

FINAL CURRICULUM PROPOSAL

Feb. 28, 2015

❖ EXPLORE, COLLABORATE, ACT

The new curriculum adopts “Explore, Collaborate, Act” as an animating principle that provides a common and engaged discourse for the Colleges.

This vision for the curriculum incorporates many of the areas for which the Colleges are already justly celebrated, including our remarkable Global Education program, our rich integration of Service Learning into and beyond our academic offerings, our longstanding focus on thinking and working across traditional disciplines, and the close work of research and creativity that connects faculty and students. By adopting “exploration, collaboration, and action” as an animating principle, the new curriculum foregrounds three ideas that we hope to amplify in our individual courses, throughout our programs of study, and across the arc of each student’s career at the Colleges. Moreover, this principle also defines the distinctive role of the Colleges in the twenty-first century, expressing what we aspire our students to embody, an ethos that focuses their progress through college and beyond. In the broadest sense, it articulates what we—students and faculty alike—*do* at the Colleges, highlighting our vibrant interconnection and interdisciplinarity.

❖ FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

We propose that we enhance our current program of First Year Seminars in order to offer our students a more robust common experience and a more consistent foundation for academic success.

Our current First Year Seminars are single-semester courses, often interdisciplinary in content and form, taught on subjects designed to stimulate intellectual curiosity, with a focus on fostering writing, speaking and listening, and critical thinking skills.

To enhance this model, we would like to introduce First Year Faculty Fellowships. Each September, faculty members scheduled to teach an FSEM in the following year will be invited to apply to become one of ten First Year Faculty Fellows in the year to come. These will be substantial positions, recognized by generous stipends, or additional research or travel funds.

Fellowships will be distributed among the five divisions (humanities, fine arts, social sciences, natural sciences, and interdisciplinary programs) and between tenured and untenured faculty, whenever possible. The Curriculum Committee will be responsible for designing an equitable and transparent application process for

awarding the fellowships for Fall 2016. The fellowships will be awarded by the Provost, in the first round on recommendations of the Curriculum Committee and in subsequent years, on recommendations of the previous year's Fellows.

Fellows will be responsible for meeting regularly through the fall semester as a faculty learning community under the guidance of the Associate Dean of First Year Studies, with resource support from the Centre for Teaching Learning and with administrative support from the Provost's Office, in order to:

- **study and discuss best practices** for first year learning; discussion topics will vary from year to year depending on the interests of the group, but may include things like first year writing, critical thinking, information literacy, critical numeracy, embedded research, and digital pedagogies, among others;
- **develop a set of common experiences** for next year's incoming students; this will also vary from year to year, but may include: selecting some annual themes, setting some common readings, and organizing some common activities such as lectures, performances, field trips, service learning projects, and so on;
- **design and launch initiatives for collaborative teaching and learning**, including interdisciplinary pods, learning communities, and two-semester sequences that the other FSEM faculty will be given the option of participating in;
- **present** their work and propose their plans for the coming fall at the December faculty meeting;
- **help to recruit FSEM faculty** to teach in the FSEM program in the coming year and encourage them to participate in the year's collaborative initiatives; and
- **help to mentor FSEM faculty**, with support from the Associate Dean of First Year Seminars and the Centre for Teaching and Learning, through the process of course design within the context of the first year program.

Through the fall semester, the Fellows will keep other FSEM faculty apprised of new ideas and developments in their conversation and seek input from them as well. In January, the Provost's Office will support an off-campus retreat for all of the following year's FSEM faculty to finalize plans for the common experiences scheduled for the coming fall, to workshop new ideas for pods and other forms of interdisciplinary collaboration, and to learn more about best practices in first year course design and pedagogy.

While the common experiences will be designed for the entire incoming class and required of all first-year students, FSEM instructors will nevertheless determine how to incorporate these common elements into their own course designs. We anticipate they will adopt a variety of approaches. Similarly, we expect that the initiatives for collaborative teaching and learning will take different forms in different years, as interested faculty use this opportunity to experiment with innovative and interdisciplinary approaches in their FSEMs.

