

# **STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ANALYSIS COMMITTEE**

## **Implementing the New Strategic Plan: Elements of a Developmental Four-Year Experience**

*Discussion Paper*

**November 2022**

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this short discussion paper is to set the stage for implementing the curricular element of the newly adopted strategic plan. It begins with a discussion of the rationale for changes in the College's curriculum and graduation requirements. It then proceeds to describe some of the principles that must guide the implementation of the curricular changes called for in the new plan. Next, it provides an overview of the innovative curricular "building blocks" that other institutions have developed as they have attempted to revise their own general education programs in light of emerging challenges. It concludes with some thoughts on how some subset of these building blocks might be assembled into a compelling Macalester-specific general education curriculum – one that is both more meaningful to enrolled students and more compelling to prospective ones.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Background and Rationale

The imperative to re-imagine the college's existing general education program derives from two sources: the near-term demographic changes that will soon dramatically shrink the pool of prospective students, and the competitive challenges posed by other institutions of higher education that have already begun adapting to those changes.

### a. *The Demographic Challenge*

Much has been said about higher education's "looming demographic cliff," which will present enrollment challenges across the landscape of colleges and universities in the U.S. Nathan Grawe's research predicts that, as a result of declining birth rates during the Great Recession, the number of college-aged students will drop almost 15 percent in just five years, with the initial dropoff beginning in 2026.<sup>2</sup> These demographic changes, combined with changing views on the value of a traditional four-year college experience, mean that colleges like Macalester will be competing for an increasingly small number of students who are interested in a four-year, residential, liberal arts experience. We are already seeing the impact of fewer students opting for a "traditional" college experience, leading to the closure or consolidation of a number of institutions with a lower position in the higher education market.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this discussion paper we use the term *academic curriculum* to refer to the specific combination or sequence of courses focused on traditionally academic learning. We use the term *social curriculum* to refer to the specific combination or sequence of educational experiences focused on developing life skills. We use the term *integrated curriculum* to refer to a combination or sequence of learning experiences that includes both the academic and social curricula.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Grawe, *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press (2018).

<sup>3</sup> 81 colleges have been closed or consolidated since 2016. Notable liberal arts colleges include Bloomfield College (NJ), Burlington College (VT), Green Mountain College (VT), Judson College (AL),

Midwest and Northeast as the U.S. population has shifted more towards the south and west. While many of us in the world of academia don't enjoy thinking about the business aspects of higher education, it's imperative that we continue to innovate and present a distinctive, valuable college experience for prospective students and families.

### ***b. The Competitive Challenge***

The students Macalester admits are an unquestionably talented group who have many choices when it comes to selecting a college. As Macalester has become more selective in recent years, more attention has been paid to the percentage of admitted students who ultimately choose Mac - a metric known in the enrollment world as 'yield rate.' In the past five years, Macalester's yield rate has ranged from 21-25 percent, meaning that we must admit 2,000-2,500 students to enroll a class of ~500. The top institutions that our admitted students select, if not Macalester, include a range of well-known and highly regarded small liberal arts colleges, national private universities, and large state flagships.<sup>4</sup> Many of these institutions have yield rates significantly higher than Macalester. For example, Carleton's yield rate for the Fall 2021 cohort was 40 percent; Grinnell's was 43 percent.

Yield is not the only metric of concern in terms of our competitive challenge. While Macalester's sophomore retention rate has historically been very strong, we saw a significant decrease in the percentage of our Fall 2021 cohort who returned for Fall 2022. The average retention rate for the Fall 2011-Fall 2020 first year cohorts was 94 percent, while the retention rate for our Fall 2021 cohort dropped to 91 percent. This is particularly concerning as it has downstream impacts on graduation rates. Research is underway to better understand why these students chose to leave Macalester, but anecdotal evidence suggests that one reason may be a disconnect between the expected academic and social experience compared to the reality. We don't yet know whether these students all transferred to other institutions, and if so, which institutions they chose.

Students choose colleges based on a variety of factors, but cost, prestige, location, and academic offerings typically rise to the top of the list. All of these reasons for choosing a college could be directly impacted by a curricular redesign. Macalester continues to struggle in the marketplace in terms of being not as well known as many of our peers (something that students and families often correlate with prestige). For Macalester to stand out in a very competitive field and improve enrollment yield, offering a distinctive, comprehensive academic experience will be a key initiative. This could also serve to impact decisions regarding the cost of college in demonstrating the value proposition of the educational experience students will have. In

---

Marlboro College (VT), Mills College (CA), Mount Ida College (MA), and Wheelock College (MA). See Higher Ed Dive, 10/26/2022.

