

Task Force on Undergraduate Education Across the University

What the University Should Do

In the interest of promoting higher education in the most important sense at Washington University, a committee that includes members of the faculty from various schools was charged with the task of describing what every undergraduate at our university should know and be able to do. The committee was created on the assumption that the educational goals of our institution are broader than those that can be achieved through the curricular requirements of various schools alone. Having made its report, the committee believes that it is also important for the university to consider what it will take, as a practical matter, for the goals to be achieved. In so far as we think that there are certain things that every undergraduate should know and be able to do, we have a responsibility to say what the university should do to make it possible for students to achieve the ends that have been identified. The recommendations that follow are made with that responsibility in mind.

Cross-Disciplinary Teaching and Research

- ◆ *Issues:* In many ways our goals involve gaining access to and an appreciation for subjects and methods that cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries. One important avenue to that end is through courses that are team-taught by faculty from more than one discipline or school. Another is through research in a school other than one's degree-granting home. However, cross-school research is often under-acknowledged, and there are presently structural and cultural impediments to cross-disciplinary teaching. Some problems, such as tuition flow, have recently been resolved. Nonetheless, there is resistance by chairs and deans to such teaching arrangements on the grounds that they create staffing gaps. In addition, scheduling and salary arrangements are perceived by some faculty as presenting obstacles to teaching courses that are listed in more than one school.
- ◆ *Proposals:*
 - It would be helpful to have a public statement from central administration about the importance of these opportunities for undergraduate education across the university, indicating a willingness to support and encourage them.

- The Office of Undergraduate Research should work to facilitate and enhance opportunities for cross-school research, identifying successful models.
- A policy should be developed that provides guidelines for team-teaching across schools. While there are policies on formal joint appointments across and within schools, it is important that issues regarding more transient teaching arrangements now be addressed. These include:
 - Counting such courses as part of the teaching load of each faculty member involved.
 - Scheduling problems that arise because different schools operate on different academic calendars
 - Best practices for team-teaching at our peer institutions and ways of assessing course success.
 - Principles governing the allocation of TAs (see below)

Graduate Students and Undergraduate Education

- ◆ *Issues:* It is often assumed that the knowledge and skills that we want undergraduates to acquire will derive largely from their interactions with faculty. However, graduate students are an important resource for facilitating learning and mediating faculty/undergraduate relations. In addition, experience in that regard can enhance career opportunities for graduate students, in particular those who want to teach at liberal arts colleges or those in joint professional/academic programs (e.g. MD/Ph.D) who may need it to compete well. Finally, strategic planning is sometimes marked by the assumption that priority must be given either to undergraduate or graduate education, which need not be the case. So far, there has been little formal acknowledgment of these facts.
- ◆ *Proposals:*
 - Teaching grants for innovative new courses should provide supplemental support for graduate assistants where appropriate.
 - Postdoctoral teaching fellowships should be made available to our best Ph.D's.
 - Graduate students should be encouraged to engage with undergraduates in ways that go beyond the classroom; for instance, by offering awards for mentoring, helping student clubs and organizations, serving as referees in undergraduate essay competitions, helping to run labs, etc.
 - In all schools, graduate students should have access to office, lab, or studio space in which they can mentor and advise undergraduates.

Writing In the Disciplines

- ◆ *Issues:* One of the fundamental goals for undergraduates across the university is to be able to write well in various forms. The only course required of all undergraduates is Writing 1. However, Writing 1 alone cannot suffice. In particular, it is not aimed at training students to write in the disciplines. The College of Arts and Sciences presently has a Writing Intensive (WI) requirement for that purpose. However, there are problems with it. In so far as WI may come to be more tightly linked to Writing 1, opening the door to other schools to follow suit with additional writing requirements of their own (or to the extent that the curriculum becomes more unified across schools generally), issues about the WI courses can be viewed as important for the university as a whole. The problem is that there are no incentives for departments to offer such courses, and there is no assessment or quality control.

