

The Simpson Experience of the Future
Faculty Workshop 2008
082108

The Purpose of the Workshop

The Learning Programs Working Group (LPWG) asks the faculty of Simpson College to once again participate in the discussion of potential revisions to our general education program and help create the Simpson Experience of the future. The LPWG has spent the last six months wrestling with the challenges of creating a new general education program that will provide Simpson students with a liberal education that is both broad and deep. The conversation began with a discussion of what we want our graduates to know and what we want them to be able to do. Last year, all faculty were invited to discuss a variety of options for general education. Many of the ideas that surfaced last spring in the components of the draft curriculum may be described in this document. The LPWG believes the curriculum ideas it offers for discussion at the faculty workshop will challenge Simpson students to improve their skills in seven critical areas and to take certain courses which will ensure that all students wrestle with six important aspects of culture and human experience. These courses are not meant to represent the diversity of the academy, but are based on important issues and experiences that LPWG sees as foundational for Simpson College graduates.

It is important to note that by participating in the discussion, the faculty are not giving their approval to the model or the specific skills and courses. Faculty are being asked to participate in a refining process that the LPWG believes will be helpful as it moves forward in creating a specific future proposal for revising the general education program. The final proposal will be sent to the faculty for discussion in the early spring of 2009.

Background and Definitions

The bulk of the LPWG discussion this summer focused on what content and skills might comprise the formal general education curriculum at Simpson College. The LPWG discussed a number of different types of general education programs offered by colleges and universities with the full faculty last spring. These include:

Exposure Model

The primary intention of the exposure model is to expose students to a wide variety of subject disciplines that are reflected in the academy. Typically, students are free to select among departments, divisions, or other units of the college. The courses that meet the requirement are typically not designed specifically for general education, and are often the beginning level course in a discipline or a general survey course in a discipline.

Ways of Knowing Model

The ways of knowing model is based on the premise that different disciplines see the world in different ways. A social scientist views the world in a certain way. An artist sees the world in another way. The ways of knowing model requires students to see the world through the eyes of different disciplines. This model is similar to the exposure model in that it introduces students to a variety of disciplines, but it is often more intentional. Rather than a student being allowed to take any course in the arts to fulfill the arts requirement, for example, the student needs to take a course that meets a specific criteria.

Big Questions/Enduring Questions Model

The big questions model focuses the general education experience on one or more “big questions.” An example of a big question would be, “What makes us human?” Students are asked to explore the designated big question from a variety of perspectives. How does science answer this question? How does social science or philosophy answer this question, etc. Generally, the students take courses in a variety of disciplines that have been created to help provide perspective on the question.

Integrated or Concentration Model

The integrated model for general education uses a unifying theme to organize the courses required of students. It is typically a theme that spans several disciplines. It might be something like, “The City in History” or “Law and Society.” Courses that fulfill the concentration are noted in the college catalog. Students can often take the courses in any order, although there might be an introductory course to provide an overview for the topic.

Problem-Based Model

Problem-based learning simultaneously develops both problem-solving strategies and disciplinary knowledge bases and skills by placing students in the active role of problem solvers confronted with an ill-structured problem that mirrors real world problems. A problem-based general education curriculum could simply require students to take a variety of courses in different disciplines taught using a problem-based pedagogy.

Skills-Based Model

This model focuses completely on a set of skills that the student must accomplish during their college experience. These could include writing, public speaking, critical thinking and any other number of skills identified as being important to a college graduate.

The LPWG’s working draft curriculum to be discussed at the workshop is a hybrid of these models and represents a unique and exciting approach to liberal education. The working draft curriculum is composed of five distinct components. The faculty workshop will focus on two (D and E) of the five components.

Component A: First-Year Experience

The LPWG believes that the Simpson Experience should continue to include an introductory course that provides content and serves as an introduction to the college experience. Our current LAS program in some measure addresses these concerns for traditional students entering as first-year students. In discussing the strengths and challenges of the current LAS program, the LPWG recognized that having the first-year experience course tied to a regularly offered course in the curriculum limits the number of non-content institutional goals that can be accomplished within the course. Although it does not make a recommendation for changes to the LAS program at this time, the LPWG did spend a considerable time discussing other options for a first-year experience course. The option that received the most attention can be described as an “autonomous” LAS that is “passion-based.”

Working Definition and Terms: An autonomous LAS course that is passion-based would be a course that would focus on an interest of the instructor, a big question, an important theme, etc. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor would agree to meet the criteria for non-content goals identified by the faculty to be a part of all LAS courses. These goals might be one or more of the embedded skills described elsewhere in this document and cover such things as significant writing component, information literacy, communication skills, and any number of skills which might be embedded within the course.

