

The Values of the Open Curriculum: An Alternative Tradition in Liberal Education

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Participating Institutions:

Brown University [Project Leader]

Amherst College

Antioch College

Hampshire College

New College

Sarah Lawrence College

Smith College

Wesleyan University

Executive Summary

The open curriculum is based on a belief in the power of student choice exercised in collaboration with faculty. Such a curriculum gives students great freedom but expects considerable responsibility in return, and it requires significant faculty engagement to shape, support, and inspire student learning. This tension between freedom and responsibility, choice and accountability, student independence and collaboration with faculty, recurs in different ways at campuses with an open curriculum.

Sometimes controversial and often misunderstood, the open curriculum has become an important alternative tradition in liberal education. A “Working Group” of representatives from eight institutions where such a curriculum has thrived for more than forty years met throughout the 2005-06 academic year to identify the values and learning outcomes associated with this educational model and to begin to assess its strengths and weaknesses. In addition to articulating the assumptions and goals that define an open curriculum, the Working Group discussed the challenges of developing adequate assessment measures and conducted some initial assessment activities whose findings are reported here.

According to alumni interviews and faculty focus groups undertaken as part of this study, students who are granted such freedom display unusual motivation and engagement with their studies and develop independence, self-confidence, and decision-making skills that serve them well in later life. Although there is a danger that students may avoid difficult courses and stay within their comfort-zones, statistics about breadth of course-choice and the reports of alumni and faculty suggest that the preponderance of students use the freedom of this curriculum to explore new areas and to challenge themselves. An emphasis on developing the capacity for problem-solving and on promoting creativity, curiosity, and independent thinking is, according to these reports, characteristic of the culture of learning that an open curriculum makes possible. Alumni and faculty agree, however, that these positive outcomes are not guaranteed but require effective, engaged advising.

The history of granting students “freedom to learn” dates back at least to before the Civil War, when many leading American universities rejected classical models of higher education in favor of allowing students more choice. More recent chapters in this history include John Dewey’s principles of student-centered, process-oriented education as well as the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of the 1960s, the decade in which many campuses adopted an open curriculum. This model has now evolved into a curriculum for the twenty-first century. The qualities of mind and character that an education for the twenty-first century should cultivate include versatility, flexibility, and a facility with negotiating differences of various kinds. These are capacities that an open curriculum seeks to cultivate. Its goal is to develop agile, independent thinkers with the confidence to meet unexpected challenges and opportunities.

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The Values of the Open Curriculum: An Alternative Tradition in Liberal Education

I. Introduction: Why Study the “Open Curriculum”?

Based on a belief in the value of student choice exercised in collaboration with faculty, an “open curriculum” grants students the freedom to design their own programs of study. Sometimes controversial and often misunderstood, this approach has nevertheless established itself over the last half century as a major tradition in liberal education. The experience of “open curriculum” campuses is that offering students such freedom creates a culture of learning in which students display unusual motivation, innovation, and self-direction. Various kinds of evidence suggest that an open curriculum fosters a passion for learning and promotes independent thinking and creative problem-solving. Although there is a danger that this freedom may be abused, alumni report that the responsibilities and opportunities they enjoyed in such a culture helped them become autonomous, life-long learners and encouraged them to develop independence, creativity, and flexibility as thinkers that proved invaluable in later years. Faculty at these campuses report that their students are exceptionally engaged in their studies because they have chosen to undertake them for reasons they find compelling rather than simply in order to meet requirements. An open curriculum places more demands on faculty (especially for advising) than in models where the options are fixed and clearly delineated, but faculty say they value the freedom this openness gives them to design new courses and explore new areas in collaboration with their students.

Such a curriculum is not without its challenges, and its vulnerabilities are in many ways a reflection of its virtues. Most campuses with an open curriculum devote considerable time and attention, for example, to encouraging students to use their freedom to push themselves rather than avoid difficult subjects and to extend their intellectual horizons rather than stay within their comfort-zones. When an open curriculum lives up to its ideals, however, it creates a culture of choice and collaboration that encourages the creativity and engagement of both students and faculty by making them partners in the educational enterprise.

