciences, reasonably enough considering the proposal had been voted on only by the faculty members in this college and the expectation was that the Arts and Sciences faculty would provide the courses. This committee was charged with the implementation of the proposal and, once the general education curriculum had been established, with its maintenance. No corresponding bodies were established in the other colleges, nor were the other colleges represented on this body. Consistent with the view that faculty members were to come up with the ideas and administrators, with the money, this faculty committee was provided no resources.

So, in 1986, two years after the initiative began, the largest college in the university had a new general education structure—as yet unpopulated by courses. And most of the other colleges had reconfigured their general education structure, insofar as their deans and faculty believed that general education had any relevance to their students, to offer a rough approximation of the Arts and Sciences' structure. The program was scheduled for implementation in 1987.

In 1993 a new provost assumed leadership of this university. The challenges facing him were far from small, but his first priority quickly became a massive overhaul of general education. The decision was not initially a popular one among faculty members, so the impetus was not to build a base of faculty support. Nor was the provost driven by the ambition of making a name for himself in the national arena, for he had declared upon ascendancy to provost that he loved the university's locale so much that he intended to die there.

And he certainly was not drawing on previous experience, because in his prior roles as a faculty member and department head in a college of medicine and as a vice president for research at another institution, he had almost no involvement in undergraduate education. Rather, the provost was guided by a simple conviction that something was dreadfully, terribly wrong and that intervention at his level was the only remedy.

The evidence argues that he was right:

- The College of Arts and Sciences graduated 4,000 students a year. And, every year, over 500 student petitions were received in this college regarding general education course work. Other colleges did not keep records of general education petitions, so we can only surmise that the situation in Arts and Sciences was not peculiar. An administrative structure here and in other colleges was constructed specifically to handle such petitions.
- An analysis of student transcripts carried out in 1991 and 1992 reveals that virtually no student graduated without at least one adjustment in his or her program, and most graduated with many more. Any requirement might be met by a substitution: a student who was supposed to take History 103, for example, might, in fact, take History 454 or English 375. Less commonly, but not unheard of, requirements were simply waived. All such adjustments had to be entered in the student's file, and a cottage industry developed around recording and monitoring the adjustments. Thus, at a public institution graduating 7,000 undergraduates a year, virtually every student was receiving a personalized program. The cost associated with making these adjustments, the cost in faculty time and the necessity of professional adviser positions, was never calculated, but it could not have been insubstantial.
- Faculty members teaching advanced undergraduate courses reported high levels of frustration with the pedagogical situation they faced. If they were lucky, their classes included students at roughly the same point in their academic careers. More likely, classes included students with a broad range of

backgrounds, from students who had previously taken courses in the discipline and were well prepared to engage the material to students who not only had no background in the discipline but resented being there in the first place. One anecdote will suffice to illustrate the problem. A very good science major registered during the first semester of her junior year for a geography course to meet the general education social science requirement. Although her only prior collegiate experience with social science was a first-year course in economics, she discovered that the geography course that she was taking for general education was also a capstone course for geography majors. The instructor, though generally satisfied with her work, kept encouraging her to investigate more deeply. Frustrated, the student finally pointed out, "This is as deep as my geography background allows me to go."

- The conflict between professional staff whose responsibility it was to provide student support and the faculty was highly charged. The professional staff, in general, did not feel that faculty members were sensitive to the needs of the student body. They saw faculty members as focused on weeding out the poorly prepared and the ill suited, even while they were offering little intellectual and emotional sustenance to the better students. The faculty believed that the professional staff was undermining their attempts to uphold standards. How could they possibly hold the hands and take the side of students who shouldn't be at the university?
- Students reported considerable difficulty in meeting their requirements because the courses they needed were full or were not offered in a sequence that met their needs. A fall 1992 survey of undergraduates reveals that in some curricular areas, 80% of the students reported difficulty finding space in the courses that met the requirement.

What could have gone so wrong in the scant six years between the implementation date for general education and the new provost's arrival?