As mentioned earlier, LPWG is not making a recommendation about the structure of the LAS program at this time. It is suggesting that an LAS-type first-year experience program is likely to be included in its final report. In addition, LPWG will likely suggest that such a course be required of all students, including transfer students and those participating in the evening and weekend programs.

Component B: Common Structured Experiences

The LPWG spent time during the summer discussing non-classroom ways academic learning objectives may be achieved in a revised general education program. This is anticipated by the college's recent strategic planning process. The LPWG believes that additional discussion is necessary before it recommends such a program for Simpson College.

Working Definition: Common Structured Experiences would be a variety of structured activities throughout the student's experience at the college. These could be courses linked by a common theme that could be used to fulfill requirements in Part E. Examples might include Non-Western/Western/U.S. Culture courses using great books, and a LAS course linked with a Senior Colloquium; common readings (ex: faculty teaching US Citizenship courses might all read a work by Martin Luther King); or attendance at convocations, discussions, films, plays and other events that have been identified as those intended to help integrate the Simpson Experience for all students. The purpose would be to make it clear to students that experiences outside of the classroom can help them achieve the learning goals established by the institution. Not all learning takes place in the classroom. Attendance at certain events might be required for all second-year students or all third-year students, for example, to help strengthen Simpson College as a community of scholars.

Component C: Fourth-Year Experience

The LPWG believes that the Simpson Experience should continue to include a capstone course in the senior year. Although it is not ready to make a specific recommendation in this regard, the LPWG believes several options should be explored. The course might look like our current autonomous Senior Colloquium and be based on an interest of the faculty member, or it might be a capstone required in the major.

The goal is to ensure that work on the identified learning objectives that began in the LAS course and continues through the independent experiences in years two and three, comes together in a purposeful and reflective way at the end of the college experience. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor agrees to meet the criteria of goals established by the faculty, in addition to whatever content goals are established for the course.

Component D: Embedded Skills

Working Definition: The LPWG believes that graduates of Simpson College should seek improvement on a set of skills during their college experience. It believes that many skills are best mastered when used in support of other learning over time. For this reason, it recommends that the following skills be embedded within courses. The exact number of courses to be required in each skill has not been determined. In proposing a course, the instructor would agree to

address the learning objectives for the skill established by the faculty. Here is a list of skills that might be embedded within courses:

- Critical Thinking
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Oral Communication
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Ethical and Moral Reasoning
- Writing
- Information Literacy

It is important to note that the number of courses in each skill area and the specific definitions and learning objectives for the embedded skills have not been fixed. It may be that one or more of the areas might be combined into a single area. The names also remain under discussion. At the workshop the LPWG is seeking help from the full faculty as it refines the areas and their definitions.

Component E: Understanding Culture and the Human Experience

Working Definition: Each of the foundations courses would have specific learning objectives. The students would take a course that at least in part has been designed to achieve the criteria developed by faculty for the individual objective. The courses themselves may be developed solely to achieve the learning objective, or they may be courses that are part of an academic major. They may come from any academic department. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor agrees to meet the criteria for the learning objective.

- Global Awareness/Non-Western
- Global Awareness/Western
- U.S. Culture-Citizenship
- U.S. Culture-Minority Perspective/The Other
- Scientific Reasoning/Scientific Method
- Creative Process/Performance

It is important to note that the number of courses in each area and the specific definitions and learning objectives for the areas have not been fixed. It may be that one or more of the areas might be combined into a single area. The names also remain under discussion. At the workshop the LPWG is seeking help from the full faculty as it refines the areas and their definitions.

Final Comments

The LPWG seeks a conversation with their faculty colleagues that focuses on the larger issues of a potentially new general education curriculum. Does the idea of embedding skills make sense? Can we use a criteria-based general education format as proposed in the hybrid model it presents, rather than an exposure or ways of knowing model? If we were to implement such a general education program, how might we ensure that the definitions and rationale are clear? These are types of questions the LPWG will ask of faculty during the workshop. Questions of implementation will be addressed at a later date. The LPWG feels confident that there are enough examples of institutions doing similar things with their general education programs to believe that what it presents can be accomplished. It looks forward to the discussion.

An Introduction to the Proposal

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Background

Roughly 12 months ago, the members of the Learning Programs Working Group (LPWG) turned its attention to the general education program at Simpson College. It understood its role to be to work on behalf of the faculty in the development of a proposal for the possible revision of the Cornerstone Program. LPWG has spent hundreds of hours working together and in small groups reviewing the current Cornerstone Program, seeking ideas from other institutions and developing what it believes is an exciting proposal for discussion by faculty.