<sup>4</sup> From 2018-2021, the top ten schools chosen by Macalester's non-enrolling admitted students include Carleton, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities, Grinnell, St. Olaf, University of Wisconsin - Madison, Oberlin, Wesleyan, Vassar, University of California - Los Angeles, and the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor.

addition, further strengthening curricular ties to the Twin Cities can only help us to influence students who focus on the benefits of the location where they will spend the next four years.

The competitive challenge is intensified by online resources which allow prospective students to compare colleges at the click of a button. The U.S. News rankings of national liberal arts colleges have been online for a number of years and particular [websites](#) now allow one to see how the rankings have changed. For example, since 1988 Claremont McKenna has risen from 23rd to 9th, while Oberlin has fallen from 5th to 39th. The Department of Education's College [Scorecard](#) allows students to quickly compare median earnings of alumni across both colleges and majors. By visiting the website of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression ([FIRE](#)), students can learn how a college stacks up on tolerance toward free speech, the political diversity of its student body and other elements of campus culture. For example, Macalester currently ranks 153rd out of 159 colleges and universities for viewpoint diversity.

### 3. Curricular Guiding Principles

As we proceed with renewing the college's general education program, we must be guided by the fundamental educational goals and priorities of the College. These are derived from four basic sources: the college's *Mission Statement*; the Macalester *Statement of Purpose and Belief*; the College's learning goals; and the new strategic plan. This section provides a brief overview of these curricular "guiding principles".

#### a. Mission

*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, multiculturalism, and service to society.*

#### b. Statement of Purpose and Belief

Macalester's *Statement of Purpose and Belief* reads as follows:

*At Macalester College we believe that education is a fundamentally transforming experience. As a community of learners, the possibilities for this personal, social, and intellectual transformation extend to us all. We affirm the importance of the intellectual growth of the students, staff and faculty through individual and collaborative endeavor. We believe that this can best be achieved through an environment that values the diverse cultures of our world and recognizes our responsibility to provide a supportive and respectful environment for students, staff, and faculty of all cultures and backgrounds.*

*We expect students to develop a broad understanding of the liberal arts while they are at Macalester. Students should follow a primary course of study in order to acquire an*

*understanding of disciplinary theory and methodology; they should be able to apply their understanding of theories to address problems in the larger community. 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. Finally, students should be prepared to take responsibility for their personal, social, and intellectual choices.*

*We believe that the benefit of the educational experience at Macalester is the development of individuals who make informed judgments and interpretations of the broader world around them and choose actions or beliefs for which they are willing to be held accountable. We expect them to develop the ability to seek and use knowledge and experience in contexts that challenge and inform their suppositions about the world. We are committed to helping students grow intellectually and personally within an environment that models and promotes academic excellence and ethical behavior. The education a student begins at Macalester provides the basis for continuous transformation through learning and service.*

### **c. Learning Goals**

As articulated in the college's statement of [student learning outcomes](#), upon graduation all Macalester students should be able to:

- demonstrate Intellectual depth and breadth;
- think critically and analyze effectively;
- communicate effectively;
- demonstrate intercultural knowledge and competence;
- make informed choices and accept responsibility; and,
- engage community.

### **d. The New Strategic Plan**

The newly adopted strategic plan includes the following curricular guidance:

*Macalester is uniquely situated to offer a liberal arts curriculum that integrates our institutional values with distinctive learning opportunities. Drawing on the increasingly interdisciplinary and international experience of our world-class faculty and staff, a reimagined curriculum will inspire students to develop deep understanding in a field of study and the capacity to apply multiple methods and perspectives to address problems. We will engage our shared governance processes to update our curriculum, providing a cohesive framework and unifying experiences that prepare our students to tackle the world's pressing challenges.*

Specifically, the plan calls on the faculty to launch the following curricular "priority initiatives":

***Create a “Developmental Four-Year Experience”***

- Strengthen the student experience across the four years by identifying specific learning foci for each year. Connect and integrate learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, in ways that are equitable and inclusive.
- Develop a robust and student-centered first-year experience.

***Update and Innovate Academic Pathways***

- Create a compelling, future-focused curriculum and set of graduation requirements, framed by curiosity, innovation, problem-solving, digital literacy, justice, sustainability, and global perspectives.

***Redesign the Academic Calendar to Reimagine Our Use of Time***

- Establish an academic calendar and work schedules that intentionally center well-being by creating time for reflection, integration of ideas, community connection, and rest.
- Explore flexibility in time-to-degree to maximize use of the campus during summer and January term, potentially allowing for new models like a three-year B.A. or an accelerated pathway to graduate/professional school.

***Amplify Opportunities for Experiential Learning***

- Ensure all students have access to internships, community engagement, study away, and entrepreneurship experiences that prepare them for life after Macalester.
- Assess the feasibility of summer/January break programming to increase flexibility, grow opportunities for international experiences, and maximize use of our facilities and resources.
- Emphasize the uniqueness of our location in a capital city by strengthening partnerships with Twin Cities organizations that involve our students in mutually-beneficial learning, service, cultural engagement, and employment opportunities.