One answer might immediately spring to mind, nurtured by works like Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990) or Smith's *Killing the*

*Spirit* (1990). The faculty had failed in its obligation to the education of undergraduates: too much attention by faculty members to research, at the expense of undergraduate teaching; too few faculty members and too many teaching assistants in the undergraduate classroom; too many faculty members who did not know how to teach and who did not care to learn; a curriculum developed to meet the intellectual interests of faculty members rather than the basic educational needs of students. If we were to accept this line of argumentation, we would quickly conclude that the problem with general education at this university—in fact, the problem with undergraduate education more broadly—is that the faculty members were not doing their job, and we need look no further.

Like the national critics, many individuals closely connected to the situation, both inside this institution and out, were convinced of this conclusion. A budget officer was frequently heard, sometimes at public meetings, wondering why the instructional budget was not sufficient to the institutional needs and speculating that the only reason could be that faculty members were not working very hard. The external governing board spent considerable time investigating options to tenure, not because board members were opposed to academic freedom but because in their heart and in their gut they did not believe that faculty members were earning their keep. And the legislature—this institution is state supported—continued to consider legislation governing teaching loads, specifically, the number of hours a faculty member might be required to spend per week in the classroom, that is, on the stage, but not in any of many other teaching roles, like advising, providing individual instruction, or working with small groups of students in research environments. Their deliberations were set against declining state allocations to the university.

I do not need to review here the indictment against faculty members. Enough has been written on this score—overblown and hyperbolic, in my view, but not entirely baseless. Faculty members, especially those at research universities, do need a stronger connection to their institution and to their local responsibilities. But the case can also be made that the failure is much broader and that faculty members are the fall guys for a more complex problem with a far less facile solution—in fact, an administrative problem.



At this large public research university, the provost initially tried to focus the faculty's attention on general education by appointing a study committee composed of curriculum committee members from the various constituent colleges. This committee concluded that the situation needed fine-tuning only and echoed a regular faculty complaint: If "the administration" would actually fund the curriculum, then all the problems would be solved. The university was indeed suffering financial reverses; the budget was insufficient to the cost of running the place, but the members of the legislature simply could not be convinced that this was the case. Although the general education curriculum was implemented at a financially unpropitious time, the fact remains that if a student is admitted to an institution, it is reasonable for the student to conclude that she or he will be able to construct a course schedule—regardless of the curricular structure informing her or his choices.

In frustration, the provost convened a group of administrators and faculty members with the explicit charge of developing a new general education structure. Guiding the discussion were three implicit principles: The new structure should be simple, universally applicable to all students regardless of their major or college, and not parasitic on any other part of the curriculum. The first two principles are self-explanatory. The last spoke to the need to make this aspect of the curriculum as coherent as other requirements. Rather than allowing programmatic and major course requirements to simultaneously satisfy general education requirements, the goal was a curriculum that recognizes the distinct pedagogical and intellectual needs of these various parts of the curriculum.

Three years after this group developed a proposal, the Faculty Senate approved a new general education curriculum sharing its essential properties. Four years after this proposal was floated to the faculty, the incoming crop of new freshmen was presented with a new general education curriculum and a fully functional set of courses by which they could satisfy its requirements. The problems that had dogged the old general education curriculum were, by and large, resolved. The colleges shared a single general education curriculum; the number of student complaints and petitions was substantially reduced; and the professional advising staff was able to advise rather than mediate between students and faculty members.

The content of this curriculum will not concern us in any substantive fashion. This is not to say that the content of the old general education curriculum did not differ from that of the new. It did. The new curriculum eliminated the Western civilization component in favor of a focus on civilization and culture more generally—to the distress of many faculty members in the sciences. It included more science, with a concomitant reduction primarily in the humanities—to the discomfiture of the humanities faculty. And it required either arts or literature but not both—raising an outcry among faculty in the fine arts. But the curricular difference is not what determined the environmental difference. Rather, the difference was fundamentally administrative. I move now from the specific to the general, because the structures developed and the principles that guided their development have application far beyond the locale of this saga.

