

Undergraduate curricular reform efforts at Harvard and Duke suggest there's no one way to do it well

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Rethinking Gen Ed

Amid concerns that requirements may not mean much to students or professors, Harvard and Duke Universities both look to curricular changes to improve undergraduate education.

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By

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General education programs at their best impart to undergraduates basic knowledge in -- or at least exposure to -- a variety of disciplines, and provide some sense of how to study and live in a thoughtful way. Their iterations on different campuses are also supposed to embody the values of a particular institution. But how often do they meet that mark? Two institutions concerned that their general education programs were somehow falling short -- Harvard and Duke Universities -- have initiated the massive undertaking of reform.

At both institutions, a major concern is that students don't have much sense of what general education is supposed to be accomplishing -- a concern at many colleges nationally. A [recent survey](#) of provosts by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, for example, found that while many institutions were moving beyond basic distribution requirements in their general education designs, just 9 percent of respondents said they believed all students were aware of their desired learning outcomes.

Varying Visions of Gen Ed at Harvard

Harvard's revamped program, which was recently approved by its Faculty of Arts and Sciences, aims to honor the various ways in which professors think about a liberal arts education, and increase student buy-in.

"While many students and faculty highlight the success of specific gen-ed courses, the gen-ed program at Harvard has not yet established a clear and consistent identity among our students and faculty," reads a Harvard program review committee's interim report from 2015. "Moreover, despite its prominence in every student's curricular experience, it plays no defining role in the identity of Harvard College. Most students agree that a well-executed

gen-ed program would be valuable, but they are confused about the goals and purposes of the current program.”

Faculty members, by contrast, “are more divided about the value of gen ed, some preferring a straight distribution requirement instead,” the report continues. “But these results are tenuous in both cases, since much of our discussion with students and faculty revealed confusion about what a general-education requirement aims to be and how it differs from a distribution requirement. ... Confusion about this distinction at Harvard stems from the fact that in practice our program is a chimera: it has the head of a gen-ed requirement with the body of a distribution requirement.”

Harvard’s only had three general-education programs in its history, and the current program was adopted in 2009. The university didn’t plan to create a new program so soon (and arguably still hasn’t) but found significant flaws in the first five-year review. Interviews with hundreds of faculty members and students revealed that there was little enthusiasm about the program.

Undergraduates in many cases were seeking out “easy-A” courses to fulfill their distribution requirements for their eight general-education courses, said Sean Kelly, the Teresa G. and Ferdinand F. Martignetti Professor of Philosophy and chair of the program review committee. “They didn’t really understand what the point of it was. And they tended not to take the courses in the general-education program very seriously.”

Faculty members, meanwhile, seemed split on what they thought a general-education program should accomplish, Kelly said. Some adhered to a more classical *ars vivendi* model, in which students are exposed to courses that teach them how to live a meaningful life. Others adhered to a more medieval model, in which students gained knowledge in each of the liberal arts (or in an era of numerous such arts, a broad selection). And others still believed in a more Romantic model, in which student choice and self-cultivation were paramount.

Kelly said that Harvard’s current program focuses more on the art of living model than anything else, with limited success. In addition to students missing the point, faculty members also reported that such courses were difficult to develop and teach.

“It’s a different range of questions -- what’s the best way to teach this material so that students will recognize that it’s not about what I need to know to go on to the next-level class, but to change the life I’m leading five, 10, 15 years from now?” he said.

Rather than ditch the art of living model entirely, however, he and his committee sought to round it out by incorporating the two others. All three ways of thinking about general education are “legitimate and fascinating,” and have a history at Harvard and in higher education more broadly, Kelly said.

So instead of eight courses in different distribution areas centered on the classical model, Kelly and his committee proposed a kind of compromise: four electives in each of four perspectives -- centered on the humanities, history and social sciences, natural sciences, and ethics and civil values, respectively -- plus three more typical university-style course distribution requirements across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering. There’s also a required course in quantitative reasoning.

The review committee’s final report refers to the improved program as a “4+3+1” model. The first four courses would come from the following categories: aesthetics, culture, interpretation; histories, societies, individuals; science and technology in society; and ethics and civics.