This enhanced version of our current FSEM places no new demands on faculty FTEs and no extra demands on student schedules. And it accomplishes a number of the things that we identified as central goals for the curriculum revision:

- it creates a richer common experience for our incoming students, while also remaining flexible and responsive to change;
- it helps our faculty provide a more robust and consistent academic foundation for our incoming students;
- it helps us approach the FSEMs as connected learning experiences, not disconnected teaching experiences;
- it nurtures new and innovative pedagogical initiatives for faculty, especially with respect to collaborative teaching and learning, but without predetermining them;
- it encourages dialogue about interdisciplinarity and general education between faculty members across divisions and ranks;
- it fosters collegiality, community, and mentorship around teaching.

❖ **MAJORS AND MINORS**

We will require students to complete at least one major and one minor, without regard to their disciplinary or interdisciplinarity. (Naturally, any student completing a double major would fulfill this requirement as well.)

Our surveys suggest that the faculty strongly supports the idea that students should be required to develop two different areas of depth and specialization, but that our current distinction between disciplinary and interdisciplinary majors and minors is more problematic for our students than it is beneficial.

Although across the institution we continue to place a high value on the idea of interdisciplinarity, we are no longer convinced that majors and minors can be described effectively using these binary terms; nor are we convinced that requiring students to major/minor in at least one of each is the best way for them to achieve both depth and breadth in their learning.

❖ **WRITING-ENRICHED CURRICULUM**

Departments and Programs will participate in a new Writing-Enriched Curriculum program.

This is a cutting edge idea that was developed at the University of Minnesota, and we would be among the first liberal arts colleges in the country to adopt it. It takes the idea we already have in our current curriculum – the idea that communication is best taught in specific contexts that matter to students, not as an abstract skill

disconnected from their passions – and develops it further. Departments and programs, with the support of a writing studies specialist, will reflect on how they already teach communications skills (including writing, critical thinking, speaking and listening, visual literacy, and digital communications) within the context of their major. Next, and with institutional support, departments and programs will collectively develop a Writing Plan for their major.

Writing plans are designed to address a set of shared questions: How can writing in this major be characterized? What writing abilities should students in the major be able to demonstrate upon graduation? How can writing instruction be most effectively sequenced into the major's curriculum so that graduating students are able to demonstrate desired writing abilities? What assessment strategies would the faculty like to see in place? What sorts of support do faculty need in order to achieve the optimal integration of writing instruction?

Reports from the University of Minnesota suggest that departments from all divisions have found this strategy to be effective for students and rewarding for faculty. (See <http://wec.umn.edu>.)

The WEC model seems like an ideal fit for HWS for a number of reasons:

- The process is entirely faculty-driven and, thus, ensures that the teaching of writing can be integrated into each department and program in a way that enhances (rather than competes with) the mission of the major.
- It ensures that students encounter writing instruction and writing experiences in multiple courses at multiple points throughout their HWS career, rather than in only one or two courses.
- The process allows “writing” to be defined quite broadly, since writing plans may also include: digital competencies, information literacy skills, research techniques, oral communication, visual literacy, critical reading, critical thinking skills, and other key characteristics. (See UMN writing plans for some examples: http://undergrad.umn.edu/cwb/writing_plans.html.)
- Students in each major will be able to identify the specific writing characteristics and abilities they are developing. This will help them: to identify and think critically about how to approach new writing situations, to identify their strengths and challenges as communicators, to better understand the purpose and value of their major, and to speak specifically about the communication skills they gained upon graduation.

❖ CAPSTONES

All departments and programs will be required to define a capstone experience in the context of their major.

Capstone experiences are widely recognized as a best practice in higher education: they give students a tangible and substantial goal in the academic field they feel most passionate about, and they require students to generate a substantial work of scholarship they can look back on with pride after graduation. Most departments and programs on campus have already defined a capstone experience of this sort, and so this is mostly a call for those who have not yet developed one to do so. Departments and programs will be free to choose the form that these capstone experiences will take.

