

To: **The Curriculum Committee**

From: **Danny Kaplan, Chair**

Subject: **Graduation Requirements:
our goals and a critique of our present system**

Date: **Oct. 4, 2000**

This is a working memorandum intended to help us focus our Curriculum Committee discussion about graduation requirements. This memo concentrates on the goals of the College's curriculum, describes our present system of requirements, and criticizes the present system from a number of viewpoints. The intention is to identify those areas where changes to the present requirements would help better to meet our goals and would fix problems with our system. What I would like to emerge from this stage of the discussion is an improved understanding of what our goals are and how we can find out what they are, as well as a more complete understanding of the benefits and shortcomings of the present system of requirements.

Our Goals

Macalester is a collaborative enterprise of students, alumni, faculty, and staff. No doubt the range of individual views of the right purpose and best form of an education is quite broad. Any set of requirements should be based on a consensus. Since we already have a mechanism, the major, for enabling departments to express their differing internal standards, I want to focus here on a college-wide consensus that could lead to requirements applicable to every student at Macalester.

Insofar as there is an expression of college-wide consensus, it might be represented by statements in official college documents such as the Catalog. The Catalog gives several such statements:

Macalester is committed to being a preeminent liberal arts college with an educational program known for its high standards for scholarship and its special emphasis on internationalism, and service to society. (College Catalog, p. 6)

It isn't clear what aspects of this statement correspond to the curricular goals of the College. For instance, "scholarship" might mean that individual classes should be of high quality, or that majors should be rigorous, or that faculty should engage in research.

The term "liberal arts" isn't defined in the catalog — at least not in any concise way. A dictionary definition is:

Liberal Arts ... Academic disciplines, such as languages, history, philosophy, and abstract science, that provide information of general cultural concern, as distinguished from more narrowly practical training, as for a profession. (American Heritage Dict. of the English Language, 1973)

My feeling is that most faculty at Macalester would exempt preparation for graduate school from “narrow practical training ... for a profession.” Most students would probably exempt preparation for professional schools. Is it significant that the definition speaks of “disciplines” and not “subject matters” or “fields of knowledge?”

The Catalog’s “Statement of Purpose and Belief” (p. 6) sets several expectations for a Macalester education.

We expect students to develop a broad understanding of the liberal arts while they are at Macalester.

Coupled with the dictionary definition of “liberal arts,” this suggests that students should have an understanding of several of the disciplines. What does it mean to understand a “discipline?”

Students should follow a primary course of study in order to acquire an understanding of disciplinary theory and methodology;

Interpreting “a primary course of study” as a “major,” this suggests that understanding a discipline means investigating the discipline in some depth and not simply at an introductory level.

they should be able to apply their understanding of theories to address problems in the larger community.

This suggests that disciplinary knowledge is valued in large part for how it informs the world outside of the discipline.

Students should develop the ability to use information and communication resources effectively, be adept at critical, analytical and logical thinking, and express themselves well in both oral and written forms.

This seems to refer to a set of skills and not a set of disciplines.

Finally, students should be prepared to take responsibility for their personal, social, and intellectual choices.

This could mean just about anything, from “students should decide for themselves what they want to do at Macalester,” to “students should learn how to identify and challenge dogma or social norms.” From my personal perspective, I interpret the quoted sentence as indicating that a Macalester education should

prepare students to make reasoned, informed choices and to be able to justify to others (“take responsibility”) those choices.

In a section entitled “Curricular Recommendations,” the catalog gives somewhat more detailed information. The word “recommendation” suggests that the objectives covered in this section are not completely fulfilled by the official graduation requirements. The recommendations apply to

Basic Competency The specific competencies listed are in writing, mathematics and computing, and foreign languages. The foreign-language aspect of this is addressed by a specific graduation requirement, but I know of no requirement relating to writing or mathematics and computing.

Individualized Learning This appears to relate to independent study and to internships. There is no College-wide requirement respecting these, although several majors require or encourage independent study (in the form of a capstone, perhaps) and/or internships.

