

3. CURRICULUM (Academic Program Structure)

(Also relates to student learning experience, and faculty and staff time allocation)

Direction

Knowledge and understanding continue to be shaped in new ways. As the curriculum evolves, the faculty needs to undertake a thorough review of department and program structure to determine if the current framework, much of which was put into place in the early 20th century, is the one that most effectively educates students.

Background

The basic framework for the academic programs of liberal arts colleges was borrowed from research universities. This framework, organized around departments, has remained intact for the past century. The addition of interdepartmental programs has been the most common way that liberal arts colleges have incorporated new academic interests into their curriculum. The Committee believes the current organization of the College's academic program should be reviewed to determine if it best supports our academic goals.

The Committee recognizes that the range of academic programs offered by the College affords students and faculty broad choices, however, the Committee believes that this benefit comes with a cost. An increase in program numbers carries with it a decrease in the resources that can be devoted to all departments and interdisciplinary programs, leaving many staffed by only a few faculty members. Many programs, often those that drive curricular innovation on campus, have very small budgets and inadequate support staff.

We do not expect the overall academic program budget line to increase much beyond inflation in the near to mid future; nor do we expect the total faculty FTE to increase; nor do we expect an increase in the total FTE of academic support staff. If the College is to provide additional support to some academic units to permit them to undertake new initiatives, the Committee believes that some, if not most, of these resources will need to come from a reallocation of existing academic resources (including program budgets, and faculty and staff FTEs). The Committee also believes that the College should not offer academic programs (departments and interdisciplinary programs) that it will not be able to support in the future. The Committee believes that some increase in quality may be achieved by more effective cooperation among academic units and urges all to consider such opportunities, yet it is not convinced that the College has the financial resources to support the current number of academic units to the point of excellence. Our ability to respond to curricular initiatives and to provide academic excellence will depend on conserving and reallocating resources. As part of its review of the College's academic program, the College, led by the faculty must consider whether downsizing, reorganization, consolidation, or elimination of some programs or departments would help our efforts to conserve and reallocate academic resources.

4. CURRICULUM (Content and Challenge)

(Also related to admissions, student learning experience, institutional message)

Direction

The Committee recommends that the College undertake a review of the academic program to evaluate the overall level of challenge and rigor of our curriculum. The Committee recommends that this review should evaluate the possible impacts on rigor (perceived and real) of such matters as grade inflation, the amount of writing training our students receive, our students' level of quantitative literacy, the amount of faculty-student collaboration that takes place, the extent to which students are formally trained in methodologies, and the level of expectations faculty impose on students, both with respect to the quantity and quality of the students' work. The Committee also emphasizes that this review must be led by the faculty.

Background

During the past twenty years, the overall academic preparation and performance of our students has increased substantially. The Committee believes that Macalester will be best able to challenge its present student body, and to continue to attract the most academically gifted students in the future if our academic program is perceived to be challenging and if the College both expects and rewards high levels of intellectual achievement. The Committee believes that the best academic program is one that keeps the student intellectually engaged, and that the program best able to accomplish this is a rigorous one, that is, one that sets high expectations for students, clearly distinguishes between high quality and mediocre work, and challenges students to expand their intellectual limits.

The Committee heard from Admissions and current students that, in comparison with other top liberal arts colleges, Macalester is not regarded as offering one of the more challenging academic programs. Although those conducting the review will determine the curricular issues that should be examined, and whether in fact this perception is true, the Committee proposes several items it believes should be considered when making this determination.

The Committee is concerned that the pronounced grade inflation at Macalester may be having a negative effect on academic rigor. The Committee suspects that the grade compression that has resulted from grade inflation may be the real problem. Because grade compression provides little discrimination among mediocre, good, and excellent work, the Committee is concerned that many of our students are not learning to distinguish well from excellent work. The Committee believes that writing is at the heart of a rigorous academic program and that the College does not currently do a good job of providing writing training for our students. Students' level of "quantitative literacy," their ability to cope with basic mathematical analysis and statistical arguments, is of great importance to their capacity to function as informed citizens in contemporary society. The Committee also believes that part of rigor comes from learning academic methodology. Irrespective of the course of study, students must be formally trained in methodologies and research if they are to participate in their field beyond the basic level. Finally, the Committee believes that collaborative work with faculty members can play an important role in providing a demanding and rewarding academic experience for upper-level students.