

McCoy Report Summer Curriculum Reform 2010:

In Spring 2009, an ad hoc curriculum committee was charged with revising the problematic "non-traditional" requirement of the English major's literature track. The conversations emerging from that committee circulated largely around the idea that the curriculum was "broken": purposeful, well-intentioned revisions of/additions to the department's curricular throughout the years had yielded a major with too many requirements. Not only did these requirements make advising and registration difficult for students, staff, and faculty alike, but they also rendered the path through our curriculum look like a matter of simply checking off stuff on a grocery list. No wonder, then, that colleagues often lamented the seeming disengagement of those students who took courses without seeming to understand how/why those courses fit in their chosen major. The ad hoc committee thus concluded that though it would fulfill its charge and revise the "non-traditional" requirement, the exercise had indicated that "minor changes to current curriculum" would be insufficient to address larger problems.

As fate and the State would have it, New York's budgetary crisis and President Dahl's Six Big Ideas have brought us, willing and not, to the point where overhauling the curriculum entirely has become an urgent necessity. In Spring 2010, Provost Long called for volunteers to develop 'sample' departmental curricula in preparation for what will eventually be a full-scale overhaul of departmental and general education offerings. As the Provost put it at a June 21 meeting, curricular reform ought to "**create space for ourselves and room for us to go forward in a context with no resources in the near future.**" Importantly, she noted that the work of the Rethinking the Course Load group indicated that in moving from a student 5-course load to a 4-course one, programs that **actually were generative and rethought the curriculum rather than just tinkered with/re-labeled the existing curriculum** actually got something out of both process and product. She also noted the need to consider curriculum reform within the context of the Bringing Theory to Practice (and its guiding idea of transformational learning) Six Big Ideas Working Group.

After consulting with Paul, I answered Provost Long's call and have spent much of this summer developing that sample curriculum. As with all ideas proposing change, there are gains and losses, both foreseeable and unforeseeable.

My work proceeds from this first principle, somewhat cribbed from the Bringing Theory to Practice final report and affirmed by the Provost's framing remarks: Students need *room--room* to develop the skilled practice of discerning, shaping, and narrating continuously and consciously what they are doing throughout our curriculum.

In other words, to channel Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's words from *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, our students need to constantly consider, with our support and guidance, the big questions: *So what? Why/how does this all matter?* After all, these are the questions--proffered by families, friends, other students in other more putatively 'productive' disciplines--that plague their choice of major in the first place. And they are the

kinds of questions that can allow students to narrate their own path through the discipline, including their encounters with the disagreements and divergences within the discipline and department, as well as the commonalities and intersections. In other words, they are the kinds of questions that can give students a stake in their major and their education, and they are the kinds of questions that meet both letter and spirit of transformational learning.

Such an approach does not place the responsibility for preparing our students on any one set of instructors, courses, or curricular 'levels.' Rather, it places more responsibility on the students to work to become aware of what they are doing and experiencing (especially when such experiences may seem contradictory) throughout our curriculum and to express that awareness throughout not only their academic work but also their advisement. Developing such abilities for *narration*--even and especially if the narrative is one of confusion and ambivalence--are consonant not only with larger disciplinary currents across times and cultures, all of which rely, at some point, on telling stories about what texts, traditions, methods, and media are valuable but also with preparing our students to be makers of meaning (including their own academic and career paths) well beyond our major.

Towards these ends, I selected Amherst College's English department curriculum as a departure point. Following is that department's guiding curricular principle (<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/departments/english/major>):

Students majoring in English are encouraged to explore the Department's wide range of offerings in literature, film, and culture. Rather than prescribe any particular route through its curriculum, the Department helps its students develop their own interests and questions.

To this end, all students work closely with their advisor in defining an area of concentration within the many offerings in English studies. Upon declaring the major, all students must submit to the Department a statement of concentration which defines a field of inquiry structured around no fewer than three inter-related English courses. This statement articulates the student's understanding of how the named courses cohere in a field of concentration, along with courses in other disciplines or languages that may be related to the primary focus of the English major. In consultation with the advisor, the statement of concentration is regularly reviewed and it may be revised to accommodate shifts of emphasis in the student's curricular choices. An updated concentration statement must be signed by the advisor and submitted to the Department in order to complete a major in English.

I considered Amherst's curriculum within the context of what Ken Cooper has called the idea of "structured choice." Such a concept, I believe, allows for students to choose their own "particular route" but provides multiple opportunities for them to think (and for faculty to provide them such opportunities) carefully about that choice. Ideally, such a curriculum has the potential to attract students to the major and to provide them a sense of independence and direction.

