

# EPAG – CURRICULAR RENEW INITIATIVE

## *General Education: Models and Options*

### INTRODUCTION

The keystone of any liberal arts education is a robust and rigorous general education program. Simply put, the purpose of a general education program is provide the common core of learning that an institution's faculty members agree is essential to the type of education they are trying to impart. While there is no consensus about what that learning should entail (or even about the appropriate balance between substantive content versus intellectual skills development), there is agreement that, in conjunction with the other elements of the curriculum, the general education program should cultivate the competencies and learning outcomes associated with the institution's distinctive liberal arts mission (as articulated in the *Mission Statement* and *Statement of Purpose and Belief*).

It is worth noting that the general education requirement typically accounts for between 25% (as at Harvard) and 50% (as at Chicago) of a student's overall courses load.

### 1. THE CURRENT MACALESTER GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENT

#### **Description**

Currently, Macalester employs a hybrid 'divisional-distribution' and 'outcomes-based' general education model. In this system, students are required to complete between four (4) and eight (8) semester hours in the Humanities, Fine Arts, Natural Science and Social Science divisions (this is the divisional-distribution component). In 1991, we added to this a requirement that each student complete one course designated 'domestic diversity' and one course designated 'international diversity' prior to graduation (this is the outcomes-based element).

#### **Strengths**

- equitable (ensures that students must take courses across the curriculum)
- low cost – requires no investment in special trans-disciplinary or non-departmental gen ed courses;
- consistent with Macalester's culture of departmental autonomy.

#### **Weaknesses**

- no coherent general education objective;
- no clear vision of what we are trying to achieve with the divisional distribution requirements;
- no 'guarantee' that a student who completes any of the divisional requirements has any mastery (or even familiarity) with a particular mode of inquiry/expression.
- poorly articulated criteria for the diversity requirements;
- fails to cultivate in a purposeful fashion the other learning outcomes articulated in the *Statement of Purpose and Belief*

## 2. CORE CURRICULUM

### Description

A 'core curriculum' would comprise a specific set of courses (typically transdisciplinary and thematic in nature) that a student would have to complete before declaring a major. These are typically special-purpose courses that are not disciplinary in nature and that cannot be counted toward completion of the major. Core curricula can be extensive and comprehensive (involving a sequence of several courses) or modest and limited (involving only one or two courses). True core curricula either mandate a sequence of purpose-built common courses *or* provide a choice among several such fixed sequences. The goal of core curricula is sometimes to impart a canonical body of knowledge, but is now more typically to expose students to multiple modes of inquiry/expression and to cultivate the competencies that derive from the institution's distinctive history and mission. Core courses may emphasize either common content *or* common skills (developed through the study of different topics)

### Strengths

- shared learning experience across the student body;
- enhanced sense of community and focus;
- can be integrated into a campus-wide co-curricular program;
- transmission of cultural capital

### Weaknesses

- requires extensive coordination, planning and oversight;
- draws resources away from department, disciplines and majors;
- transition costs.

## 3. OUTCOMES-BASED DISTRIBUTION REQUIREMENTS

### Description

The second way to renew our general education requirement is to abandon our current 'hybrid' model in favor of one that more purposefully fosters the learning outcomes central to the College's distinctive liberal arts mission (see discussion paper, p. 5). This would be achieved by replacing our current *divisional distribution* and *diversity* requirements with a new set of requirements that are more directly and systematically reflective of those learning outcomes. In practice, this would be achieved by requiring students to take, not just a requisite number of credit hours in a given division, but a sequence of (departmentally based) courses that are specially designed to impart certain bodies of knowledge and cultivate certain intellectual skills and competencies (collectively known as 'learning outcomes'). This sequence would include a number of courses (probably no more than 1/3 of the 32 courses taken by a student) each of which would bear a specific general education designation (say 'quantitative reasoning' or 'written communication'). In order to qualify for one of

these general education designations a course would have to be purposefully designed to cultivate the appropriate set of learning outcomes. A faculty committee would be charged with ensuring that each of these courses meets the relevant qualifying criteria.

### **Strengths**

- more purposefully aligns graduation requirements with the College's learning outcomes;
- enhances the coherence of a student's course of study;
- departmentally based (and therefore doesn't siphon resources away from majors)

### **Weaknesses**

- transition costs;
- some loss of autonomy over courses bearing a general education designation (qualifying criteria would be more carefully articulated and more rigorously enforced than is currently the case with our diversity requirements)

## **4. ADVISING-BASED GENERAL EDUCATION**

This is a minimalist approach in which there are no formal general education requirements – the program of study beyond the major is worked out by the student in conjunction with his or her advisor. Brown, Amherst and Grinnell employ this type of system.

### **Strengths**

- fosters independence and responsibility;
- results in a program of study tailored to need and interests of the student (ideally, this means that all students are in every class because they want to be).

### **Weaknesses**

- increased advising load;
- quality control and consistency problems;
- assessment and accreditation challenges.