An “open curriculum” is one of the three main models for liberal education at American colleges and universities today. It differs from a “core curriculum,” which identifies a fixed set of subjects or a canon of texts that all students must study (the model at Columbia, Chicago, or St. John’s), or from the “distribution requirements” approach, which specifies areas in which students must take courses, often from sets of offerings specially designed for this purpose (the model at Pennsylvania, Duke, and many other institutions). Students at such institutions do of course make choices and collaborate with faculty, but “choice” and “collaboration” are not the central, defining values of the educational culture as they are with an open curriculum.

A diversity of educational philosophies and approaches has been a strength of higher education in the United States, and the differences among these three models could be seen as a sign of healthy experimentation and competition. Students benefit, after all, by being able to choose from such different options according to their own values, interests, and goals. All three models share a number of desired learning outcomes (the goals of liberal arts education, including critical thinking, moral development, articulate self-expression, etc.), and each can point to certain advantages even as it must also struggle with disadvantages that follow from its defining assumptions and commitments. Pursuing common goals through different pedagogical frameworks, these models all have much to learn from one another.

Creating conditions for dialogue about the comparative advantages and disadvantages of these alternative approaches has not been easy, however. It is sometimes felt that their differences signal a lack of clarity about the purposes of liberal education instead of offering distinctive models based on opposing assumptions and beliefs that can be debated and tested. As a recent headline in the *New York Times* puts it: “What Every Student Should Know: Even Harvard, as it replaces its well-known Core, isn’t quite sure” (“Education Life,” 8 January 2006, p. 32). In a climate of confusion and uncertainty, an open curriculum is sometimes seen as evidence of despair about ever reaching agreement about the best educational model rather than as a legitimate alternative among competing approaches, each with its own rationale. It has often been a too-easy target for dismissive criticisms that confuse the freedom it offers with an absence of standards and convictions and that misconstrue its affirmation of student choice as an abrogation of faculty responsibility.

The purpose of this paper is to inform the debate about liberal education by clarifying the goals of an “open curriculum” and by explaining how it has worked at

a group of leading institutions that have practiced it in one form or another for four decades or more. Supported by a grant from the Teagle Foundation, a “Working Group” of representatives from a small set of colleges and universities where this alternative tradition has thrived met at monthly intervals throughout the 2005-06 academic year in order to summarize and compare what their institutions had learned in their years of experimentation with an open curriculum. Led by Brown University (where granting students the freedom to craft their programs of study is a cornerstone of the curriculum), the Working Group brought together institutions with open curricula of various kinds: Amherst, Smith, Wesleyan, Hampshire, New College, Sarah Lawrence, and Antioch. This is a diverse group, including schools with distinctively different educational philosophies and programs, but all of these institutions view active, self-directed learning by students as a primary value and regard general education as a matter of thinking about disciplinary and cultural differences rather than assimilating a core set of values, texts, and traditions.

The Working Group had three primary goals: 1. To explain the assumptions, aims, and rationale of an “open curriculum” by studying the various ways in which it has been imagined and implemented at the participating campuses; 2. To identify what other institutions can learn from these pedagogical and curricular reforms whether or not they adopt all of the features of an open curriculum; 3. To develop assessment measures to evaluate the concrete outcomes of this curriculum for several generations of graduates in order to test the gains such a curriculum offers.

Identifying the distinctive features of an “open curriculum” is an important first step toward clarifying what is at stake in the debate among competing educational models. One difficulty in identifying and describing the defining characteristics of the open curriculum has been that the emphasis on individuality and diversity among its practitioners has created the impression of pattern-less variety. In fact, however, a common set of assumptions about how students learn, how faculty should teach, and what general education should accomplish characterize these different curricula. Formulating these fundamental convictions may clarify the options institutions have as they choose which model to follow in developing their liberal education programs.

