Recorder’s Summary

Forum date: February 23, 2017
Table number: 4

Key points and ideas that emerged from table discussion (bulleted list of 5-10 points with a couple sentences of description for each):

- **Support for liberal education in general**
  All participants expressed support for the broad-based, liberal education model, although concern was raised about the lack of understanding—among our students and the general public—about the value of liberal education.

- **Current LE curriculum is mostly working**
  There was some concern about the process for LE designation (courses that ought to be designated aren’t, probably because program didn’t propose them; some concern about a moratorium on new LE courses was mentioned), about the competition among units for enrollment in LE courses, and about students’ “checklist” approach to fulfilling the requirements, but overall the group thought that only tweaks were needed, not a complete overhaul. One participant said we shouldn’t “fix what isn’t broken.”

- **More transparency about the value of liberal education is needed**
  The group agreed that the main problems they see are not with the requirements themselves, but in the ways we communicate (or don’t communicate) about them.

- **Rethinking how the LE curriculum is implemented seems more important than revising the LE requirements themselves**
  Participants were concerned that students tend to focus on getting LE courses done in their first and second years, when they may not yet be ready to truly understand the value of these courses to their overall education.

- **Writing Intensive and WEC have more potential**
  Participants wondered if the writing intensive requirement was pitched too narrowly, and should address communication more broadly, especially issues of information literacy. They thought it’s possible that WI does this already but that it’s not clear from the name. They were also very impressed with the WEC program, and think that model should be applied to the liberal education curriculum more broadly.

- **Interdisciplinary courses have great potential**
  Participants generally thought interdisciplinary classes can do a lot of what we are trying to do with liberal education curriculum, but there was not a clear consensus about when is the right time for students to take such classes. Some thought early in their college career, while another thought that unless students feel like they have a foundation in some discipline, their interdisciplinary perspectives are very shallow.

Summary of discussion (300 to 500 words):
Participants were a mix of faculty and staff from several colleges; of the staff, three were long-time advisors and one works for the University Libraries.
They began their conversation with a discussion of their strong support for liberal education, but lamenting that we do not more effectively communicate the value of a liberal education. Participants don’t believe this conversation is happening, even at the major level. Faculty understand the coherence of the degree plan but don’t effectively communicate that to the students, who aren’t even a part of that conversation. One advisor thought that the key is determining how to get the students to understand that value early on, and suggested a writing/comp class that has as its content an exploration of what a university education is for, or the value of such a broad-based education. The group agreed that this is a problem across the country, and is a public discourse problem about the value of liberal education.

One participant noted interesting work from UNLV about the importance of transparent pedagogy. All measures are better when students understand why you're making these pedagogical choices. The group discussed the idea that we don’t need to change the requirements but we need to reframe this at every point -- from advising, orientation, in the syllabus. Students would be more committed to it if they could understand that the university or the faculty member were explicit in their reasons for the curriculum being designed this way, or for why a particular course is structured in this way.

The group also discussed how the structure leads to competition among departments and also from a “checklist” mindset among students, which may stop students from choosing a course that would be valuable for their development but that only checks one check box not two. One participant thinks the structure, especially the budget part, should be overhauled. She noted that she would love it if there was more career exploration instead of a focus on getting LE out of the way right in the beginning.

The group turned to the question of what do we think an educated citizen should know or be?

One participant raised the problem of information literacy, noting that information is freely available, but it’s difficult to understand what is good or bad. Some of the themes get at that (where you learn about scientific methods, peer review, etc.). Historical perspectives also show how historians do research (primary account versus secondary account. Is there a bias there?).

One participant asked if the WI class is focused only on writing, should it be more broadly about communication, recognizing other modes of communicating? Something about how we take in information, what do we do with it when it’s in our head, and then how do we get it back out? Writing-Intensive seems to be about the output only. The group also noted that information mastery is one of our student learning outcomes, but question whether we are delivering that or how we are delivering that is the question. They discussed that maybe we don’t need to change these requirements as much as need to make aspects of them more prominent. For example, could the information literacy problem be more visibly a part of the WI piece? Someone noted that WEC is great and does this, maybe we need to make it more explicit. They also noted that the WEC expertise, and attendance to a department’s specific needs, is a great model, wondering if it could be applied to the LE?
Another participant noted that he thinks the process works reasonably well, that it exposes students to a broad thing, but questioned if they achieved mastery. He suggested exploring a different way of structuring majors and minors, so if someone is doing B.S. in CSE, what if they were required to do a minor in the arts? And then every B.A. would require a B.S. minor? It was noted that the CSE curriculum is so structured, they don’t have room for much, but wondered if a second language minor could provide that balance?

The conversation turned to the role of interdisciplinary courses. One participant wondered if there is a way of changing the perspective of students who see LE classes as something that doesn’t help them, by directing them to find LE classes that give kids a chance to see a connection to their major, their passion.

Another participant noted that she hopes that the conversation of what the curriculum should look like considers the development process of students--that the difference of where they are at when they are freshmen and sophomores compared to where they are at when they are juniors and seniors. Interdisciplinary helps them develop beyond notions of black and white/right and wrong and move them toward a sense of complex answers. But unless students feel like they have a foundation somewhere, the interdisciplinary perspectives are very shallow, and a strong foundation in a discipline provides this. She noted that the real challenge is to get students to recognize the perspective and world view that they have. Another participant noted that they hear about this need from employers: they want students to master an area, but also be able to see beyond their own area of skill and knowledge.

The group began discussing the structure more in depth. One participant noted that we now assume that LE is done in the first two years and then you do your major later, and wondered how we might think about LE within the major? Another participant, while noting that he quite likes the requirements as they are, wondered what the majors would look like if we got rid of the LE requirements altogether. A third participant responded that no one in his department wants the LE classes to go away, they’re in fact more worried that they would. Someone suggested that maybe it would be good to add a more but require fewer of them, which might prompt a conversation with an advisor about why one or the other? But other advisor thinks we shouldn’t even let them choose, and would prefer to go back to requiring all themes.

One advisor noted that students will complain about the LE requirements because there are classes that aren’t on LE list but they think it should be. Another advisor agreed that students are skeptical of taking a class that doesn’t count as LE, or that counts only as core and not also as a theme. They noted that we have great advisors, but this structure can lead to the superficial, checklist approach, and it can be hard to get students talking about what they want to learn, what they want to get out of their education.

This led to a question about the value of something that is a history class but doesn’t meet historical perspectives, noting that some are discouraged from creating something that double-dips. It was noted that faculty are responsible for making sure they are developing classes that meet these requirements. There was a suggestion to improve the process to make sure that courses that meet the criteria are certified.
The discussion closed with consideration of a concern that students are doing the same things in their junior and senior year and noting there is a value to see students learning in other contexts and experiences. The group briefly talked about how to structure things to allow for that as well? Maybe add a requirement that is about applied/experiential learning? The group didn’t like those terms, wondering if it’s more appropriately called “Testing out what one has learned in context” or “embedded learning.”