



The College of  
**WILLIAM & MARY**

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**Office of the Provost**

BOV Academic Affairs Committee  
Report on Revised Curriculum  
February 6, 2014

In reporting on the recently approved general education curriculum, I would like to cover concisely several topics: context for the change; process leading to its adoption; overview of the new curriculum; anticipated costs; and, finally, next steps.

*Context*

When the College embarked on its strategic planning process in 2008-09, the faculty representatives on the Planning Steering Committee made sure that the strategic plan included revisiting the general education curriculum. But this process should begin, the strategic plan outlined, only after a year-long conversation on W&M as a leading liberal arts university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I had the privilege of leading that “conversation” during the 2009-10 academic year. It was a lively set of panels, presentations and debates that helped to clarify our strengths and the directions we wanted to move in.

General education curricula change over time. What Thomas Jefferson studied at W&M in the early 1760s is not what students study today. And our students today arrive with different preparation than did students even 20 years ago. More particularly, colleges and universities seem to revisit and modify their general education curricula about every generation, once every 20 years or so. W&M last adopted a new curriculum in 1993, and so to revisit this set of courses was appropriate and timely.

*Process*

The process was what one would anticipate. In autumn 2010, I wrote a memo to the three deans with a purview over UG education (A&S, Mason and Education), with, appropriately, A&S in the lead, asking them to take up the promised review of the curriculum, setting broad parameters for their exploration and encouraging them to be expansive in their thinking; after twenty years, changes at the margins seemed inadequate. Over a two-year period, the Curriculum Review Steering Committee, through frequent meetings, focus groups and more public fora, studied, discussed and developed a plan. After approving a set of guiding principles for the curriculum, the faculty, over an additional year, considered, debated, modified and ultimately voted to adopt the individual elements of and then the overall package of the proposed curriculum.

You may have heard some voices about the manner of the vote and the final tallies. Let me be clear on a few points. The A&S faculty, the deliberating body on this issue, followed – after full discussion – their procedures and policies for the vote. They decided, for example, not to hold such an important vote by electronic ballot, ensuring that those voting had heard the discussion. The vote was held during fall semester’s exam period – a time that would allow very broad faculty participation. The final vote – 101-83-1 – was not a run-away victory, although by political standards, 55%-45% is a mandate. The vote obviously reveals differences of opinion but this, too, is no surprise when the changes are not just nipping at the margins, and when we consider general education curricula are aspects of the Academy about which all have a view, often deeply held.

I followed the several stages of the process closely, attended some of the discussions and was in frequent contact with the dean – and with many faculty who expressed their views to me. I updated the president periodically and, upon our review of the final product, we strongly endorse the proposed general education curriculum as an excellent platform for a W&M education for our times. We aspire to offer the best undergraduate education in the country, grounded in the rich soil of the liberal arts; this new curriculum will help us achieve that goal.

#### *Overview*

So, what’s in this new general education? First, some things remain: freshman seminars, language requirement, state-mandated digital competency, writing proficiency, mathematics/quantitative proficiency. No differences here. And students will still be required to take courses across the curriculum from among all three of the broad areas of arts/humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The key differences are these:

- 1) These core courses will be taken at W&M and not satisfied by AP/IB courses. They will be true college-level, W&M courses.
- 2) In addition to taking one of our highly successful freshman seminars, which focus in depth on one topic, all incoming students will take a 100-level course that takes up big ideas and challenges students to think critically, crisply and creatively, while also developing their communication skills.
- 3) Students will also take one course in each of the three broad knowledge areas that intentionally integrate across disciplinary boundaries. So, to take a possible example from my own background, instead of a student taking a course on Greek tragedy, she might take a course that studies fifth-century Athens from the perspectives of art, religion, anthropology *and* literature. In the new curriculum, in addition to these integrated courses, students will still take “regular” departmental courses as part of their breadth requirement.
- 4) *Every* student will expand their global understanding, ideally by studying abroad (our goal is to reach 60% of all undergraduates) or through the new COLL 300 courses taught on campus.

- 5) *Every* student will have a culminating or “capstone” experience, most typically in their major.

Overall, the new curriculum combines the best of the old and the new. It continues the key ingredients of a liberal arts education, namely breadth of study and study based on inquiry and discovery. At the same time, it increases the *integration* of the students’ education, expands their *global* perspective, and deepens their engagement in hands-on *research* with faculty. These three enhancements are all part of the vision statement that has driven our strategic planning process.

It should also be remembered that the general education occupies only about 25% of a student’s course of study. The requirements for the majors are totally unaffected by these changes. Students will continue to receive credit for appropriate scores on AP exams and in IB courses, but these credits will count towards electives in some cases and other parts of the general education requirements, but not the core COLL courses, which will be taken at W&M. To be honest, I admit that we do not know *all* the possible ramifications of these changes. And for this reason, the curriculum will be rolled out – after a pilot year this coming year – over a four-year period. Any changes or tweaks that need to be made can be effected easily.

Two other points: 1) communication, especially writing, will get greater emphasis in the new curriculum; and 2) there is no “dumbing down” in this curriculum. It will be no less rigorous than the current one; in fact, the emphasis on integration should make it more intellectually demanding. The suggestion that only specific courses in prescribed subjects can command rigor is deeply mistaken and without any foundation.

#### *Anticipated Costs?*

I would like to believe that not all new things cost money. But they typically do, and the goal of the curriculum review was not to reduce costs. Briefly stated, there will be three kinds of costs: developmental; transitional; and on-going. The new curriculum will require considerable development of a large array of new – and, I believe, exciting – courses and further planning. Most of the funding for development will come from redeploying existing funds and private support. An excellent proposal for major funding to support this development period is almost ready to go, and I have high confidence in its success.

For a period of a year or two, we will have both students completing the current set of GERS and those starting out on the new COLL courses. During this period (FY16 and FY17), we will likely need an additional \$150k/year to cover the transition. Ongoing costs are the ones I pay most attention to, since they are by nature permanent. At this point, it seems as if we will need an additional \$700k/year, starting in FY19, most of these funds being used to expand the research experiences that will now include all of our undergraduates through COLL 400.

*So what are the next steps?*

Four Faculty Fellows have been selected to lead the efforts to develop the new curriculum, to work with their faculty colleagues to move from blueprint to physical structure. Next year, pilot versions of the new first-year courses will be launched, and others will be created. As mentioned above, the A&S Dean's Office is in full gear on grant-writing to support the developmental phase of the new curriculum. Changing a curriculum involves many parts, and so doubtless there will be some tweaking along the way and various issues still need to be sorted out. The foundations for the new curriculum have been well laid. And they are consonant both with our strategic plan and with our dedication to excellence in the liberal arts.

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