First, there is the curriculum itself; second, there is advising.

1. The curriculum, one guided as a whole by three overarching learning outcomes:
 - Students will be able to perform close textual reading/interpretation/explication;
 - Students will be able in writing and in conversation to synthesize and differentiate among multiple texts/sources;
 - Students will be able to provide appropriate attribution to differentiate among multiple texts and sources.

In order to graduate, each student must take 10 courses in the English major (as opposed to the current 12), a major whose courses will be divided into three groups. Of those 10 courses, one must be a Group 1 course, one must be a Group 2 course, and one must be a Group 3 course. Taking a Group 1 OR Group 2 course allows access to Group 3 courses. Transfer students must take one Group 1 or Group 2 course *at Geneseo* before gaining access to Group 3 courses.

Group 1: **Conversations in the Discipline** courses, which would include 100-numbered versions* of 170 and 201 and 285, survey, and genre courses.

Proposed distinctive learning outcomes for Group 1 courses (**raw and unfinished and in need, obviously, of departmental input**):

- Students will be able to analyze how course material reflects larger conversations in the discipline.

* Many of these courses could easily be revised to address the new outcomes, ones that ask instructors to teach their subject matter with an active awareness that they are introducing or reinforcing the idea of a discipline in active conversation. Other courses would need to be revised more significantly, but there is already desire to do so (e.g., conversations about changing the way that British literature surveys are sequenced).

Group 2: **Intersections** courses. The idea for this Group of 200-numbered courses comes from the ad hoc curriculum committee's "cultural intersections" revision of the former "non-traditional" major requirement. But this Group expands the idea of "intersections" to include not only intersections of identity categories (e.g., gender, ability, etc.), but also cultures, aesthetics, historical periods, and theories (Gillian's "Letters" class would be a good example of this kind of course, as well as Beth's "Hurricane Stories.") This expansion is consonant with the spirit of the ad hoc curriculum committee's report:

The ad hoc committee agreed unanimously that the problems raised by the "non-traditional" requirement cannot be fully addressed by minor changes to current curriculum. Rather, the department needs to implement a curriculum matching the best practices of similar institutions, a curriculum in which cultural and theoretical diversity is a pervasive feature of the whole, as opposed to something reserved for one designated set of courses. Such "best

practices” emphasize connections and intersections among cultures and ideas, not just distinctions and differences.

The guiding question for this Group's courses might be imagined as "What happens when x and y are examined in the same course?" and thus might be an incubator not only for innovative teaching but also for innovative faculty research and creative activity.

Proposed distinctive outcomes for Group 2 courses (**raw and unfinished and in need, obviously, of departmental input**):

- Students will be able to identify and analyze in writing the course's intersections, whether those intersections yield differences and/or similarities.

Group 3: **Major Inquiry courses.** This Group takes as its departure point the kind of depth and individual research afforded by the current "Major Authors" courses and would include revised, 300-numbered versions of current 300-level writing courses; theory courses; major figure courses; capstone experiences (theses, directed studies, and teaching assistantships). In this Group, depth would be defined not as study of one author but as intensive investigation of an author/theory/theme/period/problem/issue.

Proposed distinctive outcomes for Group 3 courses (**raw and unfinished and in need, obviously, of departmental input**):

- Students will complete a significant research/creative project that demonstrates their own development and understanding of an issue related to the course subject matter.

Issues I have NOT yet addressed, quite on purpose, because they are matters for departmental conversation :

A. I have made no suggestions for any further student 'requirements' other than those proposed above. The question that many of us likely have is who will take our classes if students are not required to take them? This worry is not one I can assuage. Indeed, I am one of the people who worries that no one will enroll in my courses, not least given tales from this summer's first-year orientation advising where incoming students balked at enrolling for courses with "African" in the title.

I will point out that I have listened carefully to lamentations (including my own) about some student behaviors in required courses, (e.g., 300-level, Major Authors course, Shakespeare, "non-contemporary" literature courses). At the same time, I have also listened carefully to the surprise and pleasure that students can experience when they find themselves moved deeply by a course that they did not want to take but did because it was required.

An important caveat: As it is very nearly definite that we will move to a 10- rather than 12-course major, ANY requirement under ANY new system will take up more space and signal

more importance than it would under the existing curriculum. And, again, any change is going to bring attendant gains and losses, foreseen and unforeseen.

