Curriculum Review Narrative

In the Fall of 2001, the College of Arts & Sciences implemented new curricular requirements for the matriculating class of 2005. These requirements were established by the 1999 report of the Bowen Commission on the Undergraduate Curriculum in Arts & Sciences, which undertook the first comprehensive review of the College’s distribution requirements in nearly two decades. The centerpieces of the new curriculum, called the “Discover Curriculum,” were, first, a focus on coherence that would both encourage students to seek connections between courses taken for distribution requirements, and, second, a refined emphasis on the development of core skills. At the same time, the Commission affirmed the College’s tradition of student autonomy in selecting distribution classes, such that while types of distributions were required, how students would fulfill those requirements would be driven by their own intellectual curiosity, guided by their four-year academic advisors.

As directed by the Bowen Commission, the curriculum was reviewed for its effectiveness, both in terms of student learning outcomes and administrative efficiency, and in April 2009, the New Curriculum Review Committee (NCRC) issued a report of its findings to the Arts & Sciences faculty and administration. As stated in the Introduction to the NCRC’s report:

In the Fall of 2008, a committee of faculty, students, and administrators was appointed and charged with the task of reviewing the undergraduate curriculum in Arts and Sciences. Since then, the Committee has met a number of times, assessing focus studies and surveys and soliciting input through town hall meetings and discussions with various groups. The Committee’s review has concentrated on three major components of the curriculum: the cluster system, core skill and area requirements, and small group experiences of several kinds.

In making the recommendations that follow, we have been guided by the goal of developing a curriculum that engages the natural curiosity and drive of our students, that reflects the growth of knowledge and important changes in the nature of faculty research in the past ten years, and that includes requirements that are well-coordinated and work together interactively. Our aim is to provide students with a solid liberal arts education in the context of a research-oriented university, characterized by depth of knowledge in a major; breadth of understanding of modes of inquiry and the forms of knowledge in several core areas; and a sense of perspective and integration which comes from seeing connections across courses, disciplines, and schools.1

From both student and administrative perspectives, the overwhelming difficulties of the Discovery Curriculum had to do with its very hallmark, the so-called “cluster system.”

Students were required to complete one “cluster” – two related courses – in each of four distribution areas: the Natural Sciences; the Social Sciences; Textual & Historical Studies; and Languages & the Arts. A major/minor could serve as a cluster in its area of study. To maximize choice, thereby allowing individual students to pursue their unique combination of intellectual interests, clusters multiplied, ultimately totaling more than 250. Students, overwhelmed by the sheer number of options, quite understandably began to suffer from the “Paradox of Choice.” Additionally, because clusters typically comprised four or five courses from which the student would select two, they would sometimes “break.” For example, a cluster might be dependent on a particular faculty member’s class; if that faculty member was on sabbatical or left the University, the cluster – which a student had pre-selected and perhaps had already begun – would no longer be viable. Sometimes something a simple – and common – as a schedule conflict would put the student in the untenable position of having to choose between a course for a major and a course for a distribution.

A concerted effort was therefore made to render clusters manageable and accessible while preserving what we feel to be the pedagogically productive elements of thoughtful selection of distribution courses (vs., say, choosing a course solely because it fits nicely in a semester schedule) and encouraging students to see connections between different courses.

A New Curriculum Implementation Committee (NCIC) was established to translate the NCRC’s recommendations about curricular coherence into a more robust, stable, and accessible form. The NCIC comprised faculty, administrators, and students; met regularly for more than a year; and, once establishing a detailed plan of action, coalesced to comprise the committee chair, Professor Matt Erlin, and several administrators to handle the pragmatic details, which included a complete overhaul of the technological presentation of and access to curricular details.

Regarding the clusters, and with a keen eye toward preserving broad departmental representation, the NCIC reviewed the individual clusters, first pruning them – eliminating courses no longer offered, offered irregularly, habitually over-subscribed, and/or requiring substantial pre-requisites – and then re-envisioning the remaining courses from a macroscopic perspective instead of the microscopic presentation of “clusters.”

The result is a set of 22 stable, robust, and dynamic “Integrated Inquiries” (IQs). In essence, they are the clusters reconstituted from many choices with few options to fewer choices with many options. Most importantly, the IQs have been reframed in an effort to encourage students to see their own intellectual explorations as part of the larger, longstanding tradition of the Liberal Arts. In explaining IQs to students and in our publications, each IQ is presented as an exploration of “an enduring question that educated, engaged, curious people often ask”; their required interdisciplinary “provides a more nuanced and textured intellectual experience, one that befits the complex questions that have challenged great minds for decades, centuries, and even millennia.”

IQs include examinations of “The Development of U.S. Democracy,” “Ethics & Morality,” “Forms of Creative Expression,” and “Science & Society.” A complete list of the IQs, their descriptions (written by our faculty), and the courses comprising them, can be found here: [https://acadinfo.wustl.edu/CourseListings/IQ/Integrations.aspx](https://acadinfo.wustl.edu/CourseListings/IQ/Integrations.aspx)

The IQs’ strict interdisciplinary is an important revision. Whereas perhaps only 1/3 of clusters enabled or required students to choose courses from different disciplines, all IQs require students to select courses from different departments. We are excited about this element as it complements the College’s strong and growing tradition of interdisciplinary study and research.

A second substantial change directed by the NCRC involves a reconfiguration of the distribution areas. The Natural Sciences and the Social Sciences remain unchanged. Textual & Historical studies, however, has been broadened as The Humanities, thereby reintegrating the creative and performing arts classes (from the departments of Music, Drama, Dance, Creative Writing) previously attributed to the Language & Arts area.

The Language & Arts area, in turn, has been reconceived as Languages & Cultural Diversity (LCD). This new area, as the NCRC observes, “signals the importance of cultural understanding as an educational goal.” Whereas in the Discovery Curriculum, students could fulfill the Language & Arts requirement by taking two semesters of a foreign language, and they were required to take just one course that focused on “Cultural Diversity” (CD, a Core curricular requirement that mandated at least one course focusing on non-Anglo-American cultures), students may now choose to take three semesters of a foreign language or four CD courses (of which one or more may be a foreign language course, a recognition that it is sometimes not in the student’s best educational interest to persist in a particular language sequence). We feel that this new area is a vital development, highlighting the College’s acknowledgement of the increasing importance our global culture.

In keeping with this increased focus on cultural understanding, the NCIC also expanded the definition of the coherence requirement (coherence options include majors/minors, freshman Focus programs [year-long linked seminars], and clusters/IQs) to include our 12 faculty-led study away programs, which range from language study programs in France and Spain to topical programs on Shakespeare’s Globe and the Village India program. Doing so has the added benefits of, first, showcasing these excellent programs for our students and, second, encouraging students to consider how study abroad fits into their educational experiences during the regular academic year.

The revisions to the Discovery Curriculum were implemented in Fall 2012, for the matriculating class of 2016. We delayed implementation by one year in order to develop new web applications for students and their advisors to plan and map students’ progress through the curriculum. (The new web app, called The PlanIt, was developed to support both active versions of the curriculum.)