- ◆ *Proposals:*
 - Arts and Sciences should enforce the mandate to departments and programs to offer WI courses by acknowledging this contribution to our teaching mission when search or budgetary requests are reviewed. It should motivate the creation of such courses by offering Kemper-type grants. Other schools should develop writing-in-the-discipline courses similarly.
 - Every WI course should be assessed annually by departments and programs. A report should be made to the Curriculum Committee.
 - The Teaching and Writing Centers should work jointly to create a group of specialists, perhaps including trained graduate students, who could provide advice to departments or instructors regarding WI courses.
 - The staff and space of the Writing Center should be enlarged to meet student demand.

Libraries

- ◆ *Issues:* Great universities have great libraries. Our libraries fall short in comparison to our peers, a competitive disadvantage. We cannot list them as one of the virtues of a Washington University education; on the contrary, our library collections are often a source of dissatisfaction among students and faculty. In addition, an essential skill on which many of our goals depend is the ability to conduct library research. It is not clear that all or most of our students have that ability. Finally, librarians can facilitate learning. Some of our reference and area librarians are excellent resources; yet they appear to be underutilized and many students seem unaware of them.

◆ *Proposals:*

- The University should make increasing the budget for library acquisitions a special priority, distinct from other infrastructural needs.
- Students should be educated about resources for research available in the library and trained to access them, beginning with freshman orientation.
- Departments and programs should work with our libraries to provide opportunities for students, undergraduate majors as well as graduate students, to meet reference and area librarians and learn about how to take advantage of them.

Coursework and Career

- ◆ *Issues:* It is important for students to begin thinking about the careers that may interest them before they declare a major. At Washington University, we emphasize integrated learning. One way that learning can be integrated is through seeing relations among courses that can define paths to certain careers. However, our students are given little guidance early on, and faculty sometimes have the attitude that such guidance is not an academic responsibility. Furthermore, alumni can be an excellent resource for students in this respect; yet we do not take advantage of them. Because alumni enjoy interacting with students, involving them could create important development opportunities. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for departments and programs, the natural sponsors of workshops on coursework and career, to get access to lists of former majors and minors from the Office of Alumni and Development or to get support from Career Services in this regard.

◆ *Proposals:*

- The schools should emphasize the educational value of having students reflect from the outset on how courses connect in ways that can lead to careers; not only in majors and minors, but in special programs and by virtue of subject matter and themes. The emphasis should be directed both to students (e.g. in orientation and workshops, or through written models and guides) and faculty (in Chairs and Directors meetings, advisor training, etc.)
- Successful alumni should be invited to speak to students about how their studies helped them achieve success or what they think might have helped them, topics which, on reflection, they would like to have pursued.

- The Office of Alumni and Development should make the names and addresses of former majors and minors readily available to department chairs and program directors, and Career Services should work with them to plan career and development events.

Attitudes and Abilities

- ◆ *Issues:* Many of the goals we have identified depend on the development of dispositions, attitudes and abilities. However, the precise role of the institution and the means by which it might encourage such development are difficult to spell out. To some extent, the abilities will emerge from and be enhanced by the pursuit of first-order goals that call upon them. We assume that they are also fostered by the example of faculty. Nonetheless, little is done formally or structurally to help students achieve these ends.
- ◆ *Proposals:*
 - A recent review of a 172 studies of moral and aesthetic judgment in college students shows, as a measure of development, a greater increase in preference for post-conventional reasoning among students who received a liberal arts education than among those who did not. The university should take measures to make a more unified, liberal arts curriculum available to undergraduates in every school.
 - One factor cited by students who show the greatest development is spending time contemplating and reflecting on issues. Efforts should be made to ensure that students have the time; for instance, by limiting the number of majors/minors a student can have (as Arts and Sciences has recently done).
 - Students can develop these abilities through dialogue. The University should provide more support for venues for public dialogue about citizenship, ethical issues, and the arts in society.
 - Students can also develop these abilities through practice in using them. Both problem-based learning and co-curricular activities provide relevant opportunities. Funding should be developed to support more of the former, and co-curricular portfolios should be created for each student, which advisors could use to encourage them to pursue their interests in this regard.

Like individuals, universities can have virtues. Through their policies and practices, they can exhibit the initiative, resolve, creativity, leadership, and practical insight they expect their students to possess. In so far as we help students achieve the goals we have set for them, our institutional character is enhanced.