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ENGAGING STUDENTS IN ADVISING AND GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

Rachel Most and Chad Wellmon

ABSTRACT

The focus of this essay is to examine how general education requirements and advising are connected in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. To do this, we begin with a brief description and history of general education requirements. We move next to a description of the advising system and general education requirements of the College of Arts and Sciences and the current requirements and advising system and conclude with an overview of where the College is headed within the next three to five years.

Keywords: advising, curricula, general education, liberal arts, University of Virginia College of Arts and Sciences

Background and History

What Is a Curriculum?

A curriculum is not just a formal list of requirements; it is an assertion of values, purpose, and commitment (Boyer, 2006). It is an expression of what the faculty holds dear and true—what is worth knowing, conserving, sharing, stewarding, and defending. 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 form certain kinds of people and uphold and pursue knowledge that is valuable both in itself and for the purposes of a life well lived.

A curriculum occupies a middle space between ideals and pedagogical practice, between a faculty's aspirations and its attempts to give them shape and reality. Thus, it pushes for what ought to be and recognizes the limits of what often is. It provides a compelling rationale for and clear vision of the purposes of a university education.

In designing and teaching a curriculum we, as a faculty, make normative claims. These claims need to be clear and given content. It matters what we assign our students to read and why; it matters what we have them do in our labs, studios, and libraries. Every course, every assignment, and every exam is a statement about what is worth knowing and what is not. What we teach and how we teach shapes our students' intellectual and moral habits and imaginations.

A curriculum 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, above all, by faculty members dedicated to fostering its broader ends and collectively planning, teaching, and revising its basic elements, from particular courses and labs to broader requirements and literacies. And it must be accompanied by excellent advising.

General Education: A Brief History

For most of the twentieth century, many of these broader curricular aims and purposes were embodied in general education programs and efforts. According to Stevens (2001): "The general education movement consisted of a circle of influential professors and administrators, including Adler, Hutchins, McKeon, and R. S. Crane of Chicago, Barzun, Erskine, and Mark Van Doren of Columbia, and Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr, of the University of Virginia and later of St. John's College" (pp. 171–72). Until the end of the nineteenth century, the shape and content of most, if not all, American college curricula were either explicitly or implicitly based on particular religious traditions (Veysey, 1965). Whatever their limitations, and they were many, these traditions lent colleges relatively coherent resources for designing a cohesive and structured curriculum. As colleges and universities gradually drifted away from these traditions, they struggled to recover the sense of wholeness and unity that holistic, religious-based curricular orders had afforded (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996). This was the context in which general education programs emerged. From Columbia's and Chicago's core curricula to St. John's Great Books program, these curricular innovations were surrogates for what had been religious-based visions of the unity of knowledge, learning, and culture.

These general education initiatives were also motivated by the rise of the modern research university between 1880 and 1920. As the consequences of this new institution gradually became apparent, university and college presidents and faculty began to worry about the fate of undergraduate education. Some lamented that undergraduate education was being subsumed by the professionalizing and specializing imperatives of graduate education, while others worried that it was simply being shunned by universities' desire for the prestige associated with research and productive graduate programs. Others yet worried about life after college and the job market. Hutchins, for example, protested against schools that focused on job training, writing that "vocationalism leads, then, to triviality and isolation; it debases the course of study and its staff" (in Stevens, 2001, p. 175). As the reader will see below, however, we will reclaim and redefine certain words such as *vocation* and *vocationalism*.

For the research university's critics, the new curricula organized around concentrations and electives, which began to replace the prescribed programs of moral education common to most American colleges, produced specialists and dilettantes. But for the research university's defenders, the religious-based college model was an anachronism. It provided insufficient training in the modern sciences, mathematics, and languages other than Latin and Greek; it was little more than a finishing school for the country's Protestant elite.

General education was an attempt to address these concerns by supplementing departmental courses and giving a certain order to the increasingly dominant elective system, as initially proposed and implemented by Harvard president Charles Eliot (1898) in the late nineteenth century. When faculty crafted the first general education programs, they typically appealed to broader notions of a "liberal" education, that is, an education designed to cultivate the values rooted in the long history of the liberal arts such as a curiosity about oneself and the world, an openness to debate and discussion, and a commitment to writing and speaking well. The aim was to provide a synthetic or cohesive learning program. The initial general education programs emphasized moral formation and development and the provision of basic knowledge necessary before proceeding to more specialized study.

General Education in the Twenty-First Century: The Challenges of Pluralism and the Ethics of a Liberal Education

Faculty across the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia (UVA) lament the lack of coherence and unity in our current curriculum (see below). Students graze at a smorgasbord of unrelated courses, and the College faculty rarely works as a whole to make robust curricular demands on students. We implicitly endorse the notion that individual choice is the ultimate value.