### e. Value Proposition

Although not strictly speaking a fundamental educational goal, another guiding principle that must shape curricular renewal is the need to enhance Macalester's *value proposition*.

A value proposition is simply a concise statement of why a customer should buy a product or service from a particular business. It should clearly explain how that business's product fills a need, communicate the specifics of its added benefit, and state the reason why it's better than similar products on the market. The ideal value proposition is to-the-point and appeals to a customer's most important decision makers.

If Macalester is to strengthen its value proposition, it must develop a distinctive curriculum – one that distinguishes us from our peer-competitors and that enhances our appeal to prospective students/families.

## 4. The Building Blocks of a New General Education Program

Realizing the curricular goals of the new strategic plan – and doing so in a way that is consistent with Macalester's mission, statement of purpose and belief, and learning goals – will require purposefully organizing the various building blocks described below into an integrated academic and social curriculum that spans all four years of a typical undergraduate experience. In this section, we describe each generic curricular building block, provide some insight into how other institutions have innovated in connection with each building block, and provide some guidance to the implementation team as it begins the hard work of creating a new developmental four-year general education experience.<sup>5</sup>

### a. First-Year Experience/Foundation Curriculum

Most of the institutions we reviewed have First-Year Experience (FYE) programs. Typically, these programs consist of a single required course that focuses on developing basic academic skills like writing and information literacy. Some also involve a more general [transition-to-college](#) component intended to familiarize students with the norms of college academic life.

A small number of institutions require *two* first-year courses (or a first-year/sophomore sequence). Some of these [programs](#) focus both courses on [foundational academic skills development](#). Others focus one course on basic academic skills development and the other on facilitating the transition to college. At least one other institution requires a first-year course focused on building academic skills followed by a second course focused on [exploring complex problems](#) from multiple perspectives.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Strategic Plan uses the term “developmental curriculum.” Given that this term is often associated with K-12 education, SPA suggests that we consider using a different label, perhaps “scaffolded curriculum” or “progressive curriculum.”

A very small number of the institutions we reviewed supplement these First-Year courses with required experiences beyond the classroom. These typically consist of [common](#) or [critical](#) conversations programs involving the whole incoming class and focused on teaching first-years how to navigate and negotiate viewpoint multiplicity.

One noticeable trend was that the more-innovative institutions we reviewed approached the FYE less as a one-off academic boot camp and more as the cornerstone of an “integrated curriculum” combining traditional academic educational experiences (the academic curriculum) and educational experiences that exceed the academic curriculum but that are nevertheless key to helping students meet the College’s learning goals (the social curriculum).

Based on all this, SPA recommends that, as we begin implementing the new strategic plan, we consider:

- Adopting a two-course first-year experience, involving one course focusing on foundational academic skill/literacies, and a separate course focusing on transitioning to college or other elements of the social curriculum.
- Refocusing the course-based academic element of our FYE to encompass foundational literacies beyond just college writing (see below regarding *foundational literacies*).
- Adding a required non-classroom [experience](#) that builds the culture and skills necessary to sustain viewpoint multiplicity in a diverse community (at and beyond college).
- Framing the FYE as part of an iterative “onboarding process” – i.e. less an academic “boot camp” and more gateway into a developmental “integrated curriculum” with both academic and social components interlaced over four years.
- Foregrounding the following [themes](#) (identified by IR&A as defining elements of a liberal arts education):
  - Developing the well-rounded person
  - Preparing for life after graduation
  - Gaining skills/capacities
  - Broadening perspectives
  - Discovering and pursuing an intellectual passion



### ***b. Career Exploration/Development***

Almost all of the institutions we reviewed have career exploration programs that support students seeking jobs or internships, writing resumes and cover letters, learning how to network, and preparing for job interviews. Some institutions, however, go beyond providing a menu of services and offer instead integrated career exploration/preparation pathways. These pathways are typically developmental, involving experiences that build on each other with the goal of developing the skills, competencies and attitudes necessary to transition successfully from college life to the world of work. They also typically span all four years of undergraduate education. Examples of such programs can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

As we begin implementing the new strategic plan, SPA recommends that we consider:

- Developing an integrated, developmental pathway for career exploration and preparation, one that has both classroom-based and nonclassroom-based elements and that spans all four years of the student experience.
- Organizing this as an undergraduate certificate program (see elsewhere in this document for a discussion of certificate programs)
- Integrating this pathway/program into a broader, more holistic, four-year developmental experience comprising both academic and social curricula.