There are two parts to this discussion—what we might call administrative strategy and administrative wonk. Nothing good happens in the curricular wars unless the battle ceases. So, one issue is how to get to the treaty, and here I will suggest that one administrative component of curricular change is strategic skill. But, although reaching agreement is no small achievement, this is only half of the administrative necessity surrounding the curriculum. The case study underlines one basic and fundamental fact: No curriculum, no matter how well constructed, runs itself. Because the need to include policy wonks in curricular change is so often neglected, I will begin here and work backward. For the moment, assume a healthy university-wide curricular agreement, one that has reasonable buy in from all campus constituencies, and consider what is required, administratively, to keep it working for the students, the faculty, and the institution.

Most departments spend a great deal of time considering, reconsidering, and adjusting their courses and the structure of their curriculum. A curriculum that draws from across departments similarly requires attention, and—because its character is determined outside the department—this attention must be extradepartmental. That is, an institution-wide curriculum, for example, requires a structure to maintain attention at the institutional level. Given this simple fact, there is nothing magical about the essential administrative

components. Assuming that the institution is not fundamentally underfunded, they are ongoing oversight, staff to support the oversight responsibility, and course management at the locus of responsibility.

### **Ongoing Oversight**

The initial general education structure in the case study included within it the establishment of a faculty oversight committee, whose single responsibility was the care and feeding of general education. This was an important development. Where this responsibility is added to those of an existing university curriculum committee, the usual result is overload; unless adjustments are made elsewhere in the system, the committee simply cannot handle the additional duties. This oversight committee did not suffer from this defect, but it still was not successful in keeping the curriculum on track. The issue, then, is what counts as oversight.

Although few faculty members are enthusiastic about others vetting their course proposals, most will admit, if grudgingly, that some gate is necessary. Within the department, it is the departmental curriculum committee, for example. But oversight is far more than review when a course is proposed for entry into a cross-departmental, cross-college curriculum. The content of a course taught by the same faculty member or group of faculty members will change over time; the content of a course that is passed from one faculty member to another can only change more rapidly. So, some method must be developed to keep courses consistent with the principles under which they were approved. Periodic review is one possibility, but this is reactive. Much better, because it is proactive, is a practice of engaging the faculty members involved in general education courses in an intellectual community. This maintains an awareness of and interest in the original curricular intent. The initial oversight committee in the case study did not recognize this necessity, and, after four years of attending only to entry review, the die was cast. Not only had courses approved early in the process moved far from their original intent, the faculty members who taught them were totally unprepared for and utterly resistant to any external review. In sum,

ongoing oversight requires an administrative commitment to support the faculty review process and to ensure that it is proactive in maintaining curricular integrity.

### **Staff Support**

Institutional committees, even standing committees, seldom have an administrative staff—to keep the records, track the changes, and handle correspondence and all the other details of program management. The responsibilities of a general education oversight committee mandate that at least one staff member be dedicated to its support. The level of record keeping and the need for communication across campus simply cannot be handled through volunteer labor. Funding staff support is also an administrative commitment.

### **Responsibility**

The responsibility for the management of a curriculum must reside where the curriculum is determined. For a departmentally determined curriculum, like the program for a departmental major, the department is the responsible party; for an institution-based curriculum, like a general education structure that is not simply based on distribution, the institution is the responsible party. This responsibility extends beyond curricular content to include the size and number of courses, the type of instructor, the time of day, and the teaching assistant assignments. In the absence of central responsibility for what is often ceded to departments, the institution has no way of ensuring that the curriculum will be delivered.

The details as to the administrative structures necessary to keep a curriculum healthy may appeal only to the collegiate equivalent of policy wonks. But without the policy wonks and their continued attention, the curricular wars are fought for no purpose. They will appear to have been concluded only to break out again.

We move, now, to the part of the discussion that will appeal to strategists—the administrative components of successful curricular change. There are five:

1. the open and enthusiastic backing of the chief academic officer
2. the involvement of a critical mass of faculty members
3. the demonstration of feasibility
4. skill in negotiation and bartering
5. a little razzle-dazzle

The first provides the initial impetus or keeps the project on track, depending on when it comes into play. The combination of the second and the third creates a commitment to the new curriculum among at least a segment of the faculty, necessarily a large enough segment to quell the concern that the administration might be driving the curriculum. The fourth cements this commitment. The fifth thwarts the attempts to stop the momentum that the other four have created.