Guiding questions for professors creating such courses include:

- What does my area of inquiry have to offer of value to the society or culture at large?
- What does a student, who might otherwise have no further education in my area of inquiry, need to know in order to appreciate this value?

- How, in particular, will knowing these things help a student to think differently about his or her ethical decisions or approach differently his or her contributions to civil discourse and action?

The other three required courses are more typical departmental ones -- one each in arts and humanities, the social sciences, and natural sciences or engineering.

Students may test out of the last qualitative reasoning course, according to the committee.

Encouraging Risk or Laziness?

The committee also proposed that one of the general-education courses may be taken pass-fail, at the discretion of the instructor, to encourage students to take risks and enroll in something in which they may not necessarily get a top grade. Despite limited, arguably counterintuitive evidence to suggest that students who take courses pass-fail may actually outperform those who take them for traditional grades, Kelly said there's been some controversy surrounding the issue. Some professors don't believe in pass-fail, or in having students taking a course pass-fail in the same section with those taking it for a grade.

In the end, the idea of offering a pass-fail option in one course seemed like a compromise, he said. (A separate, existing policy could allow students to take the three other distribution requirements pass-fail.)

Budget issues plagued the rollout of the current general-education program in 2009. While no budget currently exists for the new changes, Kelly said 2008-9 was a particularly "inauspicious" time to be starting a new curriculum. His committee's final report makes clear that the proposal needs resources to succeed, and Kelly said he hopes "alumni and donors will see this as worth their support."

Regarding the program's success over all, Kelly said he's not in the business of predicting the future. But he said he's hopeful, based on faculty participation so far. "I was here in 2006-7 when we discussed the original program, and the tenor of discussions is dramatically different," he said.

The next challenge will be administering and transitioning to the new program -- another huge effort. Kelly estimated that it won't actually be adopted until after 2017 at least.

Edward J. Hall, Norman E. Vuilleumier Professor of Philosophy and chair of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' standing Committee on General Education, reiterated that the general-education program voted on last week wasn't new, but rather an enhancement of what's already in place.

The "primary mission of courses in this program is to focus on some problem or issue likely to be of significant importance to the lives of our students, postgraduation, and to draw on the instructor's scholarly expertise and intellectual insights in such a way that, coming out of the course, students will be able to grapple with that problem or issue in a much more sophisticated fashion," he said.

In requiring just four such courses, instead of eight, Hall continued, the enhancements make it possible to ensure a high level of course quality and rigor. Whereas designing the previous number of courses to allow students to fulfill their requirements was probably "too tall an order" for the faculty, he said, the new number of eligible courses -- 120 to 150 -- seems more manageable.

Hall differed from Kelly a bit regarding the pass-fail option, saying he wasn't sure it was a good idea. In any case, the faculty will be watching to see what effects it has on student engagement. "If it leads students to take risks, delving into courses outside their comfort zones, then that's great," he said. If it "leads them to phone it in, in gen-ed courses taken pass-fail, then we'll need to change the policy."

Making Duke Distinct

Unlike Harvard, Duke did intend to take a hard look at its general-education program for most undergraduates,

Curriculum 2000, which has been in place for about two decades. That's not because it was failing but rather because, as at Harvard, there seemed to be little enthusiasm for it -- particularly as two-thirds of professors have left since it was adopted. While Curriculum 2000 emphasizes areas of knowledge, methods of learning and classroom innovation, a new program presented for the first time last month seeks to streamline requirements, foreground the liberal arts and put Duke's stamp on general education. And because it stresses student agency and designing one's own educational pathway, it's tentatively being called Experience Duke, Deliberately.

"We have both a responsibility and an opportunity to reassert and reimagine the value of a liberal arts education," reads a recent report from the curriculum review committee. "The liberal arts and sciences landscape is both under siege and in flux. The value of the liberal arts is contested in no place more than here in North Carolina, where a narrow utilitarianism dominates debate about public higher education. At the same time, knowledge, what constitutes it, and how it is created and shared continues to evolve."

