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Cornell College of Arts and Sciences considers new general-education program

Submitted by Colleen Flaherty on March 28, 2018 - 3:00am

Like many general-education programs [1], the required curriculum at Cornell University's College of Arts and Sciences has gotten a bit stale [2]. There's nothing wrong with it per se, but it's been in place for 15 years -- meaning that many if not most of the faculty members, administrators and students who helped create it are no longer on campus.

And like many general-education programs, the college's is also complicated, involving a web of thematic distribution and breadth categories across the arts and sciences (some required and some not). That makes the program increasingly hard to sell to students and even the faculty members who are supposed to support it, said Tom Pepinsky, an associate professor of government and chair of the committee charged with updating the curriculum.

"There was a sense among the faculty that the curriculum was very poorly messaged to students, and students didn't have a clear understanding of why they had to take the courses they had to take -- there was no clear reasoning behind it," he said. "Many students think of the curriculum as a series of boxes to check [3], and we on the committee don't think that's an effective way to have a modern liberal arts curriculum at a university."

With that criticism in mind, Pepinsky and his committee have worked for two years to develop, in his words, a "simple, clear, easy-to-message curriculum that reflects the values that the College of Arts and Sciences faculty actually have."

The committee -- composed of 11 faculty members across the arts and sciences, two undergraduates, and a senior associate dean -- in early 2016 started gathering data, outlining its ideas and thinking about the curriculum with respect to pedagogy. That fall, members participated in collegewide discussions, including with a group of professors from each department that served as sounding board. The committee also solicited feedback through a public website, focus groups and town halls.

By early last year, the committee had drafted a curriculum proposal and asked for feedback through a similarly structured process. Members spent the fall considering the feedback and this month released a final set of recommendations.

An all-faculty meeting will be held today, putting the curriculum a step closer to being adopted.

The 'Opportunity to Explore'

In its final report [4], the committee says that while all undergraduate study culminates in depth and proficiency through the major, "the defining experience of the college's liberal arts curriculum is the opportunity to explore the breadth of our collective knowledge to inform, contextualize and enhance studies beyond that final specialization."

To that end, the committee recommends replacing the current curriculum's "matrix" structure of breadth and distribution requirements [5] with a single list of distribution requirements.

Today, students must take four curriculum-approved courses in the natural sciences and math: two in the physical and biological sciences, one in mathematics and quantitative reasoning, and one more in either of those categories.

Students must also take five arts, social sciences and humanities courses from at least four of the following categories: cultural analysis; historical analysis; knowledge, cognition and moral reasoning; literature and the arts; and social and behavioral analysis.

The college also currently requires additional geographic and historic "breadth requirements," one course each focusing on an area of people other than those in the U.S., Canada or Europe, and on a historic period before the 20th century.

Four or five three-credit elective courses outside the major field also are required.

Under the committee's simplified plan, students would instead be required to take one course from each of the 10 following categories:

- Arts and literature
- Biological sciences
- Ethics and the mind
- Global citizenship
- Historical analysis
- Human difference
- Physical sciences
- Science of society
- Statistics and data science
- Symbolic and mathematical reasoning

Students would have all four years to complete the curriculum. But they'd be required to take one course from five different distribution categories during their first four semesters, to encourage early exploration.

The committee also proposes a foreign language requirement that students complete either one course taught in any language at the nonintroductory level or at least two courses of at least three credits each in one language.

That would replace a requirement that students either pass an intermediate-level language course or complete at least 11 credits in a single foreign language at Cornell.

Pepinsky said his committee was not trying to shortchange language study. But there's evidence that some students were transferring out of arts and sciences to other Cornell undergraduate colleges specifically to avoid the "stress" language requirement, he said. And when that's happening, "we don't have a language requirement that works."

The committee hoped that more students would be encouraged to try new languages under the streamlined requirement and find some new "joy" in the process, he added.

The new curriculum also would end a requirement that students complete at least two semesters of language study at the intermediate level prior to studying abroad. Pepinsky said this is designed to encourage more students to study in non-English-speaking countries, since, as it stands, "If you wanted to study abroad in, say, Thailand, you'd have to know that right away," and enroll in Thai as a freshman if you had no background in it.

"We view this as a win for language learning at Cornell," he added.

Curricular Innovation

A two-seminar, first-year writing program requirement would remain, based on the new plan. But the committee recommends that the existing program be strengthened and further supported, to encourage more writing courses in the sciences and social sciences.

Beyond outlining new requirements, the committee's report also emphasizes curricular innovation, by endorsing faculty efforts to introduce interdisciplinary courses.

All students also would be encouraged to take a community-engaged learning course -- perhaps ideally, the committee says, to fulfill the new human difference and global citizenship distribution categories.

Pepinsky said the entirely new "human difference" category is essentially a diversity requirement, with "less loaded terminology." Whatever it's called, Pepinsky said the committee wants students to see conflicts and discussions about race, class, gender, ability status and other issues as "objects of study rather than just features of our time."

Community-engaged courses also are a way for Cornell to build on its public-private status, he said. "That's something that can really set us apart from other institutions and help make us the liberal arts college we want to be."

The committee also recommends the formation of a joint undergraduate curriculum governance committee between College of Arts and Sciences and Computing and Information Sciences faculty, encompassing the departments of computer science, information science and statistics. Such a committee would then develop and oversee a coordinated curriculum framework for undergraduate data science "pathways" across the colleges.

Pepinsky noted that while his college's curriculum has a strong quantitative foundation, the

proposed curriculum divides the mathematics and quantitative reasoning requirement into two distinct areas: statistics and data science and symbolic and mathematical reasoning.

The idea, he said, is for students to understand that "data is not just a language used by mathematicians."

Gretchen Ritter, dean of arts and sciences, formally charged [6] Pepinsky's committee in 2016, asking that it "identify ways we can support and enhance curriculum innovation."

Ritter is an early proponent of the committee's work, saying this week that she's encouraged by its focus on "exploration as the early foundation for a liberal arts and sciences education at Cornell." She also applauded the committee's attention to not only distribution requirements but also course navigation and curricular innovation.

Recognizing "the importance of understanding human difference and exploring what it means to be a global citizen -- as well as how data science integrates with a variety of disciplines -- widens the breadth and complements our core disciplines," she said.

Should the recommendations be adopted, Ritter said, the curriculum "will compel students to explore our many, varied disciplines" and "stay curious throughout their lives and careers."

Ritter said the college's Student Advisory Council has endorsed the committee's report -- a "good sign." But the faculty has ultimate say. Should the committee get support from a major share of the faculty, a formal proposal would then prompt a vote.

Pepinsky said if that happens, clear "messaging" will be key to the curriculum's success with students.

The gist, he said, is that "we are a place that values exploration in the liberal arts and more generally. Here's how the curriculum gives you that experience."

Teaching and Learning [7]

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