❖ PILOT PROJECT INITIATIVES

In the curriculum review process, members of the HWS community repeatedly voiced the need for a curriculum that helped students focus on the pressing challenges of the 21st century. The review also consistently emphasized the idea that collaborative teaching, collaborative learning, and interdisciplinarity were still widely valued as hallmarks of an HWS education. Many ambitious and innovative ideas emerged that tried to build on these foundations, but did not make it into the final proposal, most often because there were concerns about the feasibility of implementing and sustaining these ideas as ongoing requirements in the general curriculum. With this in mind, we propose an approach that has the potential to draw faculty and students together to explore, collaborate, and ultimately, act on these challenges in a variety of ways.

The Provost's Office will set up a structure to support pilot projects for classes that address issues of concern in the 21st century, that embody the curricular vision of "Explore, Collaborate, Act," and that employ collaborative teaching strategies to encourage collaborative learning, especially for students in the spring semester of their first year and in their sophomore and junior years.

Pilot projects will be approved by the Provost, and the courses developed out of the projects will be approved by COAA. There will be support for faculty development, acquisition of materials, and for academic enrichment, including travel to related sites or events and bringing guest lectures or performers to campus. Proposals for pilot projects must be collaborative, with two or more faculty developing the course content and pedagogical design, and must address the following questions:

- How does the project address a challenge, issue, question, or problem of consequence to the 21st century?
- How does the project incorporate the model of "Explore, Collaborate, Act" for both the faculty and the students?
- What genre(s) of writing and kinds of information technology does the project include?
- Does the project include attention to developing an understanding of mathematics as a tool of inquiry?
- Does the project help students address other curricular goals?

- Which departments and programs will accept the course for credit toward their major and minor?
- How will the success of the pilot project be assessed?
- Is the model replicable by other faculty?
- To what extent does this pilot project offer a model that we might wish to consider adopting as a permanent element of the curriculum in our next curriculum review?

The pilot project can be for a one or a two-semester course of study, and following its completion, will be reviewed for renewal for up to two additional years. These pilot projects may not involve first year seminars, but they emerge from them and build upon them.

❖ GOALS

The goals continue to receive broad support from faculty, staff, and students as one of the defining elements of the HWS curriculum. Dissatisfaction with the goals is focused primarily on how they are currently assessed, since there is a widespread perception that different advisors hold their students to inconsistent and inequitable standards. Many advisors also report that the process of certifying goals has reduced advising to an uninspiring and largely bureaucratic process. Because of this:

For the new curriculum, lists of specific courses will be provided to students to tell them which courses can be used to fulfill each of the goals.

These lists will be constructed in consultation with the faculty who teach these courses and formally approved by CoAA. The lists will be kept updated as new courses are proposed, and they will be distributed to students in advance of registration each semester. Our hope is that these lists will steer our students into academic directions they might otherwise have overlooked, and thus be an excellent starting point for focused and meaningful advising conversations.

There is also widespread consensus that the language of the goals needs updating to reflect our current values and priorities. However, we did not feel it was possible for us to undertake this detailed task until the larger framework of the new curriculum was approved by the faculty. As a result:

We recommend that a new committee be formed to revise the specific language of the goals, bringing this new language to a faculty vote by the end of 2015.

Furthermore, we recommend that whatever this new revision of the goals may turn out to be, it should not require more than eight classes to complete (most likely three classes to cover breadth in math, science, and fine arts, and five classes to

explore pressing issues dealing with gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, identity and difference, social justice and ethics, the local and the global, environmental sustainability and political action, digital literacies, and so on.)

❖ **GOING FORWARD**

Following approval by the faculty, the new curriculum will be presented to the Board of Trustees for their approval at their April meeting and then to the State of New York. It could come into effect in September 2016, when the Classes of 2020 arrive on campus.

In the next year and a half, much work remains to be done to address questions about:

- the implementation, maintenance, and assessment of the curriculum
- academic and technological support for the curriculum
- the Colleges' mission statement
- adding an academic component to orientation
- the academic day, the academic year, and contact hours
- advising
- student assessment
- e-portfolios
- the relationship between the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular elements of student experience
- a clear schedule for future assessment and revision of the curriculum.