Duke's redesigned curriculum "needs to embrace the challenges of this new ecology creatively and deliberately," it continues. Graduates "still need to be ethically responsible, able to engage multiple languages and logics, be theoretically versatile, able to mount sophisticated arguments and able to deploy appropriate data and evidence. But how we cultivate this sensibility, these perspectives and capabilities needs rethinking at Duke and beyond. Our students need more than ever to be challenged and empowered to be intellectually and personally creative, agile and resilient."

The proposal is guided by the committee's assertions that "simple is good" and "simple and more scholarly is even better," based on feedback from students that too complicated a general-education program would hold them back intellectually and experientially. At the same time, the committee says, the program should be a Duke signature. Students, faculty and staff in interviews "asked for something bold, something inspirational and something that reflects the very best of what Duke is today. Good is not good enough at Duke. Many believe that Duke can, and should, be known for its curriculum."

The proposed shift would maintain Duke's emphasis on language, cross-cultural competencies and data analysis. But it includes several new elements, perhaps most significantly the Duke Experience -- a multidisciplinary, team-taught, flipped-format course centered on a shared educational experience. According to a proposal, all first-year students would take a common, 10-month course led by five faculty members from different disciplines. Suzanne Shanahan, an associate professor of philosophy, co-director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke and chair of its curriculum review committee, said how and whether the course will center on a given theme is still being debated. There are concerns about particular themes being more suited to some disciplines over others. But preliminary possible topics include mind and body, climate change, and race and inequality, to rotate every three to five years.

The committee report describes the experience like this:

"For students to understand how to navigate the intellectual terrain and craft their own coherent pathways, they need to experience the diversity of perspectives, logics and modes of scholarship early on at Duke. They need to see them in interaction. ... The Duke Experience would be a truly common first-year experience with shared lectures and perhaps even shared readings. It is a space for deliberative discussion, scholarly writing, analysis and reflection."

Another aspect of the plan is sustained work in a field beyond one's major. Duke already encourages interdisciplinary study, and 83 percent of students conduct work in second field. But the general-education program would bump that figure up to 100 percent, with students required to pursue a second major, a minor, a certificate or an independent sequence. This is about encouraging students to be "intellectually adventurous, and to think about how they can chart a pathway through the curriculum" to uncover the "animating questions" of their studies, Shanahan said. So student's major and secondary field could be complementary, such as political science and educational policy.

Shanahan is currently in Jordan, interviewing Syrian and Iraqi refugees with a group of undergraduate researchers as part of the university's existing Duke Immerse program. That kind of experience parallels the general-education proposal's other element: a mentored scholarly experience. Students would fulfill it through one of a number of efforts, including but not limited to lab work under a faculty member, independent research, an internship, or an arts or writing project.

The proposal also includes five learning expectations for undergraduates:

- Communicate compellingly.
- Understand other languages, cultures and civilizations, past and present.
- Understand different forms of scientific thought and evidence.
- Understand creative products of the human imagination.
- Evaluate, manage and interpret information.

Faculty members were receptive to the proposal at a meeting last month, but some had concerns, including how first-year writing would fit into the Duke Experience, or how to know what qualifies as a mentored experience or secondary field work.

Additional questions for further consideration included in the report -- and which recall some of Harvard's concerns -- are, "How do we combine this structure with a robust pass-fail policy to further promote academic experimentation? What student mentoring structure will need to be in place to promote a deliberative engagement with the curriculum and ensure students embrace and meet expectations? How will this be financed? What other academic support structures may be necessary? How will faculty mentoring be recognized and remunerated as part of their overall teaching effort?"

Shanahan said the curriculum committee has lots of work left to do in terms of defining just how the program will work and is still gaining feedback from faculty members.

"Whatever we do, this is an opportunity for people to re-engage with the curriculum and see what they like about it, what's good, as well as what may need to be changed," she said. "This is a process, and it's early, and there's a lot more conversations to be had."

Lee Baker, dean of academic affairs for Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke and associate vice provost for undergraduate education, said the value of the program concept is that students are forced to make strategic decisions about their education. They're "motivated and encouraged to develop their own pathway through the curriculum, taking advantage of the many educational opportunities to demonstrate that they have met the expectations of the curriculum," he said.

Baker added, "This is the liberal arts for the 21st century, where curricular engagements inform the co-curricular and vice versa."

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