*B. Other than beginning the work of writing learning outcomes, I have made no specific recommendations for how individual courses might be revised in light of the fact that students will be taking fewer courses. Many colleagues see the change in student course load as an opportunity to encourage students to do deeper, better work in the courses that they do take. I would caution against simply assigning **more** work, especially if faculty are already feeling stretched unpleasantly by the number and kinds of assignments that they already require in the current curriculum.*

C. I have made no specific recommendations for the major's writing track. I do suggest, however, that film courses and non-contemporary, non-genre courses be deemed more generally appropriate for inclusion in writing track courses.

D. Other than imagining some current courses that might 'fit' in each Group, I have not divided up the current course complement into Groups. I admit that I tried to at first but realized quickly that attempting to do so without considering seriously which on-the-books courses might stay, might be cut, might be overhauled/revised was to fall into very trap about which the Provost warned: attempting simply to tinker with existing curriculum. On a related note, I have not addressed issues of course rotation, which would likely be one of the single most labor-intensive pieces of this overhaul process.

E. The Provost asked those of us working on curriculum this summer to proceed even though we don't know yet what will happen with Gen Ed, transfers, or with things such as interdisciplinary minors/majors. Important department conversation will certainly circulate around how many out-of-department courses (e.g., early modern history courses for students who wish to concentrate on early modern literature courses) students may be permitted to include as part of their concentration.

2. Advising: Because of a simplified curriculum, major advising would change significantly. Much as in Amherst's curriculum, declared majors would need to submit to their advisors a "statement of concentration" outlining what combination of issues/courses they would like to explore in the major. In Geneseo's version, however, the "statement of concentration" would be a document that students, based on growing experience in the major, revise yearly in consultation with their academic advisors. It would "live" online (no shuffling of papers in folders!) and be accessible to student, advisor (also: chair? departmental secretary? The Dean's office might have access to this, but the Dean's office would only be responsible for counting the 10 courses).

Upon completion of the major, the student would receive one academic credit (graded only as "S" or "U") towards graduation. The credit would underscore the importance of this exercise for the students *and*, as an added benefit, make faculty labor formally visible in terms of "load." Not only is this kind of formal visibility something that the Provost wants for faculty labor, but it is

also something that will recognize previously invisible labor: faculty's informal vetting of "personal statements," etc. that students often attempt to conjure frantically out of thin air immediately before job and graduate school applications. Students emerging from a yearly process of reflection and narration might be surprised to find not only how much they had learned on their journey through our major but how clearly and with complexity they were able to articulate that learning.

Under such a system, then, advising would shift from a largely bureaucratic process to a more educational one where the emphasis is on reflection and narration rather than listing each course taken. Some students will come in knowing already that they want to write poetry or study Shakespeare. Some students will change their minds while others stay their original course, but both of these paths must be narrated as such by the individual students. Some students may never find a direction and may find themselves forced to figure out a way to narrate coherence and value out of a scattershot path. Students who wish to get a broad foundation in literary histories might choose to take lots of survey courses (at the same time, they would still be required to get the in-depth inquiry afforded by taking a Group 3 course). A creative writing track student might find great fulfillment in coupling writing courses with those engaging writing and languages in a more wide-ranging sense: Julia's youtube course, Gillian's "Letters" course, Graham's History of the English Language course.

In any case, the project of "What is it that I am doing? What are my reasons for doing so? How have I challenged myself to take paths that I both favor and fear, and why/how do my choices and my course of study matter?" is valuable.

Many colleagues may fear that there is likely to be more work involved in this kind of curriculum and advising, especially at the beginning. That may indeed be so. But it is important not to overlook or underestimate how much unpleasant, often meaningless work we are already doing *for* students--calculating and re-calculating complicated advising forms, parsing course descriptions, checking and re-checking pre-grad checks, being hit with and feeling largely unable to answer questions from students (and deflecting the same questions from parents) about what they should/could do with an English major. This work rightly feels as if it is work we should not be doing: we should not be deciding *for* students what they should do, why/how their choices matter, how to handle the consequences of their decisions, how to describe or value what they themselves have been doing all the time they've been in our classes.

If the requirements for the curriculum are kept simple as proposed above, students can legitimately be expected to keep track of their *own* progress through the major: 10 courses, one course from each Group. Such simple requirements will make things easier on students, faculty, and the Dean's office, and will make room/time for the kind of intra-department narration that students must undertake in order to provide coherence for their own chosen course of study. And, if issues of equity in workload are attended to, such simple requirements can make room for faculty to experience advising as a more fulfilling and perhaps less onerous process.

