The department chairs in the College of Liberal Arts, at the February meeting of the Council of Chairs, discussed the Provost’s Liberal Education initiative and agreed to submit the following statement articulating our shared views and concerns.

The Chairs are aware of and support the original motivations for creating Liberal Education requirements: to increase the diversity of perspectives in the curriculum, to enhance interdisciplinarity and draw students across collegiate boundaries, to require students to reflect critically on the production of knowledge, and to ensure that students acquire more than the rote memorization of facts and skills in their coursework.

In addition, the Chairs appreciate and concur with the rationale for the current drive to re-assess CLE requirements including the increasing number of transfer students coming to the University and the need to establish clear equivalencies for CLE courses, and the growing urgency of preparing students for global contexts and economies.

However, the Chairs have college-specific concerns about the current CLE structure, which we fear are not being addressed sufficiently in the open forums. In what follows, we articulate those concerns, express some reservations about the current approach to rethinking the program, and offer suggestions for reform.

I. CLA and CLE
   A. The CLE lacks sufficient CLA representation.
      There are few CLA faculty represented on the Council of Liberal Education and thus our faculty find themselves in the strange position of attempting to meet criteria designed by those with little expertise in fields relevant to the established requirement areas. For example, they have had to justify to non-historians the seemingly self-evident principle that any course taught in the History Department should be considered to satisfy the Historical Perspectives requirement, or that a class taught in Philosophy should count in the Civic Life and Ethics category. To take another example, a course funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities was denied certification for the Arts and Humanities Core on the grounds that it did not contribute to humanistic learning. Moreover, some assumptions about what counts as a social science method seem to be holdovers from paradigm wars from long ago.

   B. Contradictory standards are at play.
      Any study abroad course taught through the university immediately satisfies the Global Perspectives requirement, even if it is taught by instructors outside the university, but courses offered at the university in such fields as Asian Languages and Literatures, Art History, or Geography have to
satisfy niggling criteria to qualify. Similarly, any AP History course taken by an incoming student (taught by high school teachers over whom the university has no control, teaching curriculum that is not subject to examination) can qualify for Historical Perspectives while, again, the faculty in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., in the Departments of History, Anthropology, and Geography) are subjected to the application of arbitrary criteria such as that any such class must include readings in archival material. Social scientists are put in the position of having to dispute the council’s views on what constitutes a “bona fide social science data set,” and the mis-informed criteria being applied to Social Sciences courses. Such examples (and virtually every chair on the council has horror stories like these) show the CLE program itself to be severely compromised.

C. The CLE Program, in combination with the budget model, rewards quantity over quality and disregards pedagogy.

Since the University has moved increasingly to an enrollment driven budget model, departments and colleges have been placed in the position of competing with each other to attract students. Thus, there is intensifying pressure for departments and colleges to offer courses that meet CLE requirements. Such pressures are especially felt in CLA, where the budget is influenced more than in any other college by enrollment revenue. This perverts the original intentions for CLE, forcing faculty to subordinate their research interests, their disciplinary knowledge, and their pedagogical expertise to courses that serve the sole purpose of drawing students who need to check the required boxes. For example, faculty in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies cannot get approval for a course on Athenian Democracy to satisfy the Civic Engagement requirement, but must attempt to develop a class that has “contemporary relevance.” The interface between CLEs and the budget model creates perverse incentives for colleges to create CLE courses to keep student credit hours inside a college instead of having students circulate across colleges. This last effect directly negates one of the primary reasons for having CLEs; to move students across colleges to experience the diversity of knowledge production.

The CLE Program produces an environment in which innovation is not rewarded by virtue of its rigid and often confounding guidelines for certification. Furthermore, LE required classes are large, yet large class sizes are frequently not a beneficial learning environment for students. While there was once a time in which small classes were considered a virtue, the only characteristic that seems to matter today is that a course draws as many students as possible.