Articulating a coherent explanation of the goals and values of the open curriculum may also help to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions about it that now circulate unchallenged. Skeptical commentators have typically felt free to dismiss open curricula as lacking in rigor, standards, or content without facing rigorously formulated, evidence-based responses to their arguments. It is a fallacy, for example, to assert that a core curriculum or a curriculum with fixed distribution requirements is necessarily more rigorous than an open curriculum, although this is an oft-repeated claim. A college with many general education requirements may have low expectations for student performance, and an institution that gives students freedom of choice may have very high standards. Distribution requirements or a

common canon of texts are no guarantee of quality or accomplishment. Indeed, challenging students to develop their own educational programs and to work independently can be more intellectually demanding than following a pre-scripted curriculum. High expectations for student accomplishment are consistent with promoting individual exploration and discovery. The question is how to realize this ideal. Institutions with open curricula are typically very concerned that students use their freedom well, and they deploy many kinds of strategies to make students accountable for their choices and to encourage responsible reflection about their educational objectives. How to ensure that students in an open curriculum are using their freedom positively rather than negatively—in order to explore, discover, and create rather than to avoid certain subjects or to take an easy path—is a concern that these schools take seriously and devote considerable attention to.

Another often-heard fallacy is the assertion that an open curriculum lacks values. The Working Group devoted much time and attention to articulating its shared values and the desired learning outcomes associated with them. Rather than resulting from a failure to think seriously about pedagogical goals and principles, the impetus to adopt an open curriculum typically grew out of progressive thinking about the purposes and possibilities of general education. Faculty at these institutions believe that a student-centered curriculum stressing freedom, creativity, and individuality as well as close collaboration between students and faculty produces a vibrant environment for learning. An open curriculum is based on the assumption that students learn best what they choose to study and that students should be regarded as active learners rather than passive recipients of information. A related value of the open curriculum is the belief that students will be best prepared for the opportunities and uncertainties of the future by developing confidence in their ability to explore and respond to difficult issues without a pre-given road map.

Some versions of the open curriculum stress the importance of exploring different ways of knowing, and this emphasis on epistemological difference in turn reflects a high value placed on interdisciplinary exploration. Instead of seeking to promote community by assimilating students to a common culture (as a core-curriculum typically intends), colleges with an open curriculum often emphasize the value and the challenge of negotiating differences, whether between competing ways of knowing that cannot be reconciled, or between disparate social worlds with conflicting conventions, values, and beliefs. Such emphasis on intellectual and cultural diversity is, again, not an absence of beliefs and moral purpose but, rather, an alternative set of values with a different vision of knowledge and society than proponents of a core curriculum share.

Because the differences between curricular models often reflect disagreements about fundamental beliefs and values like these, debates about general education can sometimes seem theological—a table-pounding war of conflicting assertions based on nothing more (or less) than “This I believe!” That is one of the reasons why the Working Group took seriously

the challenge of assessment: “How do we know if our curricula are working? What evidence do we have that our claims for our curricula have the outcomes and practical consequences we assert they do?” At many of our campuses, the open curriculum has been styled as an experiment, and the ethos of experimentation is consistent with—even demands—a culture of evidence and critical questioning about the grounds for assertions. The tradition of the open curriculum has also been associated with a healthy skepticism about conventional methods of assessment and has been committed to imaginative, non-reductive modes of evaluation (for example, course performance reports instead of grades, portfolios instead of transcripts, performances instead of tests and term-papers, etc.). How to engage in meaningful assessment of the outcomes of an open curriculum without falling back on reductive modes of measurement is a non-trivial challenge to which the Working Group devoted considerable attention. Some progress was made, which will be reported on below. In particular, the pool of alumni whose subsequent lives and careers testify to the value of the educational experiences they had in college represents an extraordinary resource that the Working Group began to tap in an effort to develop an evidence-based analysis of the implications of an open curriculum. Some obstacles could not be overcome in this one-year project (how to identify a “control group,” for example, that wouldn’t simply be a straw man), but ideas for future assessment activities were generated by the group that may be followed up on, it is hoped, after the period of the grant. The experience of campuses with open curricula is that the evidence of student learning and accomplishment supports their pedagogical claims, and the assessment activities undertaken in this project represent an important beginning attempt to document and test these assertions.