*Principle 1: Backing the Chief Academic Officer*

In the case study, the provost initiated the curricular exploration. He did something else. When the group that he formed reached a preliminary proposal about the shape of a new general education curriculum, he announced it at a general meeting of the faculty and indicated his support for it. His action caused a stir. The provost's group met over the summer, and the announcement came at the very beginning of the academic year, leading to accusations that the faculty had been purposefully excluded. (Almost everyone in the room was a faculty member, although many were also deans and department heads. But the chair of the Faculty Senate did not make his participation in the summer workgroup widely known, especially after the uproar began.) On top of this, the proposal was a significant departure from the status quo, including the possibility that all students might take the same set of courses, a relatively radical idea at a large research institution. And, finally, it is one thing for a provost to indicate his support for curricular change; it is entirely another for him to lead it and to back a particular proposal. Although the reverberations of this beginning echoed through the debate that followed, the provost's actions made it clear to all that this was not something to be ignored and that some kind of curricular change was inevitable—and, at least for some, potentially desirable.

Success does not turn on the kind of curricular activism displayed by this provost. But in the curricular wars the slightest hint of anything less than full commitment by the senior academic officer gives shelter to those who are opposed or wavering. Institutional curricular change is very difficult. It can, and usually does, modify the relationship of departmental curricula to institutional objectives. Some courses might disappear, and others might come into existence; some departments might gain, and others lose, enrollments. In the face of such imponderables, it is much easier to keep teaching the same curriculum and expend energies elsewhere.

*Principle 2: The Involvement of the Faculty Rank and File*

The curricular proposal cannot be hammered out by the faculty at large or on the floor of the institution's legislative body—the negotiations (see principle 4) are simply too complex. But the involvement of rank-and-file faculty members in the debate is essential. Minimally, it allows the community to begin to understand what is under consideration, to build faculty support and buy in, and to assess the validity and force of possible objections. More generally, university politics might require that the members of the faculty leadership present themselves as facing down the administration, a situation that can create gridlock on curriculum and many other fronts. In instituting curricular change, then, it is critical that connections with the teaching faculty be created and nurtured and that faculty members be drawn into the discussion in reasonable numbers.

In the case study, a faculty revolt was likely in the absence of the involvement of the rank and file. In fact, the general education curriculum that was developed was only an idea. It included a structure (Figure 1) and the four principles listed below, in descending order of importance:

- General education courses will be developed specifically for general education.
- All students, regardless of intended major, will have the same general education requirements.
- The two courses in each of the Year 1 areas will be identical for all students.

- Students will complete general education by the end of their second college year.

As a package, these principles were intended to support the creation of a common educational experience for students that faculty members could depend on in succeeding course work. But the first two spoke most fundamentally to the perceived needs of students. If students shared a set of general education requirements, their movement from one major or college to another would be less problematic. Most fundamentally, if courses were developed for general education, the general education needs of the student would not take a backseat to the needs of the major.

Year	Individuals and Societies	Natural Sciences	Traditions and Cultures
Year 1	2 courses (6 units)	2 courses (6 units)	2 courses (6 units)
Year 2	1 course (3 units)	1 course (3 units)	1 course (3 units)

**Figure 1.** Proposed General Education Curriculum Structure

Much remained to be defined. Broad acceptance of the principles was far from a foregone conclusion. The criteria for each of the curricular areas were as yet unspecified, except insofar as their labels were evocative, for they were carried over from the old general education curriculum. And no attention had been paid to the incorporation of composition, mathematics, and a second language, competency in all of which was highly valued within this faculty. In short, there was a tremendous need for faculty deliberation, focusing on very real and important considerations.

There were public debates on the problems and promise of the curricular proposal, most of which concerned themselves with its guiding principles. But the fundamental administrative strategy was to move beyond such debates, because they kept the focus on whether change was necessary. Rather, with the implicit assumption that change was not only necessary but inevitable, the focus was shifted to various parts of the proposal.

