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Sweet Briar Chooses a Core Curriculum

By Dan Berrett | DECEMBER 18, 2017



Chronicle photo by Julia Schmalz

The small college for women came close to shutting down in 2015.

Updated (12/18/2017, 6:57 p.m.) to include information about job losses.

Sweet Briar College's near-death experience in 2015 has led to a wholesale reimagining of its curriculum.

On Friday the 280-student women's college unveiled its 10-course core curriculum, which the faculty had hashed out over several months. The changes make Sweet Briar both a curricular outlier and a model of recent trends in general education.

The core courses, which emphasize leadership, will replace the existing general-education curriculum. It has followed a distribution model — one in which students select from a menu of courses that satisfy requirements like written communication or quantitative

reasoning.

The distribution model is the most popular form of general education, with about three-quarters of colleges using it, according to a survey conducted in 2015 by Hart Research for the Association of American Colleges & Universities. Fewer than half of the colleges surveyed used a core curriculum, the survey found.

Sweet Briar's core courses are "tailored to meet student demand for 21st-century relevancy and to their academic interests and career choices," the college said in a news release.

Some of the courses, like "Argument and Persuasion" and "Decisions in a Data-Driven World," focus on core skills. Others, like "Women and Gender in the World," are tied to Sweet Briar's mission. And courses on such subjects as design thinking and sustainable systems explore methods and approaches that are growing in popularity nationally.

The courses are also “integrated,” which typically means that students must apply the skills and knowledge they develop in one course or discipline to another. Two-thirds of the administrators surveyed by the college association said their institutions were placing more emphasis on integrative learning in general-education programs.

The shift to a core curriculum takes place amid a broader reorganization of academic departments and programs at the institution. The changes will mean the hiring of about five faculty members in the next two years — as well as the elimination of 10 faculty positions, including some that are tenured or tenure-track.

Sweet Briar faced closure in 2015, but alumnae rallied to its cause and kept it open. Its circumstances are similar to other women’s colleges and small colleges that emphasize the liberal arts.

The new curriculum will be put in place in the 2018-19 academic year.

Dan Berrett writes about teaching, learning, the curriculum, and educational quality. Follow him on Twitter @danberrett, or write to him at dan.berrett@chronicle.com.

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

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