The project began with a two-day conference at Brown in September 2005 attended by four-person teams of faculty and administrators from the participating schools. The purpose of the conference was to acquaint participants with one another’s curricula, share issues of current concern on their campuses, and begin to frame the questions that would occupy the Working Group. The conference was divided into three parts: “The Practice of Our Curricular Values,” “Expectations for Faculty: How are Teaching and Advising Shaped by the Open Curriculum?” and “Assessment Issues on Our Campuses: How Do We Know If Our Curricula Are Working?” A Working Group consisting of one dean or faculty member from each institution then met for one- to two-day sessions in October, November, February, March, and May to follow up on these initial discussions and draft this report. Representatives of the institutional research offices from several participating schools joined the November meeting to help design assessment activities involving alumni and faculty that were conducted during January and February. The results of these activities were analyzed at the March meeting of the Working Group and are reported below. The Working Group met for a final time in June to review and ratify this “white paper” and to discuss plans for continued collaboration after the grant.

The next section of this paper reports in more detail the Working Group's findings about the defining assumptions, values, and goals of an open curriculum and analyzes how they take form in the different curricula of the participating institutions. A section on assessment follows that discusses the challenges of designing appropriate and meaningful curricular evaluation exercises, reports on the assessment activities conducted in this project, and outlines additional prospective evaluative activities. Further analysis is then offered of three areas of concern that emerged as particularly important in the assessment activities and in the discussions of the Working Group: advising, curricular breadth, and the advantages and disadvantages of this educational model for students and faculty. The paper concludes with reflections about the history of the open curriculum and its relevance to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

II. What is an “Open Curriculum”?

A. Shared Assumptions, Values, and Goals

An “open curriculum” constitutes a recognizable tradition in American higher education, with shared values and common experiences among its different practitioners that distinguish it from other models. Nevertheless, as is often the case with vital traditions, there are many divergences in the practices of its members, and a great many structural differences can be found among the curricula of these schools. An “open curriculum” is not defined by an absence of general education requirements. An institution with great curricular flexibility may require a freshman writing course or a first-year seminar (as is the case at Amherst, for example), or a school may encourage considerable innovation in the design of concentrations but may have clearly delineated expectations about the fields of inquiry to be covered in the first two years of college (as is true at Hampshire). Or the primary area where students are encouraged to exercise independence may be outside the classroom, in co-curricular experiences (as with the “co-op” program at Antioch). This variation makes it important to step back and identify the defining assumptions about learning and the desired experiences of students and teachers that characterize these curricula and make them unique. Significant commonalities exist among these institutions (“Yes, we are part of a cohort” was the implicit response to the invitation to participate in the Teagle Working Group). Articulating this common ground with some rigor and specificity is necessary to define the “alternative tradition” to which the members of this cohort belong and to determine the fundamental claims of this model so that one might assess their validity.

A consensus emerged in the Working Group’s discussions that, more than any particular curricular structure, the defining characteristic of this tradition is “a culture of student choice bounded by advising.” In whatever form, these curricula give students great freedom but expect responsibility and accountability in ways that make advising an especially critical duty of the faculty. This tension between freedom and responsibility, choice and accountability, student independence and collaboration with faculty, recurs in different ways throughout the cultures and curricula at these institutions.

The emphasis on freedom exercised in a partnership with faculty goes hand in hand with other values about learning and teaching that are widely shared among members of this tradition. Faculty at these institutions find that a distinctive engagement with learning is a typical and desirable result of a culture of choice. Faculty who have taught required courses at other institutions report that students are much more committed to and involved with their learning if they have chosen to take these courses. “Learning occurs when students are motivated,” a Hampshire faculty member said, and one benefit of teaching in this culture, faculty agree, is that students who want to be in a class are more motivated to learn than students who are compelled or coerced to be there. The quality of interaction in the classroom in a culture of choice and collaboration is unique.