One was content. All faculty members were invited to participate in the development of the criteria for the curricular areas.

Roughly 60 faculty members volunteered to spend a portion of their summer participating in this exercise; each was paid a stipend for his or her efforts. Simultaneously, the faculty groups most deeply involved in the delivery of the various competencies were asked to consider how effectively this portion of the curriculum was currently working and whether any changes were possible or necessary. In each case proposals were forthcoming, sometimes not the radical departure that some desired but in all cases a significant movement away from the status quo.

The discussions of the criteria for the three content areas proceeded along a path familiar to anyone who has been involved in debates about curricular content—lots of wrangling over what seem to outsiders to be small points but to insiders are points of major significance; many false starts and wrong turns; and, slowly and finally, a growing, if still unspoken, agreement. The faculty members who participated in this exercise were self-selected volunteers. As such, they were, at the outset, more receptive to considerations of new possibilities. The open invitation was designed to appeal to just this segment of the faculty.

Other discussion points involved the competencies and the overall size of the general education curriculum. One of the complaints of the faculty members in the professional colleges about the proposed curriculum was that it put an impossible burden on their students. The requirement of nine courses—27 units out of a minimum of 120 required for graduation—devoted exclusively to general education ate unconscionably into their programmatic and major requirements. If students in the professional colleges could not use general education courses to simultaneously satisfy other requirements, the argument went, they would not be able to complete their required course work in a timely fashion. The trade-off that emerged was to accelerate a developing trend to allow students to demonstrate the requisite competency in mathematics, composition, or second language at entrance, rather than requiring them to take a university course, that is, to make them competencies in more than name. The mathematics and language faculties were committed to the idea that students who could demonstrate the appropriate competency did not have to take a course at the university. The faculty members and staff running the composition program believed—and could not be dissuaded—that all



students, regardless of their demonstrated writing ability at entry, require at least one composition course. The depth of their feeling and their absolute intransigence put the central administration on notice about the need for compromise more generally, unless they were willing to risk a bloodbath. (See principle 4.)

The reaction of the mathematics department and the language departments to ideas about how competency might be achieved immediately tested this heightened awareness. Consistent with the principle that a single curriculum would work for all undergraduates, there had been some discussion of the possibility that both mathematics and second-language skills might be integrated into the content areas. Neither the mathematics department nor the language departments greeted this idea with any enthusiasm; in principle, neither was opposed, but they were extremely skeptical that practice would match the idea. Their skepticism carried the day. The language departments recommended fourth-semester proficiency in a language other than the student's native language. The mathematics department developed three entry-level competency paths for students—calculus, finite mathematics, and mathematics for life.

Because the requisite competency varied with the major, the mathematics proposal defied the principle that all students would share a general education curriculum. The response to fourth-semester proficiency from many campus quarters—particularly the sciences and engineering—resembled the concern about the number of overall general education units: Major and programmatic requirements precluded its accommodation out of hand. Subsequent negotiations led to a further compromise on the principles. Students in B.A. programs would be required to demonstrate fourth-semester proficiency; students in B.S. programs would be required to demonstrate second-semester proficiency. This compromise satisfied the concerns of faculty members, but, as with the criteria for mathematical competency, it defied the principle that all students would share a general education curriculum.

The points of debate in this case study are neither surprising nor unexpected. Nor are the resolutions particularly innovative or exemplary. At any large research university, one can expect tension between the demands of the professional curriculum and the desires of liberal education, as well as debate over the level of skills and

competencies that can be expected of the students. In fact, no institution of higher education is immune to like tensions, although they might appear in a different guise. The strategic point is simply that faculty members must get involved in the debate and, thus, come to have a stake in its outcome. Even if one were to start, more traditionally than in this case study, with a curricular task force developing a proposal, it is essential to build in broader debate and discussion along the way. For example, if a curricular task force were to develop the initial proposal, this proposal should not immediately go to a vote of the faculty. Rather, it requires ripening and seasoning in various faculty-driven forums.