Eliot's embrace of "liberty in education" continues to hold sway, both at UVA and across most colleges and universities. His advocacy of the elective system was, in part at least, part of a larger effort among the new generation of university presidents toward the end of the nineteenth century to avoid religious sectarianism. If university curricula such as Harvard's could no longer be organized around one particular religious tradition, then they would have to be organized more directly around the choices and decisions of individual students.

Universities both public and private continue to live in the shadow of Eliot's elective system. And that means that faculty teach curricula that are in large part based on students' choices and desires—what Eliot (1898) celebrated as students' "freedom of choice in studies" (p. 125). It is no wonder, then, that our own teaching efforts and the experiences of our undergraduate students seem to lack cohesion. But as faculty at a public university, UVA, in the twenty-first century, what could give our curriculum unity and coherence? We cannot and do not want to return to the nineteenth-century American college, whose coherence came at deep costs—the exclusion of women and people of color, for example. More recently (over the past decades), the demographic changes of our own student body have transformed a small, southern college for white men into an institution that represents the range of experiences and values encountered across the globe. Our students arrive here, however, both worldlier and less rooted; they are less committed to any particular set of traditions or principles. They are the products of our twenty-first century and the pluralism of traditions, voices, and social identities that has come to define it.

This situation presents both problems and possibilities. We view it as creating the possibility to rethink general education and the liberal arts for the twenty-first century. As a public university, the University of Virginia aspires to be representative. It strives to resist the domination of any one voice over others. It aims to create an environment in which voices from the full range of traditions, cultures, and identities represented on our grounds can be heard and engaged. Any attempt to build a curriculum upon a singular culture or tradition, be it the Protestantism of nineteenth-century American colleges or the vague humanism of mid-twentieth-century Great Books programs, is both naive and wrongheaded. What, then, can give our university a common purpose in a highly pluralistic American liberal democracy such as ours? What can organize a common general education curriculum that aspires for some sense of unity and coherence of purpose? What can bind the many together? We may never recover the unity and coherence of our eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, but we might forge a different kind of unity—one that better suits the needs and longings of our student body and our faculty colleagues.

We propose that our general education curriculum should be devoted to an unwavering commitment to articulating and engaging different visions of the true and the good. We want our students to be formed through reasoned, embodied encounters and engagements with conflicting positions and rigorous reflection on their own commitments and deepest-held convictions. The College of Arts and Sciences curriculum should not only help students work out 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. We envision a grand pluralistic set of arguments and conversations in which different and sometimes competing visions of the good and the true, be they different forms of knowledge or different religions, are revealed, explained, shared, and evaluated.

In order to achieve this, we need first of all to acknowledge that faculty members and students come to the university with their own desires and hopes and notions of the good, the human person, and what counts as authoritative knowledge. In a pluralistic society, the university has to ask systematically how the manifold ends and purposes of the people who inhabit it might fit together, but it can only do that if it acknowledges that its scholars and students are full, embodied people with desires and, oftentimes, incommensurable notions of the good. Universities need to discard the ruse that its faculty can leave their notions of what is valuable and worth knowing at the campus gate; this is both false and detrimental.

College provides a rare and unique space and time to encounter these competing claims and struggle with uncertainty, conflict, and the new. It is an opportunity for the productive use of uncertainty both internal and external. Our curriculum should help students develop the ability to reflect on, refine, and articulate the intellectual and ethical commitments that they will continue to develop over the course of a lifetime.

Current Requirements in the College of Arts and Sciences

The current general education requirements of the College of Arts and Sciences have been in place for more than forty years; they were only slightly modified in the early 1990s. At that time a review committee proposed more significant changes, but, for various reasons, they were not adopted.

Currently, the general education requirements are split into two groups: competency requirements and area requirements. The competency requirements consist of a first writing requirement (a specific course or set of courses), a second writing requirement (filled from a range of courses across the College), and a foreign language requirement (completion through the

second semester of the advanced level and the equivalent of four semesters). The area requirements consist of

Social Sciences: two courses/six-plus credits from two different social science departments

Humanities: two courses/six-plus credits from two different categories (literature, fine arts, moral and philosophical perspectives)

Historical Studies: one course from the history department or a course flagged as meeting this requirement

Non-Western Perspectives: one course flagged as meeting this requirement

Math/Science: twelve credits from two different departments (there is no math or quantitative requirement)

What these requirements have done quite well is expose students to the breadth of study available in liberal education. Students must, for example, take science or math classes, and they must take humanities classes. But what advisers repeatedly see is almost complete randomness in the manner in which these requirements are filled. One student might take anthropology and sociology for the social sciences requirement (never taking economics or gender studies), and another student may take economics and politics (never taking a class on culture). For some students, though not many, these two courses could be the only social science classes in which they enroll. Others yet may be exempt from the requirement completely using Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment credit. Students rarely, if ever, look for classes that complement one another—they select classes that have space, fit their schedules, and are popular.