A concern with the primacy of student learning is connected in such a culture with an emphasis on the acquisition of skills and the development of competencies rather than the coverage of subject matter. As a representative from Sarah Lawrence said at the opening conference, “our approach tries to foster autonomous learners—learners who develop ways of problem-solving, and who learn by doing.” “It’s all about learning by the student,” another faculty participant from Hampshire said, “not delivery of content by the teacher.” According to yet another faculty participant, “students at Brown are a lot more proactive, a lot more flexible and independent in their thinking, because their interests and their willingness to question and explore have not been stifled,” and he said visitors from other schools had been impressed by his students’ “curiosity and fearlessness.” As an Amherst faculty member put it: “A liberal education is not coverage; it is agility, versatility, and independence of mind—connecting knowledge to action.” An emphasis on developing the capacity for problem-solving and on promoting creativity, curiosity, and independent thinking is characteristic of this culture of learning.

Based on the exchanges at the opening conference, the Working Group developed a list of shared values, assumptions, and attitudes that tend to characterize an educational culture defined by student choice and a collaborative approach to learning:

1. Designing one’s education is an important part of the education.
2. Agility, versatility, and independence of mind are primary educational goals.
3. Students should be active learners who use freedom for innovation and discovery rather than freedom from requirements.
4. An active advising process must engage students and faculty in substantive, collaborative discussions of the student’s program.
5. Faculty should meet students where they are in relation to the demands and challenges of a particular course and teach to them, mindful of their background, abilities, and learning styles.
6. The curriculum, because of built-in flexibility, accommodates different ways in which students learn.
7. The curriculum emphasizes knowing for a reason and learning how to use the knowledge that students acquire in college.
8. The activities of the faculty and the educations of the students should cross disciplinary boundaries.
9. Close collaboration with faculty members is an important component of the undergraduate experience.

To be sure, these values and attitudes can also be found at institutions with core curricula and distribution requirements. As a colleague from Hampshire reminded the opening conference, “We seem to assume that what is happening at our schools is happening only at our schools, but there is no evidence that this is true.” Nevertheless, the convergence of these values and their reinforcement of an educational culture based on choice and collaboration do combine to create a distinctive environment for learning and teaching.

Variations within a common culture are not unusual, and it is consequently not surprising that different members of the Working Group felt that some of the values and attitudes listed above were more or less important on their campuses. Students at Brown who reviewed this list, for example, took issue with the assertion of #5 that faculty were likely to tailor their teaching to the backgrounds and abilities of the students rather than expect the students to adapt to the needs of the subject and the expectations of the faculty. Some members of the Working Group argued that it was healthy and natural for there to be a tension between what students want and what faculty demand, while others stressed the importance of acknowledging and addressing different abilities and learning styles as crucial to a collaborative approach to learning. Similarly, there was disagreement about whether the emphasis of #7 potentially opened the door to an incursion of pre-professionalism into the free exploration of liberal learning (a concern voiced by representatives from Smith and Amherst). While acknowledging this danger, the participants from Antioch and Brown stressed the importance of social engagement and activism as laboratories for testing theories learned in the classroom. It was generally agreed in the Working Group as a whole that a desirable consequence of applying knowledge was the integration of learning to which this can contribute, and the importance of making connections between different aspects of one’s education and experience was a value all shared.

Similar disagreements and differences of emphasis occurred when these values were translated into a list of desired learning outcomes. In general, however, there was consensus that students in an open curriculum should:

1. Become autonomous learners with intellectual self-reliance.
2. Become “self-starters” who engage in self-initiated work for which they feel ownership.
3. Develop a love of learning and a habit of life-long learning.
4. Acquire agility in the imaginative use of intellectual, critical, and creative resources.
5. Develop a facility with a range of analytic vocabularies, textual styles, and modes of problem-solving and an understanding of interdisciplinary approaches.
6. Achieve competence in understanding and negotiating the differences between cultures.

7. Acquire an ability to develop an independent, critical perspective on a problem or issue.
8. Learn how to use and apply knowledge.
9. Develop ethical and social responsibility.

