

10 December 2008

To: Linda Tate and Rod Buxton
Fr: Dean Saitta
Re: Process and Substance of Gen Ed Review
Cc: Faculty Senate Executive Committee

Here's a follow-up to my earlier message to the Senate Executive Committee suggesting use of the *Faculty Forum* weblog to keep the faculty better informed about Gen Ed Review. Since the Review Committee's favored curriculum model appears to be a Duke-like structure, it might be worth considering Duke's process. It has been hailed as one of the more successful processes for generating faculty consensus in curriculum review.

I know something about the Duke process because I've read about it, plus one of my good friends served on the Duke curriculum committee that created their famous "Curriculum 2000" matrix. In fact I arranged for her to visit DU to consult with our Core Curriculum Committee when we did our last Gen Ed revision in 2000. The process that produced the Duke matrix was nearly two years in the making. It was characterized by very substantial interaction with the academic units about the contents of the matrix. The committee was constituted by a group of appointed faculty members with reputations for thinking beyond their discipline and who were widely respected as articulate campus "statespersons." The committee was chaired by a senior professor who made truly extraordinary efforts to keep the community informed and to incorporate feedback into curriculum drafts. He apparently collected more than 1,000 faculty email messages commenting on the various drafts. The final draft curriculum was, in fact, revision #22—which says something about the transparency of the process and the amount of give-and-take with the campus community. The chair of the Duke committee earned so much respect for his skills in managing the review that he was appointed university Provost shortly after the new curriculum was ratified and implemented. Duke's process was probably more successful than most because they are constituted as a College of Arts and Sciences with a single dean. We have multiple divisions, deans, and academic cultures, which means we should probably make even greater efforts to communicate, critique, and revise. Hence my suggestion that we mobilize the *Forum* weblog to help with the process.

Now for the substance. The Review Committee is interested in anticipating criticism, taking comments, and building a solid rationale for reform. I understand the rationale for a matrix, but after reading the November 12 minutes (and comparing text to figures) I'm not sure I know what the current working model is. If the model is something close to the "Revised Matrix", then I have the following comments:

1. When I look at the two designated "Areas of Inquiry" at the top of the matrix ("Physical and Natural World" and "Society and Culture") I see Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. It's no secret that the Humanities have become significantly marginalized within the contemporary university. This two-part scheme obliterates them, even if the intention is to subsume them under "Society and Culture". This is a problem. Certainly there's enough variation in the subject matters of the Arts and Humanities to produce a third area of inquiry that, arguably, is even more fundamental than the other two; e.g., something along the lines of "Mind and Representation."
2. It's not clear how the left hand axis of the working matrix is to be labeled, whether as "Experiences" or "Modes of Inquiry." Whatever's the case, the distinction between "Analytical" and "Scientific" modes is not clear to me. These concepts strike me as overlapping quite a bit (as they do in large parts of the philosophy of science). I'd sure hate to have to explain the distinction to a student or parent. Contrasting Scientific and "Interpretive" makes more sense to me, but that creates problems elsewhere in the matrix. So it goes with any scheme that reduces complex realities to a grid of boxes. It might be worth noting that Duke's matrix was being finessed to accommodate student and faculty needs almost as soon as it was

implemented, and it underwent a significant revision (i.e., simplification) in 2004 that, I think, is no less problematic (and arguably more incoherent) than the original one that inspired us back in 2000.

3. I'm not sure if "Transcultural and Linguistic" is still part of the mix of inquiry modes/experiences on the left-hand axis, or not. If it is, I think it's a very bad idea to equate a term connoting "cross-cultural inquiry" with our three course Language requirement. There are other academic units that do what I believe is implied by the term "transcultural". In fact, this term describes the central organizing ethos and methodologies of anthropology.

4. "Integrative" would, in my opinion, be a much better word than "Synthesizing" for describing the single required Advanced Seminar.

At the end of the day I don't really care if we use a matrix to describe the Gen Ed experience at DU, provided it is demonstrably better than non-matrix alternatives when evaluated against multiple criteria and lines of evidence. I don't much care whether the matrix's geometric form is a square, rectangle, or circle (however I do think that someone should have a go at a triangle given the "Disappearing Humanities" complaint mentioned above). I don't care what shorthand terms are used to label axes and boxes as long as they capture *some* kind of meaningful and easily communicable distinctions. My primary concern is with the size and quality of the high end Gen Ed experience—another shrinking phenomenon in the current working model. Since "marketing" Gen Ed to parents and students seems to be a major committee concern (and a reasonable one at that), and since matrices don't exhaust the possibilities for creating accessible and assessable programs, I'm still hopeful that sometime in the near future I'll be able to look a parent in the eye and say something like the following (which is intended to serve as a teaching moment as well as a hard sell):

"Here at DU we start by introducing your child, in a small seminar, to the nature of the university as a community of scholars and learners. At the same time we ask him/her to take several courses that build competencies in writing, creative expression, and a language other than English. In their first two years we honor the 19th century origins of the modern university by introducing your child to the varied subject matters and multiple ways of knowing that distinguish the three great domains of human knowledge: Arts and Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences. Your child can go to other universities and get all sorts of complicated schemes (or, no schemes at all) for organizing a Core Curriculum, like the ones they use at Brown, Princeton, and Duke. However, here at DU we use the one, and arguably only, scheme that has come closest to "carving knowledge at its joints." We're certain that the Core Foundational courses your child takes in each great domain of knowledge will ignite or renew their passion for a specific field of professional endeavor. "

"As your child is cultivating their professional expertise and maturing intellectually we re-acquaint him/her—as a junior and senior, and in a way that's unique to DU—with the original Enlightenment Quest to unify knowledge. We do this by asking all students to take a set of advanced seminars: three interdisciplinary, thematic Core Conversancy courses focused on timely, compelling challenges of 21st century life (e.g., sustainability, biotechnology, globalization, interculturalism). Our goal is to provide context and opportunity for your child to compare and integrate what she/he is learning in their major with what their peers majoring in other subjects at the university are learning. These courses test your child's ability to synthesize different ideas about how the world works and contribute to broader conversations about complex issues and problems. They invite your child to, in the words of our university's Learning Goal, "imagine new possibilities for themselves, their communities, and the world." Our intention is to push your child to critically reflect on the virtues and limitations of their chosen field of specialization, and to better equip them to adapt to rapid and unpredictable change in the world of work, and the world of ideas. Thus, the required Core Curriculum at DU aims to extend and enrich your child's development as both a professional and as a citizen."