### ***c. Understanding the College and Higher Education***

While some of the institutions we reviewed had some programming that was geared toward facilitating the transition to college, these tended to be limited to familiarizing new students with the norms of college *academic* life and making them aware of the curricular and co-curricular resources available to them. What no institution we reviewed did in a systematic way was introduce students to the professional or institutional ecosystem of higher education or to some of less visible aspects of Macalester life.

This would seem to be an important gap in the social curriculum. Ensuring that students have a well-developed understanding of the institution where they are studying and living for four years has many benefits, including:

- enhancing their ability to navigate and make full use of the resources available to them;
- move them away from a consumerist mentality to one more connected with citizenship (which would also benefit them as they transition to other realms of professional and civic life after Macalester); and,

- encouraging a deeper sense of connectivity/belonging (which we know correlates positively with mental health, academic performance and, over time, alumni giving).

This being the case, SPA recommends that as the college begins implementing the new strategic plan we consider building into the integrated curriculum experiences that purposefully develop student understanding of:

- the College's annual budget and business model;
- campus operations (what it takes to keep the college running: plant ops, deferred maintenance concept, energy management, grounds, custodial, etc.);
- college governance (Board of Trustees; president, vice-presidents; provost, deans, faculty governance; etc.);
- the professional life of the faculty (teaching/scholarship/service; tenure & promotion; etc.);
- sustainability (waste sorting, bike program, mulch garden, food waste, etc.);
- Public Safety (campus safety, 24/7 assistance, parking, emergency prep, fire, severe weather, active shooter, etc.); and,
- the Hamre Center (available resources, tips, etc.).

#### ***d. Learning/Knowledge Domains***

All the institutions we reviewed mandate that students take courses beyond their narrow academic speciality. These mandates typically take the form of "breadth" requirements that direct students to take courses across a range of academic divisions (most commonly social science, humanities, fine arts, and the physical sciences). Some institutions, however, structure their breadth requirements to ensure that students more purposefully encounter specific *knowledge domains* or *modes of inquiry* (rather than simply having students complete courses in each division and assume – hope? – those courses embody those specific domains or modes of inquiry).

The following are indicative of the range of breadth-requirements and related curricula we reviewed:

- [Learning Domains](#): Expressive Arts; Historical Perspectives; Literary Studies; Natural Science Inquiry; Social and Behavioral Analysis; Values, Beliefs and Ethics.
- [Breadth of Study Areas](#): Area 1 – Criticism, Analysis, and Contextual Study of Works of the Human Imagination; Area 2 – Social Institutions and Human Behavior; Area 3 – History, Values, Ethics and Cultural Studies; Area 4 – Physical and Biological Sciences; Area 5 – Mathematical and Formal Reasoning; and Area 6 – Creation and Performance of Works of Art and Literature.

- [Learning Outcomes](#): Creative Arts; Culture, Power and Identity; Global Perspectives; Historical Perspectives; Natural Science; Physical Education and Well-Being.
- [Distribution Requirements](#): Difference, Power, and Inequity; Inquiry in the Natural Sciences; International Perspectives; Visual and Performing Arts.
- [Arts and Science Requirement](#): Expression; Civilization; Society; Science/Analysis.
- [Integrative Pathways](#): A set of courses organized around a theme (food; peace and conflict; public health) that must be addressed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

As the college begins implementing the new strategic plan, SPA recommends that we:

- specify more clearly what we mean by “breadth” in the liberal arts;
- explicitly articulate what we hope to achieve by requiring breadth (the developmental benefits, goals and outcomes that we believe ought to be associated with breadth);
- decide where in the four year curriculum breadth ought to be achieved;
- consider the [relationship](#) between breadth requirements and skills/literacies development; and,
- restructure the academic curriculum to assure that *every* student experiences breadth meaningfully – that is, with an eye to achieving specific learning goals/outcomes – in the course of their four years at Macalester.

#### **e. Foundational Academic Skills/Literacies**

All the institutions we reviewed require students to take courses that develop certain foundational academic skills or [literacies](#). Among the common requirements in this regard are successful completion of courses that teach writing skills, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, digital literacy, and a second language. Also common were requirements that students take courses in internationalism/global perspectives and U.S. identity/inequality/difference. These requirements are sometimes presented as stand-alone graduation requirements and sometimes built into the breadth or knowledge domain requirements discussed above.

Some institutions integrate experiences designed to teach foundational skills/literacies into a developmental curriculum involving several skills-focused courses completed in a staged or progressive manner over several years. Examples can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

SPA recommends that before we begin working on a new four-year developmental curriculum, the college revisit the foundational academic literacies that we believe every student will need if they are to flourish at and after Macalester. Specifically, we recommend that the appropriate body revisit the existing graduation requirements and curriculum in light of the college’s learning

outcomes, with the goal of addressing the gap between these [learning outcomes](#) and our actual [graduation requirements/curriculum](#).

