

General Education Committee Interim Report

INTRODUCTION

The College last revised its undergraduate curriculum forty years ago. In the early 1990's, a faculty committee made ambitious recommendations in an effort to craft a more unified general education curriculum couched in the values and methods of a liberal arts education. The College faculty voted against the broader plan and, instead, endorsed a number of smaller changes to the general education distribution requirements.

The fact that the College's general education curriculum has remained the same for almost half a century is not in itself an argument for reform. However, re-examining the curriculum allows us to return to the question of what a curriculum is and what principles it can embody and advance. A curriculum is not just a formal list of requirements; it is an assertion of values, purpose and commitment. It is an expression of what the faculty holds vital to know, share, steward and discover. A curriculum is also a touchstone to which alumni can return again and again as they continue to learn and develop over the course of their lives. And, finally, a curriculum is a public pledge to uphold and pursue knowledge that is both valuable in itself and for the purposes of a life well-lived. It provides a compelling rationale and a clear vision of the purposes of a university education.

Our curriculum also needs to be dynamic; it needs to be a subject of constant debate among faculty and students. In this sense, it needs to be a collaborative, shared enterprise undertaken and led by faculty members dedicated to fostering its broader ends while collectively planning, teaching and revising its basic elements from particular courses and labs to broader requirements and literacies.

CITIZENSHIP & VOCATION, DISCOVERY & FLOURISHING

The College provides students an opportunity for self-transformation. But it does more than this. The development of intellectual and ethical commitments takes place in communities and institutions that both form and are changed by our students. A general education, therefore, should form our students to consider their labor, their leisure and their life in terms of citizenship and vocation. A general education curriculum should prepare students to be citizens of a range of communities, sometimes overlapping, sometimes distinct. It ought to prepare them for the multiple roles that they will inhabit and struggle to make sense of and integrate over the course of their lives. It should introduce students to the challenges of balancing self-interest with the interests of others and the interests of the various communities in which they live and learn.

A general education should also prepare students for vocations and for membership in vocational communities and institutions that act and effect change in the world. They may be doctors, but they will participate in medicine as a vocation; they may be politicians, but they will participate in public service as a vocation; they may be biologists, but they will participate in science as a vocation.

The liberal arts, further, seek to teach students how to develop capacities to evolve, change and adapt to a world that is in constant flux. They aim to deeply involve students both in the

acquisition of knowledge and in the discovery of knowledge—as designers, shapers, and creators of unprecedented forms of understanding, research and apprehension. They aim to develop habits, skills and learning that last a lifetime and to equip students to become people who are freely capable of forming themselves and adapting to constant change. The liberal arts aim to enable people to flourish as active, reflective, articulate and contributing members of civic communities. Above all, the liberal arts aim to equip people for lifelong engagement in activities that give purpose and meaning to their entire lives and to the communities in which they live.

A curriculum should have a significant, positive impact on the education and preparation of our undergraduate students for such a life. Our claim, as a committee charged with the review of the existing general education requirements, is that the most important way to address these concerns, as well as broader questions about the future of higher education, is through a bold, meaningful and purposeful revision of the undergraduate general education curriculum.

We propose that a successful liberal arts education at UVA accomplishes the following:

1. Equips students for lives of purposeful vocation in a dynamic, rapidly-changing world;
2. Prepares them for engaged citizenship—locally, nationally, and globally;
3. Involves them as co-discoverers of unprecedented scholarship, research and understanding;
4. Enables their individual human flourishing;
5. And readies them to contribute to the flourishing of the Commonwealth and the global common good.

With these guiding principles in mind, it is equally important to ask ourselves:

- Are we doing these things in the best way possible? If not, how can we best do so?
- How can we educate students for their work-lives and the democratic challenges of an ever-more-global and digitally transformed world?
- How can we equip them for vocation and citizenship, not only by what we teach but by the ways we teach?
- How can we supplement the learning that takes place in lectures, seminars and labs, with what occurs in collaborative, team-based, experiential learning environments?
- How can we ensure that even as we are readying students for the new we are immersing them in the best of what is enduring? (Including the need for deep historical understanding, a grounding in ethical reflection and a knowledge of the multiple cultural traditions and languages of the world).

FOUR PROPOSED COMPONENTS OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

The Committee proposes a curricular structure subdivided into four components:

1. Critical Engagements & Global Literacies
2. Crossing the Disciplines
3. Major Field(s) of Study
4. Capstone Experience

Summary of Component One: Critical Engagements & Global Literacies

The first component of the proposed general education curriculum would offer a set of shared or common experiences organized around four modes of Critical Engagement and three Global Literacies (see page 4).