*Principle 3: The Demonstration of Feasibility*

Few faculty members will leap to spend the time and effort it takes to create a new course, especially if they are doubtful as to whether an audience exists. Few undergraduates take courses that do not satisfy one requirement or another, a behavior that is, in part, a consequence of the number of requirements that students must satisfy and, in part, a consequence of their fundamentally conservative streak in regard to curricular choices. Skepticism and inertia can kill the best-laid curricular plans. Critical, therefore, to successful curricular change is a demonstration that the curriculum under consideration can attract both faculty and students. Can and will faculty members introduce courses that are consistent with the criteria? Will students find these courses appealing? Can these courses be sustained?

In the case study, the demonstration of feasibility was accomplished by the creation of pilot courses, in advance of any adoption of the curriculum. The plan was ingenious, because it built on and expanded the principle of faculty involvement, but it also raised interesting administrative problems.

The summer stipend that was offered to faculty members interested in fleshing out the criteria for the three content areas had a catch. All faculty members who participated in this exercise were obligating themselves to develop a pilot course. Consistent with the idea that students would share a common curricular experience, the hope was that the members of each of the three faculty groups would collaborate on the development of two courses for their respective

content areas. This immediately proved to be a forlorn hope. Rather than expending energy on what was clearly going to be a lost cause, the expectation was changed to the development of a course that was not tied explicitly to a single faculty member but, rather, could be offered by a reasonable selection of faculty members.

Not all members of the summer faculty group met the obligation to develop a course, but a substantial number did. To reassure them that their efforts were not in vain, it was essential to find the courses a curricular home and, thus, a built-in student audience. No pilot course was going to attract an audience unless it could be inserted into the existing curriculum, and, if a pilot course were offered that did not attract students, it could easily be taken as evidence that the curriculum under consideration was fundamentally flawed.

Because the curriculum did not yet exist, the temporary curricular home for these new courses was reasonably the old general education structure. But because the new criteria differed from the old, this was a challenge, requiring the willingness of the members of the old general education committee to be creative in their application of the old criteria. After much debate, their compromise was to give provisional approval only to these new courses, pending the result of the discussion of the new curriculum. This compromise may seem small, but it was not. To move beyond the criteria that the faculty had approved for the old structure was a large leap and a courageous move on the part of these faculty members.

At the same time plans were laid to change the character of the committee. The old general education structure, recall, had been overseen by a committee drawn from faculty members in what is traditionally the arts and sciences—humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts. The central administration proposed that the general education committee should become a university-wide committee with responsibility for the oversight of general education and, thus, should be more broadly representative. This structural development was explicitly not tied to the discussions about the change in the general education, and, although the Faculty Senate expressed some suspicion about the motives behind the proposal, they ultimately agreed that general education was not reasonably the domain of the arts and sciences only and that there was a need for a more broadly representative oversight committee.

The old committee included two members from each of the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Each was an independent administrative unit, so the model proposed to the senate was based on college representation. The humanities, social and behavioral sciences, science, and fine arts kept two representatives each; the next largest college—agriculture—also had two representatives; and the remaining colleges had one representative each. The process by which representatives were chosen was a college decision. Most decided on college-wide elections, and the consequence of this was that faculty members who had never before thought about general education had to when they voted on their college representative.

Establishing a university-wide oversight structure and raising the general faculty awareness of general education were salutary effects of the senate action, regardless of the fate of the emerging general education proposal. As noted above, departmentally based curriculum has the constant attention of its faculty, but general education curriculum lacks a ready-made faculty constituency. These two developments created such a constituency. But the most important effect was more subtle: It afforded the new pilot courses a legitimacy they would not have had if their approval and oversight remained strictly within the arts and sciences. This laid the foundation for acceptance of a university-wide general education curriculum.

#### *Principle 4: Negotiate and Barter*

I indicated at the outset my skepticism about a “perfect” curriculum. Every curriculum is a function of local considerations (e.g., the composition of the faculty and its institutional history), institutional vision (e.g., the sense of where the institution is going and how it wants to be known), and external pressures (e.g., national perceptions about essential curricular components). It follows, then, that one of the principles for successful curricular change would involve the notion of compromise. The trick, of course, is to compromise without violating fundamental principles.

