LE Pre-Planning Forum Recorder’s Summary

Forum date: 6 March 2017
Table number: 5

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

- Bureaucracy surrounding the liberal education requirements is a concern.
  - The amount of hoops one has to jump through in order to have a course satisfy a liberal education requirement is concerning. Examples of this include a member’s dissatisfaction that a sociology course on American race relations does not satisfy the “diversity and social justice” liberal education requirement. Similar concerns were voiced, but the table was divided as to whether courses like these should automatically fulfill an LE or have to undergo a rigorous certification/vetting process beforehand, like other courses that may not be as ostensibly linked.
- Students frequently seek to take LEs that remain within their “comfort zone,” and often either cursorily take or push off courses that do not align with their particular interests.
  - One of the main concerns surrounding this theme is that humanities students put off science-related LEs, and sciences students put off humanities-related LEs. Often, humanities students will take “softer” science classes that fulfill an LE, such as “Geology and Cinema,” and sciences students will take humanities classes that are related to the sciences, such as “History of Science.” An important consequence of this problem is that neither type of student feels any differently about themselves after taking a course out of their comfort zone. Advisers encouraging students to get out of that comfort zone can improve this problem, but ultimately the choice is the student’s to make. Perhaps marketing and communications strategies can help students realize the benefit of stepping outside of their comfort zone.
- Participants reached consensus that today’s students are very “talented” but not highly “educated.”
  - K-12 high-stakes testing systems may be to blame for this outcome. Some argued that today’s students lack critical thinking, reading and writing capacity, and concrete science and math skills. Others argued that their current students write better than previous ones. Most participants agreed that, “on paper, students look better and better every year.” One participant offered a more nuanced perspective, explaining that students are now more bifurcated—some have fallen drastically behind, while others surpass his expectations. There are not many students in the middle.
  - Students do not study enough, which is a separate problem.
- Timing of liberal education requirements is critical, and the University should consider a scaffolding model.
- The University could consider requiring the diversity and social justice theme to be fulfilled within a student’s first year here; it could positively impact the campus community if students address issues of diversity and social justice immediately upon their arrival.
- A scaffolding model would be very difficult from the administrative side, and may create more unnecessary bureaucracy. However, it could also mitigate the problem of students either postponing their LEs or just “getting them over with” by ensuring they are spread out over the course of their undergraduate career.

- It is important to meet students where they are, before going in-depth on a topic or methodology they do not understand.
- The U of M could implement a class, similar to CLA 1001/2, that is emphasizes and explicitly outlines and explains the basic concepts, vocabulary, and core methodological issues of academic inquiry. The class could help students probe questions such as: What counts as a question? What counts as evidence? It is clear that not all students need a course of this nature, but it would not hurt to offer it to those who do. The current writing-enhanced curriculum is a good start to addressing this issue, as it helps students learn how to form the methodology of their discipline.
- Student reflection on the importance of their LEs is critical to demonstrating and understanding the impact these courses can have.
- It would be great to implement a system that allows us to understand and showcase what students actually take away from their LE courses. More importantly, this system could assist students in recognizing the value of their LEs, and how that value can be translated to their experiences and qualifications in the real world. A greater emphasis placed on public engagement could help bridge this gap in translation.

**Summary of discussion (300 to 500 words):**

Our participants represented a range of backgrounds. Some had worked directly with the U of M’s previous liberal education re-envisioning process and/or work directly with the current re-envisioning process. Others had worked extensively on revamping LEs at other institutions. Others still had limited or brief contact with the U of M’s current LEs and were simply interested in learning more. Additionally, the group represented the sciences and humanities quite well, and included a full time adviser from the College of Liberal Arts. The group identified two broad categories that captured the largest concerns surrounding the U of M’s liberal education requirements: (a) capacity for implementation, and (b) understanding the value of LEs.

The discussion on capacity for implementation of a new or varied set of LE requirements centered mostly on (1) current bureaucratic frustrations, (2) the potential for implementing a scaffolding model for LEs at the U of M, and (3) the need to attend to students’ basic academic gap. Regarding (1): Participants explained that the process for having a particular course count as an LE takes extremely long—sometimes up to a couple of years. Participants also had perceptions that professors in certain colleges had assistance in petitioning their classes to count as LEs, and they felt that this is unfair. After much deliberation, the group remained divided on whether certain social science courses should automatically fulfill LEs. Participants noted that a
benefit to allowing automatic fulfillment is that it would eliminate a great deal of administrative work that they felt only currently serves to weed out a few unqualified courses. A drawback, they determined, is that some courses that should not be approved would get approved. Additionally, if some courses/department—and not others—were allowed to bypass the vetting process, it could be unfair. Nearly the entire group agreed that the syllabus review policy does not capture the essence of a course, but they were unable to propose an alternative. Regarding (2): Participants were generally supportive of a scaffolding model as a concept, as it would require students to complete their LEs in a more incremental manner. However, participants noted that a scaffolding model might exacerbate the bureaucratic process of LEs as a whole, since a limitation would be placed on students. Additionally, participants explained that some students might need to “double dip” or take a large number of LEs in a small time frame due to reasons that are out of their control. Regarding (3): Participants discussed the bifurcation of their students with regards to background knowledge, and proposed that the U of M have some method to bring struggling students up to speed so that they do not have to learn basic material concurrently with more difficult material.

The discussion on understanding the value of LEs focused on a couple topics: (1) student reflection on their LE experience, (2) student LE choice. Regarding (1): Participants would like to see a more comprehensive tracking of what students actually took away from an LE class, and they think it would be valuable for students to take note of this, too. Reflecting upon one’s LE experience, they said, would create space for more connections between academia and other professional sectors to be made. Regarding (2): Participants would like to see students engage with courses outside of their comfort zone. They said advisers can play an important role in steering students, but ultimately the student chooses the courses. The group did not provide revisions to the current liberal education requirements, as they seemed pretty content with the existing framework.

Additional context (characterize level of consensus/lack of consensus, tone and tenor of conversation, other notable aspects of the discussion):

The group was very respectful of one another, and the level of respect was more or less consistent regardless of whether members agreed or dissented. There were a few times where members butted heads, but when this occurred, another participant would always jump in to clarify a misunderstood perspective and/or help others reach common ground. The members of the group that had more experience surrounding LE restructuring were also very helpful in explaining the history and context of UMN’s current LEs to the newer participants.