

Presentation to Faculty on General Education

January 23, 2006

The common wisdom among Provosts and Academic Deans is that if you wish to ruin your tenure, you institute a review of general education requirements. I hope that is not also true for presidents.

Last year, in response to the NSSE data, a variety of conversations emerged. One focused on the senior-year experience. The report from the task force proposed a series of recommendations, including eliminating the portfolio and LAC requirements and, possibly, dropping comps. At the same time, a group of faculty and staff was actively engaged in discussions about internationalization. This group developed a series of competencies related to international and intercultural education, often referred to as the “know, be, do” list.

This fall, the Provost suggested that it might be time to begin a conversation about general education and broached this idea with the Faculty Executive Committee and the Educational Policies Committee. Concurrently, the wisdom of dropping the LAC and abolishing comps was being debated, as the senior-year report was shared with the Planning Committee.

As I sat in different meetings, clearly the neophyte in the room, it appeared that we might be tinkering with one of the most critical vehicles for implementing our mission, namely the curriculum, without the intentionality and critical analysis that such revisions might require. It appeared we could risk the danger of making curricular changes in one area in response to a particular perceived need, while not thoroughly examining unintended consequences for the entire curriculum. This, I think, should be highly problematic for all of us as educators—for the formal curriculum, in many ways, represents our stamp. It is the most clearly and publicly articulated manifestation of how we implement our mission. It is the institution’s most formal statement of how, through education, it intends to shape its graduates.

For these reasons, I met with the Provost to suggest that we take one step back and that we temporarily halt all conversations about curriculum revision to ensure that we were both intentional and inclusive as we initiated this work. I suggested that we needed to consider the impact of the proposed changes on a K education. More importantly, I thought it was time to ask more fundamental questions about our educational goals and desired outcomes: about the link between our mission and our curriculum; about our students themselves; about the world in which they will be called to live and lead; about preparing them for a future we cannot imagine.

As the Provost and I discussed this issue, we identified even more compelling justifications for the kind of conversation I envision.

1) The last comprehensive curricular review was completed in 1995-96. Since that time, the only significant modification was a change in the cultures requirement that

occurred in 1998. We have not had a faculty-wide, serious and sustained conversation about the heart of our work as educators and scholars in the last ten years.

2) During this time period, the individuals who comprise the faculty have changed. In fact, 55% of the faculty has been hired since 1997. Thus, the majority of the current faculty has not had the opportunity to participate in a comprehensive conversation about education at K College, particularly general education and/or graduation requirements.

In that ten-year period (1995 -2005), much has changed.

- AAC&U has issued its report, *Greater Expectations*, which outlines a rubric for liberal education in the 21st century.
- The pedagogical discourse has shifted from a focus on our work as teachers to an analysis of our effectiveness as facilitators of student learning.
- Accompanying this shift is an increased emphasis on linking the curriculum to desired educational outcomes that are demonstrable as well as increased attention to the value of interdisciplinary learning as a vehicle for assisting students to make connections and to think more holistically about critical issues.
- As we have amassed a more nuanced understanding of how learning occurs and of the developmental needs of traditional-aged undergraduates, new philosophies of best practices in general education have emerged.
- Equally important, the economic and political landscape in which we operate has changed. We are preparing students to live and to provide enlightened leadership in an era of global competitiveness that is unprecedented. In fact, we may be preparing them for an era in which the United States is no longer the perceived center of the geo/political and economic universe.

Each of these factors—the length of time since our last full review, the emerging emphasis on interdisciplinary investigation and student learning, the unfolding geo/political landscape—suggests it is time for K to look, once again, at its curriculum, with special emphasis on the requirements for graduation and the general education component.

In a memo to FEC earlier this year, the Provost suggested that the faculty initiate a review of the curriculum by asking, “What is it we want to see learned at Kalamazoo College? Is our current curriculum the best way to proceed?” I would like to suggest that as we address the first question, i.e., “What is it we want to see learned at Kalamazoo College?” we spend some time asking **why** the knowledge base, skills and attitudes we identify are important? In other words, is there a clear link from curriculum to mission?