Two illustrative examples of such gaps include:

- **Make Informed Choices and Accept Responsibility:** One of Macalester's stated learning goals reads as follows:

*Students' actions and words reflect choices for which they should be responsible. Students make informed choices by comparing their personal values to community standards (e.g., academic discipline, profession, campus, neighborhood, etc.), recognizing ethical issues in a variety of settings, thinking about how different perspectives may apply to ethical issues, and understanding the consequences of their choices or actions.*

Today, however, a student could graduate from Macalester under the existing requirements and never have had a structured opportunity to develop the literacy in ethical reasoning necessary to meet such a standard.

- **Leadership:** Another of our stated learning outcomes is to be able to “work collaboratively within and across communities to achieve a civic aim.” This implies a capacity for effective and ethical leadership. Yet nowhere in our curriculum is there a purposeful pathway to developing that skill set. As other [institutions](#) have demonstrated, however, this need not be the case; Macalester could in fact purposefully cultivate a capacity for effective and ethical leadership through structured educational experiences if we decided to do so.

#### ***f. Active/Engaged/Experiential Learning***

All of the institutions we reviewed encourage and support various forms of active, engaged and experiential learning. These include:

- Internships;
- civic engagement activities;
- faculty-mentored scholarship, community-engaged research, and creative endeavors.

Some institutions have taken this a step further, though, actually *requiring* students to take advantage of several such high-impact learning opportunities. Examples can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

And at least one [SLAC](#) has made faculty-mentored undergraduate scholarship, community-engaged research, and creative endeavors a well-funded part of its brand. In a similar vein, [another](#) *requires* a praxis course focused on social responsibility.

SPA recommends that any new four-year developmental experience we develop include a *requirement* for engaged learning. Some [departments](#) at Macalester already offer opportunities for this type of learning on an elective basis. We recommend that the college build on this experience, and the experience of other institutions, to ensure that active, engaged and experiential learning is part of *every* Macalester student's experience (either through the major or the general education program).

We also recommend that the developmental benefits, goals and outcomes associated with engaged learning requirements/programming be explicitly articulated.

### ***g. Health and Wellness***

All of the institutions we reviewed provide opportunities for students to maintain or enhance their health and wellness. A [few](#), however, go beyond this, providing either a single [course](#) or a curricular pathway designed to promote physical and mental wellbeing in a purposeful and structured way. And at least [one](#) institution we reviewed goes even farther, requiring that students complete noncredit modules or course equivalents that provide students with “the tools to successfully balance personal well-being with social, professional, community, and global commitments.”

SPA recommends that the college consider implementing some form of required wellness learning for all students during their time at Macalester. These offerings should focus on providing the students with skills for lifelong resilience (for example, teaching students to recognize emerging issues in their own and other's health, advocate for help for self and others, and self-apply basic coping skills).

### ***h. The Examined Life***

The kind of liberal arts education offered by Macalester today is the product of an academic tradition that places a premium on cultivating the capacity to lead an “examined life” – that is, a life in which one takes charge of one's own thought, liberates oneself from ignorance and unexamined convention, and answers for oneself the fundamental ethical question: “how should I lead my life?”

Significantly, this fundamental element of a liberal arts education is reflected in the college's “Statement of Student Learning,” which states in part that:

“Students' actions and words reflect choices for which they should be responsible. Students make informed choices by comparing their personal values to community standards (e.g., academic discipline, profession, campus, neighborhood, etc.), recognizing ethical issues in a variety of settings, thinking

about how different perspectives may apply to ethical issues, and understanding the consequences of their choices or actions.”

And yet, the existing graduation requirements and supporting curriculum do not explicitly reflect this educational goal.

This being the case, SPA recommends that any future integrated and developmental four-year curriculum include structured opportunities for students to purposefully develop their ability “to analyze, reason about, and describe their own choices, take into account the ethical standards of various communities, and make decisions based on ethical considerations.”

Examples of such structured opportunities at other institutions can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

### ***i. Shared Curriculum***

Some of the institutions we reviewed have a core or common curriculum. This curriculum acts as a mechanism for ensuring that all students share a similar educational experience and, in doing so, achieve a set of common goals.

These core or common curricula typically consist of two types of learning experiences: foundational and embedded. The *foundational* experiences typically consist of two or three courses – which are the same for all students, regardless of discipline or major – taken in the first two years of the program. These courses tend to involve, in part at least, close reading of great or transformative texts – from around the world, from antiquity to modernity, and dealing with both enduring and urgent “big questions”.

The *embedded* component typically involves common experiences and associated learning outcomes built into the core requirements of majors (or other curricular pathways).