In the case study, after a year and a half had passed since the provost’s bombshell, the initial proposal had been fleshed out, numerous faculty members were engaged in the development of

courses, and an oversight structure was in place. The debate and discussion surrounding these actions had required some modification of the initial guiding principles. The changes are in italics:

- The general education courses will be developed specifically for general education.
- All students, regardless of intended major, will share the general education curriculum. *However, the particular character of the mathematics and second language requirement will vary with the major.*
- The two courses in each of the Year 1 areas will be drawn from *a small set of courses, all of which meet the same curricular objectives.*
- Students will complete general education by the end of their second college year.

But the debate had also pointed up areas of resistance strong enough to sink the project. The campaign moved into an intense negotiation phase.

Four objections developed in the course of the ongoing discussion:

- Courses meeting general education should not be precluded from meeting other requirements.
- The general education curriculum was not inclusive enough of the range of expertise offered by the faculty.
- The requirement that general education should be completed in the first two years was too rigid.
- Twenty-seven units was too large a portion of the undergraduate curriculum to devote to general education.

Driving each objection were more parochial interests. The first objection was voiced most strongly in the traditional sciences (i.e., biological sciences, chemistry, and physics) and engineering. Many of the faculty members in these areas believed that requiring general education science would add an undue burden to the curricular requirements for their majors, without a major gain in their education.

It is interesting to note that the more interdisciplinary sciences, like planetary sciences and geosciences, were much less concerned about this issue. The second objection, about inclusiveness, was centered primarily in the fine arts faculty, who did not see how they were included in the new curriculum. The third and fourth objections, having to do with timing and size, respectively, received their support from departments with the most regimented curriculum—the fine arts, the sciences, engineering, and some areas in agriculture. The faculty members in these areas held that the sequencing of major requirements precluded front-loading general education and that the sheer weight of these requirements could not accommodate the number of proposed general education units.

A compromise on the principle that general education courses were to be constructed for general education only would have answered all of these objections simultaneously. But it would also have gutted what was taken to be the most basic premise behind the curricular reform—that is, the idea that general education deserves attention in its own right, that it is not simply something students satisfy as they are meeting other requirements. Thus, the negotiation took a different form.

The structure of the general education curriculum was modified, with the proviso that one of the areas in what was now called “Tier 2” would be met by the student’s major (Figure 2). The fine arts felt that they were represented in this structure, but the addition did not add to the general education unit load. In acknowledgment of the sequencing problems, “Year 1” and “Year 2” were changed to “Tier 1” and “Tier 2.” Students were still expected to complete Tier 1 before Tier 2, thus maintaining the idea that the second set of general education courses could build on the first, but the timing of the completion of either set was not absolutely prescribed. Finally,

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Individuals and Societies</b>	<b>Natural Sciences</b>	<b>Traditions and Cultures</b>	<b>Literature</b>	<b>Arts</b>
Tier 1	2 courses (6 units)	2 courses (6 units)	2 courses (6 units)		
Tier 2	1 course (3 units)	1 course (3 units)		1 course (3 units)	1 course (3 units)

**Figure 2.** Modified General Education Curriculum Structure

students majoring in the sciences, engineering, and certain other related subjects were allowed to meet the natural science requirement with the science courses required for their major.

The second, third, and fourth principles guiding the general education curriculum had to be modified in the course of these negotiations, but none was completely abrogated. The first principle remained unchanged:

- The general education courses will be developed specifically for general education.
- All students, regardless of intended major, will share the general education curriculum. However, the particular character of the mathematics and second language requirement will vary with the major. Further, science-intensive majors may satisfy the general education natural sciences requirement with science courses required for the major.
- The two courses in each of the Tier 1 areas will be drawn from a small set of courses, all of which meet the same curricular objectives.
- Students will complete Tier 1 coursework in a content area before they complete the corresponding Tier 2 course.