Again, it is important to note that many of these outcomes represent goals of a liberal education that advocates of other educational models would endorse. To the extent that an open curriculum is dedicated to promoting independent, critical thinking, however, some of its advocates argue that it epitomizes the ideals of liberal education (indeed, Brown's publication that introduces the principles of its curriculum to incoming students is called a "Guide to Liberal Learning").

There was more consensus about some of these outcomes and less about others. In addition to the concerns described earlier about whether applying knowledge might lead to a narrow pre-professionalism as opposed to integrative engagement with the practical implications of theoretical knowledge, there was lively discussion about whether and how students in an open curriculum (or any curriculum, for that matter) might acquire multicultural and interdisciplinary competence (and what these might mean). There was agreement that a curriculum emphasizing problem-solving and facility with ways of knowing rather than coverage of content should have advantages for assisting students to learn how to navigate a heterogeneous cultural and disciplinary world, but there was disagreement about whether we could truly claim to have achieved this end.

One purpose of translating shared values and approaches into learning outcomes is that these can be more readily assessed. Do our students indeed become the kind of learners that our values assert they should and do? The key defining outcomes of an open curriculum are those most closely associated with a culture of choice and collaboration: a capacity for autonomous learning, confidence in initiating inquiry, joy in continued discovery, and versatility in meeting intellectual challenges (outcomes #1-4). These are the outcomes about which there was the most consensus in the Working Group, and they are the attitudes and abilities we would expect to find among our students. Whether that is so is one of the questions guiding the assessment activities described below.

B. Curricular Differences and Family Resemblances: Variations within a Tradition

A culture of student choice and collaborative learning can take many different forms, and its defining values and desired learning outcomes can be fostered in a variety of ways. That is evident in the differences in structure and emphasis that characterize the curricula of the participating institutions in the Teagle Working Group. The open curriculum encourages individualism and diversity, and it is consequently not surprising that it too is a pluralistic phenomenon. Rather than a unified school of thought with a single program of study, the “alternative tradition” identified with an “open curriculum” is like a family with members who share noticeable resemblances and have overlapping features but who also differ in various respects. The opening conference and the first subsequent meeting of the Working Group devoted considerable time and attention to surveying the similarities and differences of the participants’ curricula and to asking whether the discrepancies among them called into question their belonging to a common tradition. The more the Working Group explored its differences and examined the reasons behind them, the more it recognized that its participants were pursuing common goals and principles in different ways. The survey below of the different curricula of the participating institutions is intended to convey the results of those explorations and to suggest that the shared goal of promoting autonomous, self-motivated learning by encouraging the responsible use of freedom can be pursued effectively through a range of curricular structures. (A chart summarizing these structures can be found in Appendix A.)

Amherst

From 1947 onward, Amherst had a core curriculum that occupied all of the freshman and sophomore years. General education requirements were suspended in 1971 and an “interim curriculum” was instituted that has endured much longer than was initially anticipated. According to one faculty member at the opening conference, “an interest in developing independent thinkers led to the open curriculum, which is consistent with giving students freedom of choice.” Another conference participant reported that faculty at Amherst would be surprised to see themselves grouped with some Teagle institutions (like Hampshire or Antioch) because they identify more with Williams and Swarthmore, but this person also noted that Amherst faculty prize their freedom to teach what they want to teach rather than having to conform to a preset curriculum and that students similarly cherish their freedom to choose.

Students must pass 32 courses in eight semesters and complete a major with a comprehensive exam. The only general requirement is a first-year seminar. Most of these seminars emphasize writing skills. Most are interdisciplinary, and two-thirds are team-taught. The emphasis on interdisciplinarity in the curriculum in general can be seen in the high percentage of students who double-major (30%) and in the number of faculty who have joint appointments or participate in interdisciplinary programs. The open curriculum at Amherst has encouraged a high level of curricular experimentation, supported by a President’s Initiative

Fund that has allowed cross-departmental groups of faculty to shape curricular initiatives through team-taught courses, visiting faculty, workshops, and lecture series.