Examples of core curriculum programs can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

However they are configured, the main goal of these shared or common curricula is to inspire students, develop their creative thinking, broaden their understanding of the world, and provide context and/or preparation for their specialized majors – all core elements of a liberal arts education.

Additional learning outcomes, pursued in both the foundational and embedded elements, include the development of academic skills related to critical thinking, writing, information literacy, and oral communication.

SPA recommends that further consideration be given to developing a shared curriculum that is consistent with Macalester’s mission and values.

SPA further recommends that consideration be given to a shared curriculum model that includes a common first-year experience organized as follows:

- All FY courses meet at the same time (e.g., MWF at 1:10);
- All FY courses meet collectively on Mondays in the JBD Lecture Hall;
- During these Monday sessions, educators (staff, experts, faculty, etc.) from on and off campus would lecture or lead discussions on:
  - [psychology](#) topics (emotions, social media, sleep, happiness, etc.)
  - skills (library, writing, data visualization, etc.)
  - orientation and onboarding
  - the liberal arts; and,
  - other topics related to understanding the college and higher education (see c. above)

#### ***j. Certificate Programs***

Several of the [institutions](#) we reviewed structured their general education programs, in whole or in part, around integrated transdisciplinary pathways that culminated in formal certification (i.e. a microcredential). These certificate programs are not “vocational” in the traditional, narrow sense of that term. Rather, they are flexible, stackable pathways typically structured around an interdisciplinary theme such as entrepreneurship; social innovation; media and communication; peace and conflict; public health; business management; or sustainability. At least [one](#) was focused explicitly on the liberal arts.

Given the growing [demand](#) for such stackable credentials, SPA recommends that the college consider developing one or more certificate programs, either in the liberal arts (specifying what skills and literacies the recipient has acquired in the course of completing a liberal arts degree) or in specialized fields (public health or entrepreneurship, for example).

#### ***k. Study Away***

All the institutions we reviewed provide students with opportunities to study outside the United States. Some institutions even *require* that students have a study abroad experience. And a few institutions report that all students participate in study abroad programs and articulate that participation as a point of distinction from other colleges and universities.

The institutions that either [guarantee](#) or [require](#) study abroad programs do so by offering a combination of traditional semester-long and short-term (three-week) programs.

Typically, these opportunities are concentrated in the middle years of a four-year program, allowing stronger institutional programming in the first and final years of study and, perhaps, reflecting the ideals that students need a foundation in the liberal arts before venturing away from campus and that students should be able to bring back diverse experiences as they bring together their years of study.

Study away programs offer many pedagogical and developmental benefits to students, although the benefits may depend on how the programs are structured.

- Cultural Learning: students spending extended periods of time immersed in a new environment that differ fundamentally from their home campus will engage with different ways of living and understanding daily life, offering them important perspectives on the world.
- Language Learning: immersive contact with a language provides many students the opportunity to see a language not merely as a skill to learn in a classroom, but as a way of communicating and understanding in a context.
- Applied Experience: many study away programs integrate extended periods of time for work on independent research or in internships, both of which can be valuable supplements to the standard curriculum.
- Opportunities for curricular breadth: study away programs offer students a range of courses or even disciplinary/interdisciplinary approaches that go beyond what Macalester could offer.
- Experiential Learning: students examining history, art, literature, science, or the social world may gain deeper understanding when living in the setting that they are studying.
- Cultural Capital: experience outside of the United States gives students a familiarity with different ways of understanding the world that signal a level of engagement and ability to thrive in environments of difference. Although some Macalester students come from family situations that have given them more international exposure, those experiences are not universal.
- Additional Independence: study away programs can be times that students are moving outside of their circles of friends (and family), connecting to others, while learning to navigate new situations. These experiences may foster greater confidence to respond to the unknown/unfamiliar.



Traditional semester-long programs offer students the greatest potential to realize the benefits of study away. Those programs, however, also require a greater commitment of college resources, since the typical study away program costs more than the average net tuition revenue Macalester receives.

Short-term programs can facilitate study away experiences for students whose other commitments (academic, athletic, or outside of Macalester) may make a semester-long commitment unattractive or infeasible.

One [source](#) highlights the benefits of having students work in another country over summer, getting the benefits of international experience while also gaining work experience.

SPA recommends that the college:

- articulate more clearly how study away contributes to student learning and development in relation to other elements of the educational programs;
- consider whether short-term programs (of about 3 weeks) are sufficiently beneficial to students' developmental experience that Macalester should incorporate more of these experiences to serve students who otherwise are not participating in study away; and,
- consider whether we should require or guarantee all students a study away experience during their four years at Macalester.