As this example illustrates, every curricular proposal of any substance will have its opponents. Negotiation is, therefore, a necessary part of the process. Successful negotiation requires keeping firmly in mind what is fundamental while not closing one's mind to the basis of the opposition. The alignment of these two can almost always be accomplished by a skillful negotiator.

#### *Principle 5: Razzle-Dazzle 'Em*

*Razzle-dazzle* is a semicynical label for packaging. Reason, logical argumentation, and solid construction, unfortunately, cannot be depended on to carry the day. Thus, it is essential to attend to what is in the air and to deflect it without acknowledging its existence.

The proposal was almost ready now to go to the senate for a vote. The relationship between the Faculty Senate and the central administration at this university was no different from the

relationship between most executives and most legislative bodies in organizations that have both. Each has a defined role to play, but the boundaries of the role at any point in time are determined relative to the perceived authority of the other. Thus, each works, at minimum, to ensure that its authority is not lessened and, at best, to expand its legitimate authority. The final approval for the new general education curriculum depended on a vote of the Faculty Senate. Because the provost had initiated the curricular examination, many members of the senate professed to be worried about the faculty's curricular prerogative. Although the rhetoric emphasized the character of the curriculum itself, the dynamics of the situation could have led the senate to demonstrate its power by turning the curriculum down. To avoid a negative senate vote on the new general education curriculum driven by the need to show the strength of the senate relative to the central administration, it was necessary for the curricular proposal to come cloaked in the approval of the general faculty, to be distanced from the provost, and to be accompanied by enough quantitative data to demonstrate that at least some people knew what they were doing. The proposal that went forward involved all three.

The facts in regard to the involvement of the general faculty were indisputable. Any faculty member who had wanted to be involved in the deliberations had been encouraged to participate; the major concerns of groups of faculty members had yielded significant modifications in the proposal. But the demonstration of these facts had to be very concrete. Thus, before the proposal moved to the senate, the central administration asked for an up or down vote, by department. The departmental venue for the vote encouraged a much broader participation than an open faculty referendum, traditionally drawing only those with an axe to grind. This was a calculated risk. If a majority of the departments voted no, the proposal would be dead before it reached the senate. But if a majority of the departments voted yes, it would be difficult for the senate to turn the proposal down. A resounding majority of the departments voted in favor of the change. An interesting question—one with no answer—is whether their vote reflected the effect of the preceding efforts or whether they did not want to go on record as departments as opposed to a proposal that had clear and unequivocal support from the provost.



Distance between the provost and the new general education curriculum had been building throughout the deliberations, as the proposal was changed and reshaped. But no one who had not been involved in the details of those changes could reasonably keep track of their nature and number. So, a document that detailed the differences—and emphasized their substantive character—was constructed. The modification of the four principles discussed above formed its core.

Finally, although few members of the Faculty Senate had a clear idea of what questions to ask, the senate needed to be reassured that someone had thought of all the questions surrounding a curricular change—and that answers could be provided. Was the teaching assistant pool sufficient? What would happen to transfer students? How many seats in each content area were required to meet student needs? Could these be delivered? None of the questions was particularly difficult to answer, and it was not obvious that the members of the senate knew a good answer from a poor one. But that was not really the issue. It was simpler: Demonstrate that the university was not going off half-cocked, so that the senate could feel that it had done due diligence.

Not only was the proposal that came to the senate embedded in the context these details provided, it was delivered by two faculty members, the chair and vice chair of the university-wide general education committee. The last bit of razzle-dazzle had the effect of creating yet more psychological distance between the central administration and general education.

## **Conclusion**

Weaving together practice and theory, I have explored here the administrative properties of a successful curriculum and the administrative strategies by which such a curriculum can come into existence. Although there is no reason to expect that the politics of the case study are anything other than local, the principles of the administrative response are intended to have much wider applicability. Thus, administrators embroiled in their own curricular wars need not create *de novo* their plan of engagement. The most fundamental

point is that the success of an institution's curriculum depends ultimately on the support and skill of its administrators. Institutions that ignore this fundamental fact are doomed to an eternity of curricular wars.

### References

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