The Past: Advising at UVA from 1950 to 2005

In the late 1950s, the College of Arts and Sciences initiated what was called the Association Dean system. The system began in 1957 with four association deans, and a fifth dean was added in 1958 (Cauthen, 1958, p. 7). The system was organized around the first-year student residence halls. The result was that it “provided a closer supervision over the academic and extracurricular affairs of the College students and has inculcated a growing awareness in students on the importance of proceeding satisfactorily to the College degree” (Cauthen, 1958, p. 7). At the core of this advising association was an association dean (assistant dean or academic dean), though the dean did not live with the students as is the case at other colleges. Each of the deans oversaw a small group of faculty advisers, and each student was assigned one. There was also staff from Residents’ Life.

After just one year observable differences were noted: “Fewer students are now being suspended either because of grades or because of excessive absences from class; the majority of students are in far better academic standing in regard to their required work” (Cauthen, 1958, pp. 7, 18).

A secondary goal was that students would complete their general education requirements (breadth) during the first and second year, leaving them time to focus on the major in the third and fourth year (depth), and that they would complete their degree in four years. Students were also assigned to a faculty adviser, though we do not know how that task was accomplished sixty years ago. The Association Dean system was the real innovation, and sixty-plus years later it is still in place.

The Present: Advising at UVA from 2005 to Today

The Association Dean system is still the primary advising system utilized by the College. Today we have one associate dean, twelve association deans, one honors program director, and eight staff who oversee undergraduate operations. Of the twelve advising associations, nine are still based on residence halls, and three are not. Those three associations consist of Echols Scholars (our honors program students), who mostly do live together; external transfer students; and student athletes. Each of these three groups has its own association dean.

The primary goal of the association deans is to serve as advisers to students—to help them navigate their way through the College in four years, complete the general education requirements in a meaningful way, and declare a major, on time, in an area of primary interest. The association deans are, in essence, “überadvisers”—while they cannot answer every question that comes their way, they can answer the majority of them, and for those issues they cannot address, they clearly know who best can help the student.

In an effort to improve advising for students and for the faculty who advise them we started a new initiative in 2005 called College Advising Seminar, or COLA, classes. COLA classes are one-credit, graded seminars that meet once each week for seventy-five minutes in the fall semester. Student enrollment is capped at eighteen first-year students, all of whom are assigned to the instructor for their lower-division advising. The COLA seminars are topically focused on an area identified by the faculty member. Ideally they pay special attention to the relationship of the topic to the College curriculum as a whole, allowing faculty to teach students how to discuss important issues, how to read critically, and/or how to relate real-world issues to the kinds of

courses they have an opportunity to take. COLA courses have rigorous reading and other assignments in keeping with the one-credit format. Students meet for the course weekly, and some significant portion of time during the course of the semester is devoted to “advising issues” (e.g., selecting and declaring a major, study abroad opportunities, career services, internship opportunities, undergraduate research, etc.).

These classes have been hugely successful. We started with just seven in 2005 and offered sixty sections in fall 2014. We hope to offer seventy sections in fall 2015. Student feedback includes comments such as these three examples:

I felt that with all of the confusion and stress transferring from high school to college brings, COLA really helped me sort through issues. These weren't major life issues but simply how to make the most of my time, how to pick a major, what organizations to get involved in, etc. I really feel like it kept me focused and grounded in my first semester.

Enrolling in the COLA seminar was one of the best decisions I made. I instantly bonded with the professor, and he was a good advisor for me. As far as the class itself is concerned, I learned how to read and interpret scientific literature, primary sources or otherwise, in a more skeptical and thorough manner. I learned to think like a scientist, which I would not have gained had I only taken large introductory science courses with an emphasis on memorization. I was challenged and grew from it.

I loved my COLA class! Not only was it an interesting class/topic, but it allowed me to get to know my first year adviser on a more personal level. I'm one of few out of my friends who has taken a COLA and many of them said they have only met their advisers once. I still am able to list mine on recommendations and it has had a positive impact on me being able to turn to someone like her. I think all first years should be encouraged to take a COLA.