We also need to use this opportunity to learn from our students. The various focus groups conducted and the reports prepared last year suggest that our students do not experience the curriculum and the general education framework of foundations, explorations and connections as the unified whole that many of us accept it to be. If our curriculum was assessed by an objective external expert, would the K Plan as embodied by our current curriculum represent a unified whole? There are many on campus who would argue that our system of general education requirements is extraordinarily complex and burdensome for both students and advisors: Creative Expression, Quantitative Reasoning, Cultures, Areas of Study, LAC, PE. Many would say that the whole is not equal to the sum of its parts.

Another question: Does our curriculum truly prepare students for the demands of enlightened leadership in the 21st century? Given the emerging geo/political/economic landscape, is it time to revisit our “know, be and do” list? I recognize that both the Internationalization Committee and the Experiential Education Committee have been grappling with the identification of educational outcomes. My question is whether the work of these groups is **broad** enough and truly represents **all** that we are trying to accomplish.

Equally important, have we conducted a critical assessment of who our current learners are and how the way in which we answer that question might impact the content and structure of our work?

Take two examples:

- The increased incidence of obesity, clinical depression, and eating disorders among college-aged students suggests that we might want to examine what is important for students to understand about the relationship between health and wellness, on one hand, and one’s ability to make full use of one’s talents on a daily basis, on the other. What life patterns do we want to instill in our students with respect to healthy life styles? Do five PE activity courses help them achieve lifelong patterns of healthy behavior? What are we trying to achieve in this area? What do our current students need? How do we design curriculum to meet those needs?
- In November, the Michigan Land Use Institute released an analysis of the US census data that demonstrated that Michigan was the most racially segregated state in the United States: 5 of the nation’s 25 most segregated cities are in Michigan; the state has some of the nation’s most segregated schools; and 70% of our 83 counties are overwhelmingly white. Currently, approximately 70% of our students come from Michigan. One of our espoused goals is the development of intercultural knowledge and competence. As we consider the acquisition of knowledge and skills in these domains, have we given appropriate consideration to the implications of the increasingly segregated nature of our students’ experience and environment?

In 1996 (Renewing the “K” Plan: An Educational Rationale for Change), EPC wrote, “Change is needed to reinvigorate even excellent educational ideas.” This statement remains true today, and this is a most appropriate time to consider both how the faculty should approach the important work of curriculum review and what the time frame should be, given the planning process that I outlined earlier.

Curriculum is clearly the purview of the faculty, and, as such, this effort falls under the responsibility of the Provost. I would like to suggest that during the remainder of the winter and spring quarters, EPC devote its attention to collecting best practices in the area of general education and that the committee identify the most effective vehicle for sharing this information with the full faculty to ensure that there is a broad common knowledge base among us.

In the fall, when the strategic planning report has been completed and endorsed, the faculty will have an opportunity to determine how the plan might inform its consideration of both general education and graduation requirements. At that time I would hope that EPC, in conjunction with the appropriate faculty committees as determined by FEC, will begin a discussion about what we want our students to know, do and be, as well as **why** we have selected these particular outcomes.

Someone has asked me, “What’s not on the table?” My answer would be, “very little.” We will not revert to a year-round calendar. We will not grow the faculty. We can innovate by deciding what we would like to do and by determining what we will stop doing in order to have the resources to implement new ideas. Sometimes our biggest challenge is to let go of what we have always done in order to embrace something new. Our problem is not always resources, sometimes it is resistance to change.

In the final analysis, our formal curriculum is the faculty’s and by extension the institution’s definition of who we are and what our work is. The implementation of the curriculum (both how students experience it and what they gain from it) is ultimately how we will be known. Let’s not tinker with our curriculum, let us take an intentional and necessary look at what we want to accomplish, who our students are, and how we best insure their learning.

I would be happy to respond to questions.

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