This component reflects an understanding that from their first moment on Grounds we want to ask our students to consider what it means to be critically engaged citizens of the world: What does it mean to be ethically engaged; aesthetically engaged; scientifically and empirically engaged; engaged with differences of culture, history, race, religion, gender, social organization and political thought. At the same time, we want students to become fluent with the languages of world vocation and citizenship that will be essential to their individual flourishing, the flourishing of the common good, their capacity to contribute to the discovery of new knowledge and their ability to navigate a heterogeneous, rapidly-transforming, ever-more-cosmopolitan globe. This includes education in writing, rhetoric and digital expression; world languages; and the core global languages of computation, quantification and data.

Summary of Component Two: Crossing the Disciplines

The Committee proposes that for the second key component of study we ensure that all students are challenged to explore and cross the breadth of the liberal arts disciplines: in the natural sciences and social sciences, in the arts and humanities.

This has been the domain of the existing area requirements, which we envision continuing fundamentally to be taught by departments and other existing programs. We want to expose our students to the best of our faculty as they perform the practices of reasoning embodied in their lives as scholars across the various disciplines of the arts and sciences, e.g. literature, biology, economics, statistics or the studio arts.

Summary of Component Three: Major Field(s) of Study

The third proposed and vital component of an undergraduate liberal arts education remains our students' major fields of study in which they immerse themselves in distinct disciplines of knowledge (or inter-disciplines, for those completing interdisciplinary majors programs).

Here the Committee's clear sense is that the College's departments and programs should continue to operate as they do presently, maintaining oversight over the design of majors and holding an open invitation to work with the Dean's Office on ensuring and enabling the best balance of continuity and innovation in each major (or minor).

Summary of Component Four: Capstone Experience

Finally, the Committee suggests that all undergraduate students have a capstone experience: one that allows them to pull back as they complete their undergraduate studies to intentionally re-engage the founding propositions—presented to them in their first-year courses—of embracing and enriching the world after Final Exercises through their chosen vocations and commitments of citizenship. The capstone should, additionally, invite fourth-year students to reflect on the invitation to the unprecedented discovery of knowledge embodied in the full course of their studies. It should provide them an occasion, as they prepare for their graduation from UVA, to articulate their distinctive place in the production of knowledge, research, artistic or social design, understanding of historical and political life. It should express a commitment to continually renew the promise of a free and democratic society, anchored in a free and educated citizenry, that the University has represented with unprecedented vitality since its founding and will carry into the unfolding future of its third century.

DETAILED INTERNAL ORGANIZATION OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The proposed general education curriculum would be distinct from those of traditional, smaller liberal arts colleges because it would reside at the center of a public research university. We want to reaffirm our commitment to the value of research and the purposes of a research university. As scholars and teachers, we are committed to the notion that a robust and valid general knowledge is based on knowledge of particulars. Similarly, the particular knowledge of the disciplines can easily become isolated outside the pursuit of a broader general knowledge and constant reflection on the ends of knowledge. Thus, a robust, intellectually serious general education curriculum should be informed by the best research and scholarly exploration from across the disciplines. Our goal is to expose students to the broad range and shapes of knowledge and to inspire them to explore as they move on to concentrations and majors. Intense engagement with materials and rigorous exposure to methods from across the disciplines is crucial. In this sense, the proposed general education curriculum would not be an end in itself. It would prepare students for the more in-depth forms of knowledge represented by departments and their various disciplines.

Component One: Critical Engagements & Global Literacies

Internally, the first component of the curriculum would be organized around four Critical Engagements and three Global Literacies. Each represents ways of apprehending and engaging the world and mark a site of radical sharing for our various disciplines, our faculty and our students. When we say “empirical engagement,” for example, we are not simply referring to a competency or skill that can be checked off. These are intellectual arts of knowing, doing and reasoning. They refer to how and why scientists or historians do what they do as *scholars*. Thus, each encourages various dispositions of the liberal arts.

As a crucial feature of this first component, the Committee proposes establishing a rotating set of faculty fellows drawn from across the departments and disciplines to co-design and co-teach the Critical Engagement courses (required of all first-year students). The goal would be to create a regularly renewing faculty cohort, spanning the full range of disciplinary perspectives and capable of introducing constant innovation to these courses while collectively dedicating themselves to the vibrancy and richness of this signature first-year experience. This cohort of faculty would represent the College as a whole and assume responsibility for designing,

teaching and cultivating these Critical Engagement courses that would be at the center of our student's first-year experience.

Given the ambitious nature of instituting a set of common and shared experiences and the desire to support maximum curricular flexibility, the Committee also proposes a substantial rethinking of "curricular time." Our hope is that these core curricular experiences would model and encourage faculty members and the administration to think well beyond the credit hour and, especially, the dominance of the three credit-hour course as the default measure of learning and teaching. We want to expand the notion of curricular time to involve a broader range of experiences: labs, short-term courses, practicums, internships and other forms of courses.