The process began with the development of a series of principles. These principles, along with definitions and three examples of possible general education programs were shared with the faculty in the spring of 2008. In August of 2008 at the faculty retreat, the LPWG shared with the faculty an early draft of their ideas for what the LPWG is calling the *New Curriculum*. Feedback from faculty was used to refine the basic components. This document is the latest and final of draft the proposal.

Two documents proved to be of key importance in the development of the New Curriculum. Of significant importance to the LPWG was the outcome of the recently completed strategic thinking/planning process as described in *Re-Shaping the Simpson Experience* (see Appendix A). A second document of importance was the research on essential learning outcomes completed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (see Appendix B). The ideas in these two documents were important in that they provided a framework for discussion and also validation for the Working Group's consensus view that the current Cornerstone Program, although designed appropriately to address the concerns of its day, contained shortcomings that are significant enough to warrant change.

A significant concern of the LPWG with regard to the current Cornerstone Program is not so much its focus on "legacies of Western Civilization" and "the different ways of knowing the world" but rather its structure and lack of integration. Cornerstone as currently configured also seems to see as its main outcome "to ensure that students will be effectively prepared to undertake the in-depth study required by an academic major..." rather than an opportunity to engage in an engaged conversation about important enduring questions. Unspoken in the current catalog description of Cornerstone but something commonly heard as a rationale for the current Cornerstone Program is the belief that it somehow helps develop the a well-rounded individual. If this is true, the structure of Cornerstone suggests that this outcome can best be met by students taking discreet, individual courses, mostly at the introductory level. The "ways of knowing" general education model is not uncommon at other institutions, but does not in the LPWG's view easily support the essential learning outcomes articulated in *Re-Shaping the Simpson Experience*, the AAC&U reports, and the ideas the LPWG feel are important for a future general education program at Simpson College.

In addition to the broad over view provided by the current Cornerstone Program, it is evident that the intention behind the original development of Cornerstone was the development of certain skills generally assumed to be important in college level work (writing, critical thinking, the ability to use data, etc.) The

fact that there is no coordinated intentional teaching of these skills, except in the single required writing competency course is considered a shortfall by the LPWG. Both the language competency and the math competency have test-out options which seem to suggest that these are entry level competencies and not skills that need to be improved throughout the college experience. It is a common perception that students treat these competencies and the other required Cornerstone courses as a list of check-boxes to get out of the way as quickly as possible.

Similarly when it comes to the actual assessment of the success of the Cornerstone program, only the writing competency is actually measured, and that by way of a minimum standard demonstrated by portfolio review. There is also no attempt to assess whether or not a Simpson graduate actually improves in the competencies, or if the graduating students actually have a better understanding of the legacies of the Western Civilization, the different ways of knowing, etc. which as suggested earlier are the stated objectives of Cornerstone. Nor is there any attempt to measure the *Soto voce* purpose of a liberal education, producing a well-rounded graduate. The success of the current Cornerstone Program is essentially measured by the completion of unrelated courses that as suggested earlier, expose students to a variety of academic disciplines, often at the introductory level. If the student completes the required courses, she or he is assumed to have achieved the goals of the general education program. The LPWG feels that this is a rather low bar and that the challenges of the future demand a more intentional and rigorous approach. For this reason, the LPWG decided early on to create more intentional and measurable goals for the New Curriculum, than is currently the case in Cornerstone.

It should be noted that the LPWG does not argue against the assumed goals of the current Cornerstone Program. The proposal the LPWG brings forward is one that shares the general goal of the current Cornerstone Program (an understanding of the cultural and historical foundations of Western society, the development of important skills, and a well-rounded education for the purposes outlined in the college's mission statement) but it uses recent studies on learning and essential outcomes for higher education as the basis for how these objectives are achieved.

Rather than organizing required courses around the principle of "ways of knowing" the LPWG proposal uses the term "engaged citizenship" as the framework for the new general education program. In the New Curriculum the answer to the often asked question, "Why do I have to take all of these courses?" becomes, "Because they will help you grow as an informed and engaged citizen" rather than the more general "Because they show you different ways of knowing and they will help you to be a well-rounded person." The *New Curriculum* also differs from the current Cornerstone Program in that it allows and encourages all disciplines to participate in all of the components it identifies as important to the development of an informed and engaged citizen. It is believed that certain disciplines will find a natural home in certain areas, but the required courses will be approved on the basis of the criteria rather than the courses location in a discipline. So too, the *New Curriculum* assumes many courses above the introductory level will be used to engage students in the big questions of citizenship. This will likely decrease the number of introductory courses used to fulfill general education, and provide students with the opportunity to grapple with the questions of citizenship within the context of content-oriented courses at any level. The LPWG believes this approach will allow more faculty across the campus to participate in fulfilling the objectives of the general education program, than is currently possible.

