

August 31, 2023

EPAG ad hoc Curriculum Committee Report

Submitted to: The Macalester College Senior Leadership Team
and Professor Julie Rogers, Chair of EPAG

Submitted by: Professor Ernie Capello and Professor Duchess Harris, Co-Chairs

Introduction:

The Educational Policy and Governance Committee (EPAG), chaired by Professor Mario Solis Garcia, decided that the College could benefit from an ad hoc EPAG Curriculum Committee that would address strategies to bring the curriculum in line with the new Strategic Plan. After an application process, Professor Ernie Capello and Professor Duchess Harris were chosen as Co-Chairs. The other committee members selected are Nancy Bostrom, Jody Emmings, Angi Faiks, Elicora Hansonbrook '25, Ruth Janisch, Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, Paul Overvoorde, Jos Peña, Amy Sullivan, Jaine Strauss, and Dan Trudeau.

Our charge was to:

1. Document the strengths and opportunities of our current graduation requirements that include general education, distribution, and second language proficiency courses; and,
2. Provide a written summary of alternative curricular models, along with their strengths and limitations.

From the start of our process, we determined that we could not follow this charge in its entirety. The assignment seemed both too large (i.e., a full curriculum review did not seem possible in the two months we had available to us this summer) and too small (we were advised to think big and imagine broadly, rather than simply list other colleges' curricular strategies). Over the summer, we thus dug into our own experiences with the current curriculum; reviewed existing curriculum reports produced over the past two decades; began to explore alternative models and pathways; and started to articulate possible principles that could be considered in future curriculum reform and the implementation of any major changes in the short and long term. For the sake of continuity, and due to the timeliness of this work, we request that EPAG extends the mandate of the ad hoc Curriculum Committee to include the beginning of the implementation process, and that the appropriate administrator(s) join us.

Curricular Planning

In order to execute our work, we met nineteen times as a large group between May 26th and July 27th, along with multiple small group meetings. This work can be roughly divided into three periods:

- 1) Organization, Problems and Principles (May 26-June 7th)

During this period, we worked to collate information from various internal and external curriculum reports and discuss what we saw as strengths and weaknesses to the current Macalester Curriculum. A critical moment came through an exercise to visualize and understand the root causes through separating out patterns of behavior, structural influences and underlying mindsets that hamper student learning and faculty/staff wellbeing.

Key insights included recognizing that power is reflected in internal structural and/or cultural barriers to pedagogy, the prevalence of a transactional approach to curricular pathways (we dubbed this the “bingo card” approach for short), and the related issue that current requirements do not support a liberal arts education but rather serve the purpose of securing course enrollment. We also acknowledged confusion about Macalester’s identity and brand. We surfaced a mindset of fear across our community (of failure, social comparison, resources, change) and a lack of school spirit. One equally powerful lesson from this phase concerned the impact of individual agency and the power of reflection. While individual instructors and programs embrace these strategies, we would hope to see this institutionalized across the college.

2) Gathering Comparative Data (June 7-June 28)

During this period, we broke into smaller groups that researched alternative curricular models around three key items: “A First Year Experience”, “Community and Connection”, and “Requirements?” Each group researched these elements and shared initial findings on June 28.

Key insights included strong support for a full-year First Year Experience, a deep desire for fostering community across all constituencies of Macalester College, and a strong sense that our requirements have only been additive over time. Currently, there are 64-72 required credit hours (of 128 needed for graduation) if no double-counting was allowed. This is much more extensive and limiting than those of comparable schools. Another key insight was the absence of a scaffolding of the undergraduate career so that there are distinct pedagogical goals for first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior students. A final and crucial insight concerned the importance that Advising would take on were we to drastically cut the number of General Education and Distribution Requirements. This led us to consider the need to more thoughtfully develop a culture of Advising competencies through training and mentorship, possibly with multidisciplinary teams including staff and possibly alumni or students, regardless of any future decreasing of requirements.

3) Synthesizing and Identifying Action Steps (June 28 - August 1)

During this period, we began to articulate principles and action items for the future work of both this committee and the broader Macalester community, especially EPAG and the Faculty. We explored and attempted to distill our conceptualization of the importance of a “liberal arts” experience as foundational to any future curriculum. We began to group the many suggestions and action items through a process of sorting next steps into recommendations connected to: a) implementation strategies, b) culture and connection, and c) aspirational academic culture.