Critical Engagements (8 credits total)

1. Aesthetic Engagement
2. Empirical & Scientific Engagement
3. Engaging Difference
4. Ethical Engagement

Global Literacies

1. World Languages (14 credits)
2. Writing, Rhetoric & Digital Expression (3 credits)
3. Quantification, Computation & Data (6 credits)

The first subset of Component One (Critical Engagements) would consist of common courses (8 credit hours) designed and taught by the faculty fellows drawn from across the College. These common, shared experiences would serve as intellectual touchstones derived from the modes of engagement rather than traditional disciplines. We envision a grand pluralistic set of arguments and conversations in which different and sometimes competing visions are revealed, explained, shared and evaluated. These courses should help students work out not only their own individual ideas and deepest commitments but also facilitate and support their engagement with the ideas and commitments of their fellow students and faculty members.

Several prototypes of a first-year, common and shared experience within the Critical Engagement courses have been considered by the Committee. One example prototype (see Figure 1) includes four 2-credit courses taught non-sequentially, each taught in 6-week courses and dedicated to a particular Critical Engagement. Students in this model would garner exposure to each mode of engagement through discrete, intensive experiences designed and delivered by faculty cohorts. A second example prototype (see Figure 2) proposes two 4-credit courses team-taught by two members of the faculty whose appointments are linked to different Critical Engagements. Students in these courses may investigate a question or topic through a combination of two (or more) Critical Engagement lenses. While these and other prototypes have been considered, we are committed to recommending pedagogically robust models that meet the needs of our students and invite faculty innovation.

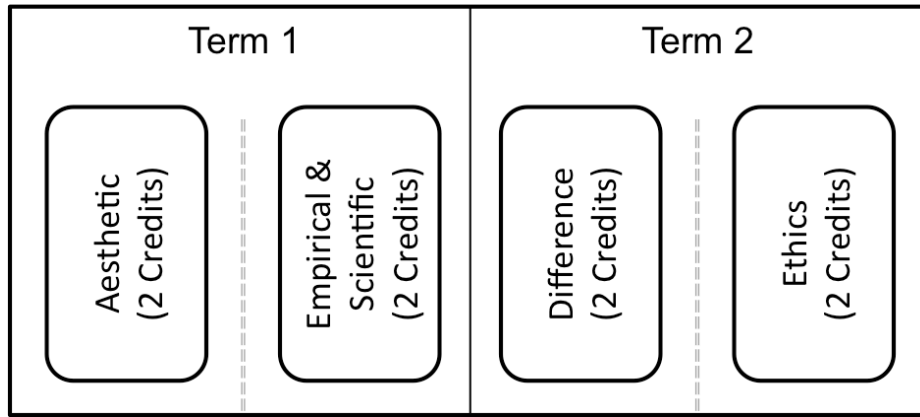


Figure 1. Four 2-credit courses taught non-sequentially

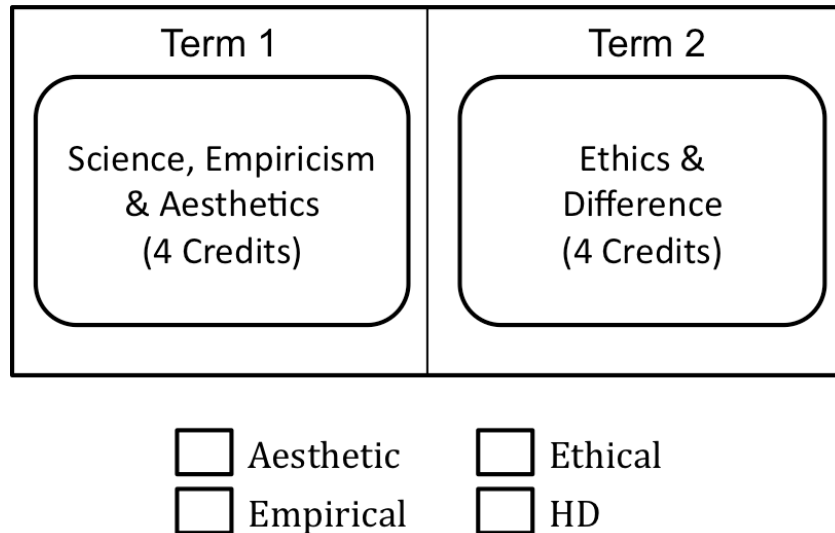


Figure 2. Two 4-credit courses combining Critical Engagements

The second proposed subset of Component One courses would develop students' skills and understanding in a set of Global Literacies. We believe every student in the College should be able to communicate in a language other than her or his native language, to express himself or herself through the learned arts of writing, rhetoric and digital expression, and to systematically investigate and interpret forms of quantitative expression, whether in mathematics, computation, logic, data, statistics or other quantitative fields.

