Recorder’s Summary

Forum date: February 23, 2017
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Key points and ideas that emerged from table discussion:

- **Important attributes of liberal education (LE):** Beyond disciplinary competency, what are the most important attributes that should characterize the U’s graduates and be addressed in a new LE curriculum?
  - The current LE classes already include reflection and critical thinking, but how do we get students to extend this knowledge past those classes and their undergraduate degrees? How do we instill a sense of responsibility in students to use and pass on this knowledge?
    - It is important to ensure action; students should actually act on and apply what they have learned post-graduation.
  - Some people may not think the requirements are truly liberal. To be liberal, one must open themselves up empathetically to respond to others.
  - In age of technological change, digital competency skills are increasingly relevant, these may not be present enough in our current LE requirements.
  - Currently, there is a great deal of emphasis on practice, which is decidedly important. The class goals often use language such as ‘active learning’ and ‘practice,’ and many want to see that continued.
  - Part of the undergraduate experience is building relationships. Students should recognize others’ intelligence of other world views. Cultural intelligence is important for the students to have come graduation.

- **Common skills and knowledge:** What kinds of practical skills need to be taught? We have some themes in the current curriculum, but these aren’t a specific set of ideas. Is there a common knowledge that should come out of this curriculum?
  - Having a common, standard knowledge may not allow thinking outside the box. It is important to try to understand other people’s points of views and not think others’ perspectives are ‘stupid’ because they are different. The current courses are not focused on LE requirement, students have different focuses. Some are pursuing the classes for their majors and others are there for the checklist LE fulfillment. We should have courses where everyone is pursuing the learning of the same knowledge and liberal themes. Having a common theme or common experience enriches the depth of the learning.
  - Is universalizing LE requirements a mistake? Should the responsibility of choosing themes be specific to departments? If so, students will be closer to the source of the requirements. This may make the requirements less of a checklist and more specific and meaningful to certain fields.
    - Universalizing may encourage checklist thinking about the LE requirements.
Deciding whether the requirements should be universalized is a structural question, and is less about the content of the LE requirements. It can be helpful to have discipline specific courses because certain fields use subjects (such as math) in different ways. Some courses should be catered to certain fields.

There should be some degree of universality for students who transfer colleges or universities.

- **Reflection and critical thinking:** Liberal education needs to have a core commitment to self-awareness and reflection. What skills or knowledge do we want students to have? A critical question for students to tackle in their LE classes: What does it mean to be a human?
  - Students must learn to bring assumptions to consciousness and become more self-aware. How can we install this self-awareness?
  - What does it mean to be human or to exist? These are questions that students should think about during their LE learning. There are some efforts to do this through multidisciplinary learning and gaining a sense of broad awareness.
  - Currently, there is some degree of arbitrariness to the LE classes—an huge variety of courses fulfill these requirements. Uniformity and purpose is lacking.

- **Content and structure are inextricable:** The question of what knowledge students should have is directly tied to the structure of the LE requirements.
  - LE is about putting students together who are there for the same purpose. The students read the same texts and question them with each other. These discussions lead to asking the fundamental questions: What is science? What is being human?
  - Does a hodgepodge of courses allow for this common experience? There should be a group of students having a common LE experience. We need a focused common effort for these core requirements. Maybe we need fewer courses, with each course having a specific LE focus, of which all students are aware.
  - Students don’t need to have broad mastery of each subject, students need to have exposure to each subject and an understanding of what each subject entails.
  - The current LE structure is enrollment driven and disciplines want more enrollment in their departments. How do we mitigate this competition so it is not the driving force? The structure is checklist driven by the students. This does a disservice to the LE mission. We are currently using the existing curriculum to fulfill these requirements, maybe we need a separate set of classes. There should also be a respect for where the expertise is for certain subjects and that is where the LE class should be taught.
  - There could be a more consciously focused class structure that covers more of the liberal educations requirements (‘block’ structuring). There would be a common agreement about what these students would gain from the experience; they would all be there to get the same themes or LE requirements.
  - Immersive learning experiences (like HECUA) get at these core themes. There should be an experiential aspect that covers many requirements.
  - There should be some fluidity and flexibility within the core. We don’t want these larger scope classes to designate which core topics should be taken together.
Let the professors decide how best to teach the themes instead of having strict requirements by the LE committee and administration; these requirements should be less specific. This may provide more variance within the program, but that may be okay if the overarching themes are still present. Variance allows for different experiences, which is important, and hard to have with too much administrative requirements.

Summary of discussion:

The group consisted of faculty members from a variety of backgrounds and departments. There were professors from the sciences as well as the liberal arts, and there were faculty from more administrative positions as well. The conversation became predominantly focused on the structure and content of the LE requirements, and how these subjects are inextricably tied. Another focus of the discussion centered around how to make the LE requirements a more common experience, or if this is the most constructive set up.

The group tended to agree that the current LE set up has some fundamental issues. Their main grievance was that the system is currently enrollment driven, which leads to a huge variety of class fulfilling the same themes. They generally believed that this overwhelming variance can lead to students not actually having a meaningful experience in relation to the theme they are fulfilling.

In terms of LE requirement content, the group generally agreed that the classes should urge students to ponder some fundamental questions, such as: what does it mean to exist or to be human? Also integral to any LE is learning how to think critically, become self-aware and gain cultural intelligence. They expressed that students questioning the same topics together, in a common LE course may be the most meaningful way to accomplish this. They suggested it may be beneficial to create a new set of classes purely for LE requirements, so that every student in the classroom is looking to receive a similar outcome. The current structure has students fulfilling LE requirements in the same course as students fulfilling requirements in their major. Along with this, the group believed that building relationships is crucial to the undergraduate experience, and including some experiential learning in a more universal LE curriculum would foster the development of such meaningful relationships.

There were, however, a few members within the group that believed having some department or field specific requirements would be useful. It was noted that certain disciplines use certain subjects differently, and having a blanket math requirement may not provide all students with the foundations that are useful for their majors.

The group ultimately focused on discussing the relationship between structure and content of the LE curriculum. The group generally agreed that it will be important for students to have somewhat of a common experience and that they will be asked to think about certain fundamental questions about the human experience. It was noted that students should have an awareness of the scope of different themes and subjects, but reaching mastery of the LE requirements is less important. The group proposed that ‘block’ classes, existing purely as LE classes and fulfilling several LE requirements, may create a more universal experience, mitigate issues of enrollment driven LE courses, and reduce the checklist driven mindset of the students. It was generally agreed upon that these problems were the primary ones to be addressed in the revised LE curriculum.
Additional Context:

The group was extremely professional and respectful of each other’s opinions. There were a few dominating voices, but every individual contributed to some extent and played an active role. At times, it felt there was a lack of direction; it would have been helpful to have a discussion leader that helped the group finish one topic before moving on to another. This would have encouraged some clearer, less spread out conclusions to be drawn.