Key insights included an understanding of curriculum as a dynamic and living educational experience grounded in coursework but not exclusively so; a realization that our distinction as a liberal arts college with strong commitment to social action and internationalism might be stronger than we thought at the start of this process; and a commitment to recognizing the pedagogical work of our entire Macalester community even as we affirm that not all learning experiences should be measured through “credits.” Finally, we recognized that the interconnected nature of curriculum reform and other Macalester experiences must be deliberately thought through when taking any next steps.

4) Finalizing Report (August 7-August 31)

We met with the Senior Leadership Team, the co-Chairs of all the Strategic Planning Implementation Groups, and Julie Rogers, Chair of EPAG on August 7, 2023. The collective co-chairs agreed at this point to share the draft reports with all SPI group members. We solicited feedback and held drop-in office hours on August 22 and August 25 with our group. The following report incorporates the feedback that we received.

Next Steps:

After these deliberations, the EPAG *ad hoc* Curriculum Committee arrived at a number of items for EPAG's consideration during the 2023-24 academic year. One of our conclusions is that effective changes to the learning experience include crafting strategies to change the College culture and shifts in power and organizational structure. These steps are necessarily interdependent and require buy-in from all involved. In our meetings, members of the committee offered examples of the many times in which Macalester supported pilots of curricular and non-curricular initiatives that proved to be unsustainable--due to lack of financial support, dedicated staff and faculty, broader community endorsement, and so forth. As we work through changes that will better align our curriculum with Macalester's Mission and Vision, we are mindful of listening to input and gathering support from the college community, as well as of offering sustainable models.

We request that EPAG extends the mandate of the ad hoc Curriculum Committee to include the beginning of the implementation process, for continuity; and that the appropriate administrator(s) join us in this process. Below, please find our objectives for the coming year, some items that we would hope to begin exploring more systematically this year but which would be culminated during a full curricular review which we would recommend, and some specific possible pathways forward.

The objectives of our work during the academic year would be to:

1. Present different models of the related items to stakeholders;
2. Listening and feedback sessions with the college's multiple stakeholders (e.g., alumni, faculty, staff, students);
3. Listening and feedback sessions by division, along with Faculty Advisory Council (FAC) representatives;
4. Drafting of a broader model for revising the curriculum consistent with directives of the Strategic Plan to present to EPAG.
5. Develop plans for piloting initiatives, perhaps including a First-Year Experience, in the 2024-2025 academic year.

Central items that the ad hoc Curriculum Committee could begin examining in 2023-2024 might include:

1. Aligning the curriculum with Macalester's Mission and Values and our [college-wide educational outcomes](#) for students.
2. Creating scaffolding for the four years of a student's academic career, i.e., noting the distinction between first-year experience, sophomore year, junior and senior year pedagogical goals. This scaffolding would:

- a. Be arranged so that the progression supports student agency and a future-oriented training in the liberal arts
 - b. Purposefully integrate reflection into the progression through the different stages of learning in a 4-year experience
 - c. Incorporate advising and reflection that supports exploration and connection to a career
 - d. Review advising expectations by considering what training faculty need to support a more tailored advising experience that supports reflective learning; identify mechanisms to distribute advising loads equitably and explore the possibility of moving to advising teams that include staff, alumni, or student peers;
3. Evaluating the structure & extent of graduation requirements, with an eye to promoting student agency and autonomy, to cultivating trust, and to promoting deep and sustained learning;
 4. Discussing the existing system of departmentally allocated faculty FTE as well as the relationship between concentrations, minors, majors, and disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, keeping in mind the centrality of academic departments as the cornerstone of liberal arts learning;
 5. Valuing faculty scholarship for the student learning experience, and the potential creation of a center for research;
 6. Reassessing the use of time (students, staff, faculty) to enable reflection, experiential learning, and advising;
 7. Reconsidering the Academic calendar, including potential length of spring break, as well as discussing which specific learning experiences would be better suited to slots such as a J-term and/or summer, including a configuration of the calendar to support a more intensive advising experience;
 8. Deepening synergistic relationships between faculty and staff in collaborating for student learning experience;
 9. Ensuring Equitable Access to [high impact learning experiences](#) in and outside of the classroom (on and off campus—Community Engagement, Library, Entrepreneurship, Internships, Study Abroad, and so forth);
 10. Understanding the costs and benefits of the 18-credit per semester limit.

