Integral to the College’s strategic planning is a review of our undergraduate curriculum. This was identified in the first year of planning, to follow the year-long conversation on William & Mary as a leading liberal arts university in the 21st century. This past year, the campus had a lively and engaged conversation on many dimensions of this topic, which is to say of our identity and aspirations. The resulting white paper, “William & Mary as a Leading Liberal Arts University in the 21st Century: From Conversation to Future Directions,” distilled this conversation and was intended to serve as a guide to the curriculum review. But only as a guide. It doesn’t prescribe a particular curriculum but rather, in defining our strengths, attributes, comparative advantages and aspirations, suggests areas in which we can improve, changes we might consider and the contexts in which we will be operating. In short, this curriculum review should above all else focus on developing the most vibrant and exciting liberal arts education for our students, leveraging our core values with our distinctive attributes.

Salient features of W&M as a liberal arts university that emerged from the conversation included: a deep commitment to engaged student learning; an unusual and unusually successful blend of research and teaching; five strong, distinct and complementary faculties; and a desire for increased international and interdisciplinary initiatives. With these characteristics in mind, what should a curriculum review consider? The spirit of last year’s conversation was expansive, and I hope that thinking about the curriculum is similarly so and takes up a wide swath of issues in thoughtful and imaginative ways. Without limiting the review, I ask that it consider the following items in particular:

1) Increasing “intense” learning opportunities for our students and incorporating these experiences into the curriculum;
2) Expanding our international scope, in what we provide both on campus and abroad;
3) Facilitating interdisciplinary learning;
4) Reviewing the current GERs with an eye towards #1-3 above, citizenship in the 21st century, and flexibility in meeting the desired outcomes of GERs;
5) Moving to a 4-course student course load as standard, as is the case at most of our peer institutions;
6) Assessing the implications of first-year students who matriculate with a substantial number of college credits; and
7) Incorporating more technology into our model of a liberal arts education in the 21st century.

What are the budgetary parameters for recommendations stemming from the curriculum review? We all know that higher education’s budgetary landscape is changing rapidly—for private and public universities alike, in the Commonwealth and across the country. Some good ideas require new resources; others require more will than wallet. We should not jettison ideas because they might require new resources nor consider only those that do. The College is working to develop a new financial model that will increase resources for the future. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the agglomerative model of higher education, in which one continues to add new programs and new courses with few changes in existing ones, is unsustainable. Liberal arts education is also, in many ways, inherently expensive. There are a variety of ways to be more “efficient” while being true to our liberal arts core, through the greater incorporation of technology and reimagining modes of instruction.

A curriculum review is a significant undertaking, requiring time, energy and imagination. It also is a complex enterprise since, when broadly defined, it stretches across many parts of the campus. Existing committees have an important role to play, and any changes to the curriculum would occur only through standard procedures. At the same time, I believe that this project also needs, as did the curriculum review in the early 1990’s, a steering committee, which focuses keenly on these issues, creates appropriate sub-committees and coordinates the many discussions between and among the various constituent units.

Because of the particular role of A&S faculty in our undergraduate curriculum, the steering committee membership will comprise chiefly A&S faculty. Faculty from other schools are needed so that the discussions can take account most fully of interdisciplinary possibilities and our competitive advantage in being a liberal arts university; furthermore, many of the issues highlighted for consideration are university-wide in nature. These discussions may also lead schools and individual departments to take up curricular changes at the school and department levels.

Therefore I am asking you, as the three deans most directly involved in undergraduate education, to work together with Carl in the lead in developing the structures and appointing the committee(s) for undertaking this review. You should also consult with your decanal colleagues in Law and VIMS since there are some aspects of this review, including internationalization and possible joint programs (BA+JD, e.g.), that intersect with those schools. Experience teaches us that such reviews also take considerable time. I am asking you for a preliminary report by April 15, 2011, aware that this work may well extend into the following academic year.
The Provost’s Office will be providing resources in support of these efforts, and Kate Slevin, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, will be the liaison in the Provost’s Office. I look forward to this critical part of our strategic planning and to engaging and learning from you all in the process.

MRH/cef

Attachment

c: Davison Douglas
    John T. Wells