We propose that students continue to satisfy the World Languages component (presently referred to as the "Foreign Language Requirement") at the intermediate proficiency level (enrollment through the 2020 course level). These courses would continue to be taught by the various language departments in the College. We also propose that all students enroll in a redesigned writing requirement that would include rhetorical and digital literacies to help them

succeed in the 21st century. The Writing Program would take responsibility for the design and teaching of these courses. The second writing requirement also would be maintained with the understanding that the QEP/Writing committee will propose a set of modifications designed to enhance and enrich this requirement. Finally, we propose that all students complete six credits of a quantitative, computational, logic or data driven language as part of their general education requirement. Responsibility for these courses would reside in the relevant departments of the College (e.g. Mathematics, Statistics, etc).

The Committee also proposes accepting external credits (e.g., AP, IB) earned prior to matriculation for the World Languages and Quantification, Computation and Data requirements, but not for the Critical Engagement or Writing/Rhetoric/Digital expression requirements.

Component Two: Crossing the Disciplines

As previously noted, we are also dedicated to exposing our students to the breadth and depth of content in the various disciplines and inter-disciplines represented by our faculty. While the first component of the proposed curriculum will vitally complement the more specific scholarly commitments of departments and other programs, the curriculum will succeed only if it embraces the importance of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary knowledge. Thus, the majority of general education credits (18 – 21 credits) would be delivered by the departments and other programs as proposed in Component Two.

At this point, the Committee does not yet offer specific recommendations on how to structure requirements for this component, but it has identified a series of key questions, including:

- 1) Should students' required trajectories of study across the disciplines be organized according to existing or revised categories (e.g. the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, historical perspectives, non-western perspectives)?
- 2) Should requirements for study in these department/discipline-crossing courses instead be organized by extending the Critical Engagement categories (ethics, science and empiricism, aesthetics, difference)?
- 3) Should there be a blend of categories (along the lines of the matrix curricula at peer institutions) including the traditional disciplines and the Critical Engagements (e.g. humanities and scientific engagement; social science and ethics)?
- 4) Should student trajectories across the disciplines instead be organized by new categories (e.g. science and society, global history and culture)?
- 5) Or should we design a series of tracks to provide flexibility in students' areas of key passion while nevertheless requiring breadth of learning, as in:
 - a. A science (or science and technology) track requiring 12 science/technology credits and 9 other credits spread across the humanities and social sciences
 - b. An arts and humanities track requiring 12 arts and/or humanities credits and 9 other credits spread across the sciences, humanities and social sciences.
 - c. A social sciences track requiring 12 credits in the social sciences and 9 other credits spread across the sciences and humanities
 - d. A global history and culture (or cosmopolitanism) track requiring 12 credits in history and global studies and 9 other credits in science and the arts.
 - e. As a core parallel: a student-designed track allowing students, with the permission of a faculty committee, to design their own intellectually compelling trajectory of study across the disciplines.

Component Three: Major Field(s) of Study

While not a specific part of the general education curriculum, nevertheless, the Committee recognizes the major(s) as integral to the undergraduate educational experience. We are not offering specific recommendations to change the current structure of the majors. However, the Committee invites departments to think about the ways in which the majors could leverage the proposed general education curriculum.

Component Four: Capstone Experience (1-4 credits)

Here again the Committee is not yet offering specific recommendations on how a capstone experience could be structured, wanting instead to get a sense of the faculty's overall suggestions, counsel, and insight on the other proposed components before fleshing out models for how this final element might be structured, and how it would align with existing distinguished major and similar fourth-year projects.

NEXT STEPS (APPROXIMATE TIMELINE)

Fall 2015

- Curriculum Town Hall
Update, Intro to the Four Components with a Focus on Component One (Nov 19)
- Student Council & College Council Forum (Nov 23)
- Summary Interim Report and Web Feedback Form Available (Nov 25)
- Curriculum Town Hall,
Focus on Component Two and Capstone (Dec 14)

Spring 2016

- Sub-Committee Reviews Faculty Feedback (Jan)
- Curriculum Town Hall
Draft Models of Revised Curriculum (Feb)
- Faculty Feedback and CEPC (Feb-Mar)
- Faculty Vote (Apr-May)

Fall 2016

- Launch of Forums

Fall 2017

- Launch of Forums (second wave)
- Proposed Beta Launch of New Curriculum

Fall 2018

- Proposed Launch of New Curriculum

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