Possible pathways forward to help implement these changes:

- Collect information from multiple constituencies during 2023-2024, through online surveys, town-hall type meetings, and listening sessions in response to possible revisions to the structure of the curriculum.
- Commit to formulating 1-2 models for a revised FYE from this community feedback process and test it/them across several courses in 2024-2025 academic year [this would need to likely involve an opt-in model among other considerations]. The revised FYE should be a part of shifting the culture around selecting coursework from one of scarcity to one of curiosity and interest in cross disciplinary learning.
- Convene a FAC-led inquiry with all departments to consider structural shifts in the curriculum, advising, and potential changes to requirements
- Consider creating a Curriculum Committee as a standalone elected committee, so as not to overburden EPAG and GERC. This would necessitate shifting these committee's mandates in the Faculty Handbook.
- Create a Dean of the First year experience, who would coordinate with faculty, department chairs, the SLT, and other offices that touch the first year experience.

Additional Notes

This report necessarily does not include all of the materials discussed, shared, and generated by our committee. Nonetheless, we wanted to include a few examples of materials that we feel need to be considered alongside any other curriculum reform measures, that is to say, we wanted to spotlight some materials that we hope are not lost in the shuffle.

1. Defining the Curriculum

At various points across the summer we bumped into a crucial conundrum, namely, just what did we mean by “curriculum?” Ultimately, we decided that defining curriculum was not as useful a procedure as attempting to wrestle with the limits of the term “curriculum.” We have thus come to the conclusion that “curriculum” might best be considered as a dynamic term that will have many meanings and associations for multiple constituencies on campus and in the broader Macalester community.

To help illustrate this, please consider an attempt at defining the term developed by the “Aspirational Academic Culture” group in our last full week of work. Even as the sub-committee acknowledged that ‘definitions matter,’ the attempt to define curriculum brought up questions about whether it is simply “courses” that EPAG oversees or whether EPAG oversees “intentionally designed experiences” that might not be credit bearing but could be required for graduation. We don’t know the answer, which is reasonable.

Thoughts on defining curriculum (aka definitions matter)

Macalester curriculum is broadly defined as the totality of significant, intentionally designed student experiences that occur in the educational process and college experience.

Note: Courses are an integral part of the curriculum but also all of the experiential learning both inside and outside of the courses are essential and meaningful elements of the curriculum. When we talk about curriculum we are talking about both of these elements. For clarity purposes, when we speak of the curriculum that EPAG oversees, we are talking about formal courses.

A further breakdown of curriculum acknowledges that all of the following are in play in our broad definition of curriculum:

- Explicit curriculum: Formal credit-bearing courses plus intentionally designed learning outside of course catalog listings (e.g. Library courses on information literacy)
- Experiential curriculum: Sports, clubs, residential life learning, internships, etc.
- Implicit curriculum: Lessons learned from culture of the school and the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations
- Hidden curriculum: Things learned that are not overtly included in the planning or even in the consciousness of those responsible. Not always meant to be a negative. It can sometimes benefit learners. For example, the relationships formed or not formed between students and other students or even students and teachers.
- Excluded curriculum: Acknowledging that we intentionally exclude certain things from the Macalester curriculum.

*Adapted from: readings of
Smith, Dewey, and Kelly*

2. Progressive or Developmental Four-Year Experience

From our first few meetings through the end of our summer gatherings, the idea of a progressive four-year experience continued to be discussed by the committee. While this did not have as much immediate traction as the idea of a full-year first-year experience, the importance of thinking developmentally about the four year experience and building in spaces of reflection on the part of students proved a consistent recurrence in our conversations. To that end, one of our final synthetic groups whose focus was on “Culture and Connection”, drafted a vision of what such a four-year progressive curriculum might look like:

A “Connected” Four Year Liberal Arts Curricular Experience at Macalester

First Year Get curious! The FYE curricular experience supports intellectual and creative exploration via engagement in all four divisions. This includes: advising and curricular choices that support openness to new fields of knowledge; engagement on campus and with a wide array of communities in the Twin Cities & the region. Design Thinking approach.