The Shape of the *New Curriculum*

The LPWG proposal for a *New Curriculum* is composed of four interlocked components. The first is a course designed to introduce the student to college and the life of the mind. In reviewing the success of our current LAS program and first-year programs at other institutions, the LPWG found that the experience provided first year students would be substantially improved if their entry course was specifically designed for the purpose of acculturating them to college life and the expectations of faculty. The LPWG envisions a revised LAS course that includes a set of agreed upon embedded skills necessary for college success.

The second component of the *New Curriculum* focuses on the development of our students as engaged citizens. Eight areas have been identified for focused attention. It should be noted that the LPWG has provided a description, rationale, criteria, support and a list of potential courses for each area.

The third component is a set of six skills that have been identified by the college's strategic thinking/planning process, the AAC&U research, and the ideas LPWG believe are important for all liberally education persons.

The final component is a senior seminar. After much discussion about the effectiveness of the current Senior Colloquium program, the LPWG recommends that it be replaced with a senior capstone class within the major.

A Criteria-based General Education

The LPWG proposal assumes that criteria will be developed for each of the four components. Courses to fulfill the component parts of the curriculum may be offered by any department, but must be designed to meet the specific criteria established by the faculty. The LPWG has included in this document, a brief description of the component parts (Section B) as well as a more complete description (Section C) which includes more specific information including other institutions that have similar requirements, and courses currently in the curriculum that may with some adjustment be suited to the particular area requirement. In both cases, the LPWG understands that should the *New Curriculum* be adopted by the faculty, specific criteria for each component area will need to be finalized. The information contained in Section B and Section C will serve as guide for the development of the final specific criteria. The LPWG anticipates temporary committees will be established to refine the criteria and vet proposals from departments for area courses.

The Apparent Complexity of the *New Curriculum*

On first glance, it may appear that the LPWG proposal for the *New Curriculum* is larger and more complex than the current Cornerstone Program. The LPWG believes that upon closer examination, faculty will come to agree that the *New Curriculum* is actually quite simple to understand both in description and purpose.

As suggested earlier, the *New Curriculum* consists of four parts. The proposed first-year course is a revision of the current LAS. The second component (required courses from specified areas) is similar to

the existing Cornerstones, but the areas of study are based on the ideas and issues determined to be valuable to the engaged citizen, rather than by discipline. The third component (embedded skills) consists of specific and intentional skills that LPWG believes are important to engaged citizenship and success in life after college. A case could be made that the identified embedded skills are for the most part visible manifestations of existing expectations of the current Cornerstone program. The existing Senior Colloquium is refashioned into a capstone in the major.

The total number of courses required for the *New Curriculum* will vary from student to student, but is likely to be a minimum of nine. Nine courses are within the proposed general education program (LAS + nine area courses). The LPWG believes that most if not all of the required embedded skills will be met within other courses (general education, majors and electives.) If this does not happen, the total courses required of most students for general education will be increase but will still likely be about a third of the 32 courses required for graduation discussed last year with the faculty. The computer degree audit program within Datatel can track which course has been approved for which area and/or embedded skill so LPWG believes the fear that the multiple areas and embedded skills will be difficult to track is unwarranted.

What about the Ways of Knowing and the Well-Rounded Person?

Although it does not mandate exposure to a variety of academic disciplines, the practical reality is that most students will be exposed to a variety of disciplines through the courses required for the New Curriculum. It is expected that all disciplines will participate in one or more of the required areas of study. It is also hoped that all departments will contribute to the LAS program. In addition, LPWG believes that advisors will work with students to make sure that students don't intentionally narrow their experience. The LPWG suggests that this be monitored and limiting factors be put into place if it is the case that a large percentage of students graduate without the breadth expected of a liberal arts graduate.

Summary

The LPWG believes it has met the charge of the faculty. It presents its proposal for the *New Curriculum* for consideration in the belief that it represents a significant improvement over the current Cornerstone program. The proposal is based on the very best practice in general education and is focused on the essential learning outcomes identified in our on-campus strategic plan and through research conducted by AAC&U. LPWG looks forward to discussing its proposal with EPCC and the full faculty.