### ***1. Residency and the Social Curriculum***

Macalester has long had a two-year residency requirement, [framed](#) as a component of a community living and learning model. The specific phrase “community living model” only appears on a few residential life and disability services web pages in the macalester.edu domain and is never fully elaborated. While SPA acknowledges that articulation of learning on Macalester web pages does not come close to articulating the range and depth of educational components at the college, we nevertheless note that the college is missing an opportunity to find further connections between residential life and learning goals, particularly as they relate to the social curriculum. Some other [institutions](#) offer more direct language about how residency integrates with larger learning goals.

The two exceptions to this limited discussion of the residency-learning nexus happens in the context of the first-year course program and for [language and specialty houses](#). For the FYC program, we can find web pages that include profiles of student experiences—including one identifying a “rad coupling” and another “Mac sweethearts”—that are tied to residential FYCs. Language and specialty houses offer students (by application) more independent living than a typical dormitory experience coupled with either [immersive language and cultural experience](#) or [learning experiences and commitments to a smaller community](#) based on common interests. We

draw attention to these explicit connections between residency and broader learning goals not so much to see the FYC or language/specialty houses as models, but more to show two things. First, that it is possible to envision ways to bring residential and broader learning together. Second, that these learning communities currently are structured more as options for students, rather than an integrated part of learning for all students to experience.

From a developmental perspective, we note that the college requires (and in recent years has only been able to guarantee) on-campus housing for two years. The presumption being that students will typically move off-campus when given the opportunity. The transition from campus-housing to off-campus housing may be a critical moment of student development.

SPA recommends that the college:

- examine ways to better integrate residential learning with other forms of learning and to articulate more clearly how residential life relates to our learning goals;
- consider whether there would be appropriate ways that the transition to independent living could be taught through the social curriculum.

### ***m. Life and Career Skills***

SPA reflected on the importance of developing life and career skills as part of a structured social curriculum. We recommend that the college consider developing structured, stand-alone, single-credit bearing learning experiences focused on developing the following skills:

- time management;
- applying to graduate school (general advice about making a list of schools, contacting alumni, writing personal statements, requesting recommendation letters);
- personal financial literacy (paying back student loans, savings accounts, credit cards, investments, mortgages, 401k, housing market, etc., budgeting/basic accounting (business/professional);
- working in a team (e.g., analysis of personality types/work styles and implications for team work);
- business plan writing / entrepreneurship;
- IT skills - [troubleshooting methodology](#) (valuable for ITS students, but also a good general skill);
- project management; and,
- conflict management ([Crucial Conversations](#) style workshop).

### ***n. Second Language Proficiency***

All of the institutions we reviewed require some form of demonstrated proficiency in a second language. They differ, however, in the number of semesters of language learning that constitutes proficiency (ranging between two and eight semesters).

Language learning contributes to many of the college's learning goals. Accordingly, large majorities of students and faculty view language learning as a vital part of a Macalester education (see the 2016 Second Language Proficiency Requirement assessment report). The requirement's learning goals include achieving "a level of oral writing, listening, and reading proficiency in a second language equivalent to what one would achieve in four semesters of college level Instruction" and "developing capacity to "recognize and negotiate cultural differences (e.g., customs, traditions, etiquette, taboos, histories, ideologies, institutions, and literatures) between the target culture and other cultures."

We note that these learning goals define proficiency in language – much as our peer institutions do – based on the amount of time one has studied the language, rather than an absolute level of language ability (such as one is asked to evaluate when applying for Fulbright grants or other awards or programs or even those developed by [ACTFL](#), which were used in the assessment report). The time needed to reach proficiency levels for native speakers of English [varies by target language](#).

We further note the importance of cultural learning and its connection to aspects of a social curriculum, life skills, and other aspects of learning that extend beyond the classroom.

Most Macalester students who need to complete the language proficiency requirement do so during their first years at the college, which allows them to further develop their abilities in the language(s) that they learn should they wish to do so.

SPA recommends that the college:

- consider how language education or training connects to our values and mission;
- investigate whether there are there better ways to integrate language learning with other learning goals *as a supplement/complement to language classes*;
- consider whether the college should re-examine the slate of language programs it currently offers.

### ***o. Capstone/Transition to Life After College***

All of the institutions we reviewed require capstone experiences involving a traditional scholarly/creative focus. Some, however, go beyond this to include a structured culminating

opportunity (typically during the fall of the senior year) for reflection on the student's overall undergraduate experience and the kind of learning that has taken place.

At Macalester, Departments have designed capstone experiences that seek to integrate student learning within majors; however, beyond a few basic requirements, there is little overall connection to wider student learning. In other words, the capstone experiences are seen primarily as ways to demonstrate intellectual depth. We have no dedicated culminating experiences for other goals of student learning.

Moreover, although many departmental capstone courses include moments of reflection and planning (often in collaboration with others on campus, such as Career Exploration staff), these moments within a larger class experience often are but a brief aside and may be experienced by students as another thing that they would like to do but find difficult to prioritize.