FYE may co-exist with a version of the FYC similar to our current FYC (one semester, small group with academic advisor) as long as the FYC has some shared goals and values (that is, not just a regular course taught to a small group of students)

Sophomore Year Reflection/introspection: [choosing a major/minor](#), including a sophomore fall retreat during Fall Break and “Major Day” in Spring; building collaborations and inter-class connections

Junior Year Intensive Planning & Focus: study away, internship, community engagement; more structured guidance related to their MacMap (Life Plan/Manifesto? Global Connections?); solidify faculty and staff mentoring relationships; intentionally planned meetings of other students across different departments

Senior Year Culmination of studies & work: capstones, internships, alumni engagement, graduation & life after Macalester!

3. Ways of Learning or “Transactional vs. Transformational”

During our last group session, we had a stimulating discussion about “ways of learning” as defined in Fishman and Gardner’s 2022 book: [The Real World of College](#). The authors highlight four ways of learning that coexist at colleges:

- Inertial (one goes to college because one does)
- Transactional (one goes to college to get degree, only does what is necessary, looking toward job)
- Exploratory (one goes to college to explore and learn broader skills and mindsets, to “marinate” in new ideas)
- Transformational (one goes to college to reflect upon one’s beliefs, with expectation that one will be changed and learn lifelong lessons)

The key insight from this work is that students at liberal arts colleges tend to more emphasize the middle two (transactional and exploratory) and faculty and staff tend to emphasize the last two (exploratory and transformational). This struck a chord with an early exercise in which the

group listed key moments in their educational background, which were synthesized with individual words like: engaged, rewarding, belonging, astonishment, collaborative, acknowledgement, proud and exploded! Each of these terms highlighted exploratory or transformational learning, and, as often as not, a moment in which a teacher demonstrated “trust” in our ability to learn and grow and develop new knowledge, skills, etc.

Our current curriculum’s bingo-card frame (with Gen Eds, Distribution Reqs, or Major Reqs) implicitly tells our students that we don’t trust them to make their own decisions and be in charge of their own educational experience. While there are good reasons for some limits on a student’s pathway through a Macalester education, our current system limits their self-empowerment – and actually creates barriers to the transformational learning environment to which we aspire.

We are hopeful that the reforms that we are considering will enable Macalester to be more firmly a transformational place where students will be trusted to learn alongside the rest of our community, faculty, staff, alums, and our broader local and global neighbors and partners.

4. Chesterton’s Fence Note

One of the subjects that we discussed extensively originated in a recognition that there may be barriers to the kind of changes that we are starting to consider. Beyond simply dismissing these as political divisions perhaps occasioned by trenchant commitment to earlier curricular models or political gatekeeping, we began to talk about the importance of exploring why these structures were set up in the first place.

We discussed this issue as the [Chesterton’s fence](#) question, which refers to a philosophical reflection by writer G.K. Chesterton who argued against pursuing reform for its own sake without first considering why certain decisions had been made in the first place. The specific issue concerns an imagined reformer’s desire to get rid of a fence. As Chesterton puts it, if one is not aware of why the fence was put up in the first place, can one anticipate the impact or unforeseen consequences of that fence being torn down?

An analogue within our process might be seen within the Divisional requirements that must be met by all Macalester students. While we are well aware that these do not have any articulated learning goals, we imagine that they were put into place when it was understood by the faculty that exposure to the distinct epistemologies of our four academic divisions would facilitate interdisciplinary and well-rounded thinking.

Such a goal may have been self-evident at some moment; however, this is clearly no longer the case. While we as a committee would be pleased to see a more fully articulated and clear engagement with the “why” behind any form of distribution requirement including “forms of inquiry” models, we nevertheless would recommend being more explicit in uncovering just why we have such requirements before replacing them. Indeed, an EPAG ad-hoc committee reviewed these Divisional Requirements in 2016 and chose not to endorse replacing them due to a lack of political will and a sense that this would involve a larger process than the committee was then willing to endorse.

While today may be a different time, we must continue to recall the importance of developing thoughtful reform in a holistic manner, attendant to the interdependent nature of our present, past and future experience, both curricularly and societally.

Concluding Remarks:

In conclusion, we would like to thank EPAG for selecting us as co-chairs and for choosing our fellow committee members. We met our assignment with intentionality. We look forward to working throughout the 2023-2024 academic year. We hope that we can encourage the faculty to imagine and implement a new curriculum that will help us move forward as we imagine Macalester.