D. The certification process is a waste of faculty time and effort.

However well intentioned the program, however dedicated the council membership, the approval process is onerous, requiring repeated submissions in response to seemingly arbitrary criteria. After numerous attempts, faculty simply throw up their hands in frustration. In this administrative version of natural selection, it is only those departments who have significant office support staff or enough faculty who are not burdened by service obligations that can be successful.
E. The program constrains students’ choices.

The need to fulfill CLE requirements, rather than intellectual passion and curiosity, currently drives student course choice. The rhetoric of the college and university is toward innovative, interdisciplinary courses that respond to key issues in the contemporary world. Such issues are well suited to topics courses that can be testing grounds for future curricular innovation. Yet CLE virtually guarantees that students will not take such topics courses: they are too busy fulfilling other requirements.

F. Helicopter advising.
CLE is driven in part by the desire to answer the question, “What should a graduate of the U of M know?” Rather like the lists of functionalities on a new car or piece of electronics, the CLE offerings look like a laundry list of “desirable attributes” for global citizenship. There is a fundamental bias against the autonomy of student choice in ways that, while well-intentioned, implicitly suggest a deep mistrust of students’ ability to shape their own academic careers. Student choices are already constricted by the requirements of a major and of WI courses. CLE further restricts those choices in ways that enforce students’ passivity and prevent them from taking charge of their own education. The university has every right to recommend and support courses that teach what it believes are desirable attributes for graduates. But it should not require them in addition to the courses that are already required within disciplines, especially in ways that are so bureaucratically cumbersome and financially problematic.

An alternative approach may be found in CLA’s new Career Readiness initiative, through which students contemplate, take responsibility for, and make decisions about their own academic trajectory in relation to a broad set of important skills. Undergraduate advisers, utilizing online tools, help students to establish their own goals and evaluate their own progress.

G. The program suppresses the benefits of a Big 10 education.
Students attend the U of M in part because of the extraordinary variety of education opportunities it affords. CLE, as currently constituted, guarantees that they cannot take advantage of many of these because their choices are so constrained. The U is killing its biggest selling point.

II. CLA and the Review Process
A. Lack of sufficient CLA representation.

While we want to encourage consultation with departments, the current process seems to be organized around a pluralist model in which those with the largest number of faculty who happen to attend the open forums have the most input on the results. Such forums might be useful as an initial step, but they will fail (as the last LE effort did) to capture the particularities of the program’s effects on individual colleges, units, faculty, and students. There should be a more rigorous attempt to gain broader faculty representation and consultation.
B. Rush to consensus.

Given the lack of focus on such particularities, the move from open forums to a “consensus document” seems premature and alarming. Specific constituencies, with unique perspectives and vulnerabilities will be ignored. Therefore a new process must be introduced.

C. Lack of serious examination of the budget model.

Even if a suitable replacement for LE requirements can be developed, it will not address the larger problem of enrollment driven decision-making. As this budget model impacts CLA more heavily than any other college at the university, it is, from our perspective, essential to the success of liberal education to examine and reform that model.

III. Recommendations

A. The process for input should be radically changed and made systematic perhaps with an invitation from each department for its perspective on the LEs.

B. The default should be that any introductory level course in the social sciences, humanities, or fine arts should count as meeting its corresponding CLE category. This would ensure that LE courses are taught by renowned experts in the respective topical areas. It would provide content flexibility so that courses could be constantly updated with the most cutting-edge methods and topics rather than conforming to content guidelines written a decade ago. At the same time, this approach would dramatically reduce bureaucracy and red tape.

C. We strongly urge the university to recognize the value of simple, broad, distributional requirements in arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. Encouraging such breadth will provide greater flexibility for students and professors alike and will promote greater independence and maturity.

D. To create such simplicity, the university will need to think critically about the current registration system software, the functionality of which is currently limited. This is an issue that the CoC has raised on numerous occasions with little success.

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