Other institutions of higher learning take a different approach – specifically, a [liberal arts capstone](#).

SPA recommends that the college consider ways to develop:

- common experiences across majors during the senior year that relate to college-wide learning goals;
- a near-peer mentoring connection among alumni and juniors/seniors in a more reflective practice sort of seminar; or, most ambitiously,
- A senior integrative capstone course that is focused on the liberal arts rather than a particular major.

## **5. Building a Developmental Curriculum**

The strategic plan commits us to strengthening the “student experience across the four years by identifying specific learning foci for each year.” Macalester currently has only a weak version of a specific focus for each year: the FYC with the college onboarding process; the second year as the discovery and declaration of a major; the junior year as the time for a study away experience; and the senior year as involving a capstone experience. SPA notes how the experiences move from more common/shared among students to more individual across the four years (and how the institutional commitment to the experience varies—with curricular commitments in the first and final years required for all students). We also note that there is not necessarily a developmental sequence suggested by these experiences in the current configuration at Macalester.

Some of the [institutions](#) that we reviewed, on the other hand, do offer a truly developmental curriculum.

SPA recommends that the college identify specific learning outcomes – academic and social; knowledge and skills/literacies – for each year, and then build an integrated curriculum that purposefully provides opportunities for students to achieve these outcomes over four years.

## 6. Integrating the Elements into a Coherent Undergraduate Experience

The strategic plan commits us to building a “compelling, future-focused curriculum and set of graduation requirements, framed by curiosity, innovation, problem-solving, justice, sustainability, and global perspectives.” It also commits us to:

- connecting and integrating “learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, in ways that are equitable and inclusive.”
- developing a “compelling, future-focused curriculum and set of graduation requirements, framed by curiosity, innovation, problem-solving, justice, sustainability, and global perspectives” and,
- building innovative pathways that assure that “all students have access to internships, community engagement, study away, and entrepreneurship experiences” so that they can “apply their liberal arts education in ‘real-world’ settings.”

And our culture, mission and learning goals commit us to promoting certain [outcomes](#) related to academic excellence, internationalism, multiculturalism and service to society.

In order to achieve all these objectives, the individual elements described above will need to be combined into a [coherent](#) undergraduate [experience](#) that [integrates](#) both the academic and social curricula around a compelling vision of what it means to be a student at Macalester – one that resonates with the prospective students that we are actually seeking to recruit.

Finally, if we are to achieve the goals laid out in the strategic plan it may be necessary to rethink the academic calendar. Indeed, the strategic plan is explicit about this, calling for us to “establish an academic calendar and work schedules that intentionally center well-being by creating time for reflection, integration of ideas, community connection, and rest,” and to “explore flexibility in time-to-degree to maximize use of the campus during summer and January term, potentially allowing for new models like a three-year B.A. or an accelerated pathway to graduate/professional school.”

SPA thus recommends that the college explore options such as a hybrid calendar (mixing more traditional semesters with shorter terms), and expanding part-term options (1 or 2 credit courses

that meet for only part of a semester). This will be the focus of a follow-on report by SPA (forthcoming, Spring 2023) that will outline more fully the various ways the college might rethink the academic calendar in the service of a revitalized, and perhaps accelerated, undergraduate experience.

## **7. Non-Curricular Considerations: Resource and Other Constraints**

As we conducted this review, we started with only a few strict constraints: Macalester needs to still be Macalester and we will need to have sufficient accreditable student classroom contact time. We did allow ourselves the ability to imagine what could be, even while setting aside the questions of whether and how additional resources could be marshaled and whether constraints might conspire to limit the benefits of multiple changes. Try as we might to keep our internal skeptics at bay, it became clear that any effort to reimagine our curriculum would be constrained by a number of factors. Among the more significant of these are:

- Physical plant
- Faculty and staff time/bandwidth
- Financial limitations
- Accreditation requirements
- Institutional culture/brand

## **8. Narration: The New Curriculum as Part of a New Value Proposition**

As we reimagine the college's general education curriculum, we need to bear in mind that we are also reimagining the college's value proposition – that is, the case we are making to various constituencies (students; prospective students and their families; donors, etc.) about why they should choose Macalester over all the other options in the higher ed marketplace.

In other words, as we reimagine the curriculum we should do so in a way that creates a liberal arts educational experience that no other college is able to offer. Among other things, this means leveraging our location in a vibrant urban center – a “plus factor” that makes us almost unique among selective liberal arts colleges, but that also positions us to compete with some of the urban flagship state universities that we sometimes lose admitted students to. While SPA recognizes that a renewed curriculum on its own will not redefine our value proposition, we also believe that it will not be possible to craft a truly compelling value proposition without creating a truly compelling integrated curriculum.