The COLA model has strengthened nonmajor advising. Students in a COLA class rate advising higher than those students who were not in a COLA class (see Figure 1). We will therefore continue to work to find ways to increase the number of COLA classes offered each fall, though we will likely not move to a point of making it a requirement of all students.

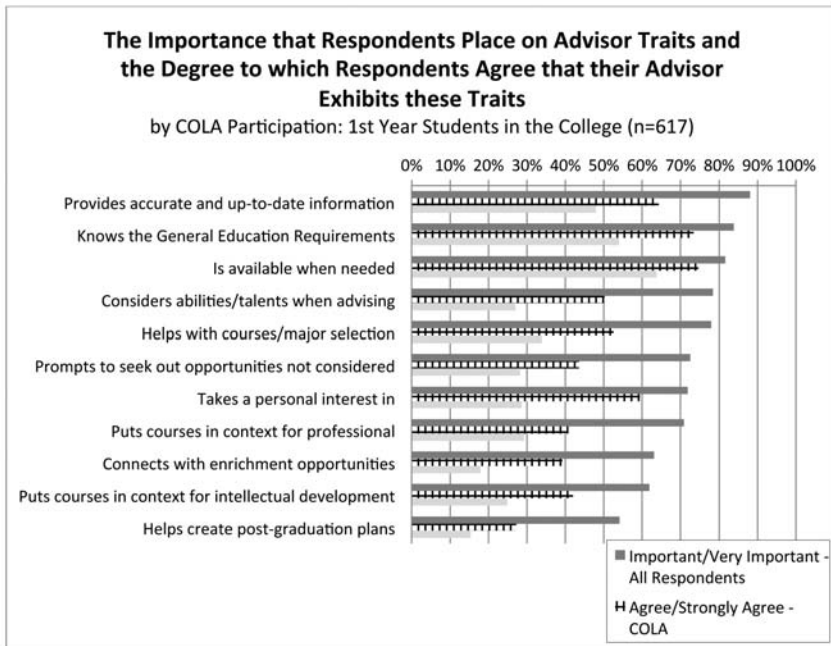


FIGURE 1: Student Expectations and Adviser Traits by College Advising Seminar (COLA) Participation

The Future: Association Deans, COLA Classes, and Curricular Reform, 2016 Forward

In the words of the newest dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Dean Ian Baucom: “The liberal arts education that our students receive in the College holds true, professional value in the global economy they will be entering and helping to remake. . . . The liberal arts will empower them to open doors of discovery, and we want those discoveries to lead to passions and vocations that attach deep meaning to their lives” (Perez, 2015). Since spring 2012, a small group of faculty from across the College have been meeting regularly to discuss curricular change, never an easy topic at any university. We have discussed many wonderful ideas—many of which we knew we could not implement due to either financial reasons or the size of the school (almost eleven thousand undergraduates). It took just over two years to develop a model that was both affordable and implementable. Again, our immediate goal is to provide students with a more cohesive curriculum and to make it easier to strengthen the bond between general education requirements and advising. We wanted to

move away from the large “buffet-style” curriculum, where students get a little bit of everything but the courses are not well integrated.

The current plan is to implement a small pilot program in fall 2016 to about 160 to 200 students by offering four to five “fora” (that name is under review). Each “forum” would have a theme, and those currently proposed include

- Arts: Creative Thinking
- Epidemics
- Human Impact on the Environment
- Mobility and Community
- Visions of the Good

Each of the above fora consists of a three-credit course that introduces students to the concept of the forum (each of two instructors will advise twenty of the forty students) and a “capstone” class that will be taken in the fourth semester, just prior to declaring a major. We are also hopeful that all students in each forum can live in the same residence hall so there can be a residential component as well.

Challenges

The problem with this model is that it is most likely not scalable to accommodate almost three thousand new first-year students and some five hundred new second- and third-year transfer students. If the above model works for those who enroll, what would the remaining students take? How will new transfer students satisfy these requirements, and how will the classes from their prior schools map onto a new set of general education requirements?

This year the curriculum committee continues its work, and the charge is to map out a new set of general education requirements by May 2015 for the rest of the College. At this point in time, we do not yet have a final plan for the new general education requirements, but they likely will (and should) include courses that help students “read, write, and think,” that is, for example, courses that help develop independent and critical thinking, strong analytical and interpretive skills, and cultural and digital literacy. There will continue to be a strong, maybe stronger, writing and foreign language component.

Though it is a cliché, we must prepare students for a world that can change rapidly and quite unpredictably. This is the true value of a liberal arts degree. We must also ensure, through clear and rigorous advising, that students understand why a degree in the liberal arts prepares them for the rest of their lives.

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