Internationalism The abstract definition given is quite unsatisfactory in my view, perhaps even embarrassing: “Macalester’s internationalism is defined by this challenge: to create an ambience that demands of our students and faculty to bring together the eternal quest for self-knowledge so constitutive of liberal education and the growing transnationalism of human life. This means, among others (sic), the provision of numerous opportunities to reflect on self as, simultaneously, one develops more knowledge about specific cultures, ecologies, races, nations and languages in a time of unprecedented globalization. Internationalism at Macalester, then, aspires to produce students confident in who they are, cognizant of the preciousness of creative intelligence, skillful in analyzing and understanding complex problems, and willing to assume leadership in a multi-civilizational yet transnationalizing world.”¹

Specific ways in which these aspirations are realized include both curricular and other means: majors in international studies, area studies, and languages; special courses by visiting international faculty; language houses; study abroad; the Macalester International Roundtable; the International Center as a focal point; the principle that 10% to 12% of the student body should be foreign students.

Other, indirect indications of curricular goals are given in the Faculty Handbook. Under §2 II A 2 b, Catalog revision requests must include “[a] direct statement of the impact of the proposal on the College curriculum goals. (e.g. liberal arts objectives, interdisciplinary opportunities, cultural pluralism, internationalism, gender issues, etc.)” Under §2 IV E, policies are given for identifying a

¹The 1988 catalog has a less highfalutin paragraph, “Macalester believes strongly in an international perspective on liberal education. This means providing opportunities for students to develop a clear perspective on the interdependence of today’s world and the implications of such interdependence for life in the 21st century. Macalester encourages students to learn about differences among nations, cultures, races, and languages and how such differences influence our daily lives and our perceptions of world issues and events.”

course as one or more of the following: W (writing), Q (quantitative), C (computer), or F (First Year). Other than first-year courses, I cannot find any further use of these identifications. The designations are certainly not published in the Catalog where they might be of potential use to students or advisors in making their course-choice decisions.. It is also unclear whether there are college-wide standards for identifying courses in this way.

The Advisor's handbook provides no description of what constitutes a proper liberal-arts education, other than giving technicalities about the formal graduation requirements. I don't know what materials students are given to guide them in their decisions.

Are there other, unstated goals about which there is consensus?

The Formal Graduation Requirements

Macalester awards the Bachelor of Arts degree according to standards set by the faculty. [Other BA standards, accreditation?] The current standards for the degree are framed mainly in terms of required courses and credits. They are²:

1. completion of 32 courses, including those listed below;
2. completion of a major;
3. completion of any single fine-arts course;
4. completion of any single humanities or foreign-language course;
5. completion of any additional course in either a foreign language, fine arts or humanities;
6. completion of any two science or mathematics courses;
7. completion of any two social-science courses;
8. demonstration of a level of foreign-language competence equivalent to 4 sequential courses starting at the basic level;
9. completion of any one of the N_{dd} courses designated as a "domestic-diversity" course.
10. completion of any one of the N_{id} courses designated as a "international-diversity" course.
11. completion of a freshman seminar;
12. eight of the above courses must be in divisions other than that of the major;
13. no more than 15 of the courses can be in one department.

²Stated in terms of a 4-credit unit course.

A Critique of the Graduation Requirements

Requirements (1) and (2) are utterly conventional and almost universal and quite successful; I won't consider them further here.

These requirements are active in the sense that many graduating students satisfy them minimally. Of graduating students³ in 2000, 35% minimally met the science requirement⁴, 31% took one or fewer fine-arts course, 53% took two or fewer fine-arts courses. The social sciences and humanities requirements are less active: only 4% of graduating students had taken two or fewer humanities courses and only 8% had taken two or fewer social science courses. 65% of graduating students met the distribution requirements minimally in at least one of the divisions. 15% of students had two or fewer courses in both fine arts and science.⁵

The standards have been criticized on many grounds:

1. They are a statement of minimum requirements and do not indicate expectations, hopes, or aspirations. They are certainly not intended as a guide to a good education. But, there is no other guide.
2. Except for the foreign-language requirement, they do not refer to a level of attainment of specific skills or knowledge. For example, there is no requirement to demonstrate competence in written composition, performance, public speaking, basic economic or scientific principles, or quantitative reasoning.
3. They do not establish a common body of knowledge or experience to be shared by all, or many, students. They do not engender community.
4. Except for the foreign-language requirement and the major, they allow all courses to be taken as at once introductory and terminal courses with no pre-requisites and with no need to maintain skills and knowledge beyond the end of the semester. They need impose no rigor and the student need have no stake in them.
5. They do not enforce standards at a division-wide level, even though the requirements are generally framed in terms of divisions. Any department or program can autonomously lower the minimum standard for that division. There is no mechanism to ensure that a course taken to satisfy a divisional requirement involves an area of study central to that division or even fairly representative of the division.⁶

³These are from data provided by Jayne Niemi that give the number of courses taken in each division by each of the graduating students. My analysis is based on the assumption that the any course in each division satisfies only the distribution requirements for that division. This is false. The data do not include information about diversity courses or the number of courses in and outside of a major. The also data don't distinguish between humanities courses and language courses.

⁴This is roughly half of the non-science graduates

⁵This is about one-quarter of the social-science and humanities graduates.

⁶An example. Physics 11, Contemporary Concepts, is a very popular course taken by

6. Except for the major, they encourage a check-list mentality when designing a plan of study.
7. Neither the domestic- nor the international-diversity requirements point clearly to any expected set of experiences. Domestic-diversity courses sometimes are oriented toward issues of social justice or oppression, sometimes to the history or culture or politics or some other aspect of one or more human groups, and sometimes to critical theories that are thought to illuminate the experience or situation of one or more groups.
8. Domestic- and international-diversity requirements sometimes shape how seemingly unrelated requirements are satisfied. For example, some students seek to “double-up” requirements by taking as their single fine-arts course a domestic-diversity course. This means that the fine-arts course itself may not be central to the division and that the student’s experience with diversity takes place in a subject where the student perhaps lacks context.
9. There is, arguably, no humanities *requirement* whatsoever. The nominal requirement can be fully satisfied with a single introductory language course.
10. The requirements do not encourage cross-fertilization between the departments inside a division. A student majoring in department X in division D might take courses only in X and in no other department in the division. A non-majoring student might take only a single course in the division.
11. The requirements are so minimal that they are easily satisfied (except language) by courses selected on a whim to satisfy a student’s momentary curiosity. Although satisfying curiosity is perhaps one aspect of a good education, it hardly seems like the basis of one.
12. The requirements tend to imply that there is no objective notion of a good education that is more valid than any student’s predilections. This tends to lower the perceived value of the education.

approximately 200 students each year (209 over the last two semesters, in 4 sections of about 50 students each) — this corresponds more than half of the non-science students at the College. The course is carefully designed for “the liberal arts student” and has no pre-requisites. It is reputed to be a wonderful course: well taught and appreciated as interesting. It deals with special relativity, curved space-time and black holes, the Big Bang universe, light, quantum theory, and elementary particles. But the course is arguably not representative of the various disciplines of science and provides little background in scientific methodology. Is this the kind of course that the science division thinks should be half of the typical non-science student’s exposure to science at Macalester? Many people in the division would say no when considering what a science-requirement should provide, no when thinking about quantitative reasoning skills, and no when considering the impact of science on the “larger community.” However, from a non-curricular point of view the course very efficiently handles the large numbers of students involved and allows other science departments — and other faculty in physics — to focus on content for majors. In any event, the issue of the curricular impact of the course does not arise, because each department sets its courses autonomously.

13. The requirements foster the creation of “X for poets” and to thereby segregate majors from non-majors. This is perhaps a problem with the huge emphasis on grades and the desire to avoid giving C and D grades to students. We do not have a culture where a D+ for a humanities student in biochemistry is an acceptable grade or where it seems reasonable to work very hard for a passing grade in a course outside the major.
14. The requirements do not lead to the need to plan carefully a sequence of courses in discussion with an advisor or advisors. It’s common for students to defer their requirements (except language) until their “real” work is well advanced.

There are, however, some genuine advantages to this system:

1. It’s easy to administrate.
2. It requires minimal coordination between faculty and departments.
3. It allows faculty members and departments autonomously to opt into or out of the teaching of “service” classes.
4. It maintains an appearance of requirements for marketing purposes — it looks complex at first glance.
5. It doesn’t turn off those students who want complete freedom to select courses.