All faculty serve as advisors, and academic advising emphasizes the importance of breadth to a liberal education. An overwhelming majority of Amherst students report that they used their freedom to explore areas of study that they would not otherwise have pursued. An Amherst dean noted that the curriculum's emphasis on freedom and independent thought is also related to a "culture of self-governance" that runs very deep among students as well as faculty.

Antioch

An Antioch education has a tripartite structure that reflects "the three C's: classroom, community, and co-op." The tension between student freedom and collaboration with faculty that defines an open curriculum informs each "C" in a different way. Perhaps the best-known aspect of the Antioch curriculum is the requirement that students take three terms of cooperative work—an off-campus job for which the student is hired with the help of a co-op advisor and that is intended (in the words of an Antioch conference participant) "to make students more aware of the world beyond the College and what they need to do to make a significant contribution to that world." More than at any other campus in the Teagle project, an explicit commitment to social justice has historically been integral to Antioch's educational values. Students view themselves as learning how to become "change agents" who are responsible for translating knowledge into action that will improve the world. Horace Mann's motto, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," resounds at every graduation ceremony.

Recently, a required curriculum was instituted that governs the first year of classroom study—not a "great books" curriculum, however, but a team-taught, interdisciplinary approach to a particular problem or theme that also introduces students to basic, discipline-based concepts and skills. In addition, students are oriented to the world of Antioch, the world of work, and the idea of "connected learning," a hallmark of Antioch's new curriculum. Interdisciplinary learning is also emphasized in the upper-level curriculum through a system in which every class is either linked to or clustered with another. "The curriculum is designed to admit multiple ways of knowing," an Antioch faculty member explained; it fosters "a capacity for ambiguity and contradiction, for multiple perspectives and possibilities, for dialogical reverberation between discourse and practice." After the first year, students design their own individually guided majors in consultation with faculty. According to one conference participant, faculty at Antioch "serve both supervisory and interpretive roles" and "create learning partnerships with students." Instead of letter grades, courses are pass-fail, and students receive narrative evaluations for their coursework.

The third aspect of the curriculum is the co-curricular participation of students in the governance of the College. Antioch views itself as a "laboratory for democracy" in which students join faculty and staff in making decisions about curriculum, budget, and

hiring. Antioch's representatives to the conference emphasized the important educational opportunities students receive by being challenged to take on responsibility for analyzing, evaluating, and resolving major institutional issues. A significant dimension of the "openness" of the Antioch curriculum, they noted, is its responsiveness to the processes of participatory democracy, in all of their potentially stimulating and disruptive flux and flow.

Brown

The so-called "new curriculum" at Brown was instituted in 1969 in response to recommendations from a student-faculty committee that proposed granting students broad freedom to design their own programs of study while also mandating that they enroll in "modes of thought" courses that would introduce them to interdisciplinary problem-solving. The "modes of thought" requirement was not adopted, largely out of fear on the part of faculty that insufficient resources would be provided to staff it, but voluntary efforts to design courses and majors that crossed disciplinary boundaries have created a climate conducive to interdisciplinary teaching and research that characterizes Brown's curriculum to this day.

Students design their own general education programs in consultation with faculty advisors who encourage broad inquiry and "liberal learning." Several features of the curriculum are intended to encourage exploration into fields beyond a student's comfort-zone: e.g., students may take as many courses pass-fail as they wish, failed courses do not appear on the external transcript, and students may drop a course without penalty until the final week of classes. Also, students must attempt 32 semester-courses but must only pass 30, which allows cost-free experimentation with at least two courses. By the end of sophomore year, students must declare a major (or "concentration") and must fulfill its requirements in order to graduate. Many concentrations are marked by considerable flexibility and openness to variation, and many multi-disciplinary majors are offered. Students dissatisfied with the 103 currently available majors may propose a self-designed independent concentration, which must be approved by a faculty committee.

The Brown curriculum is based on the belief that granting students the freedom to design their course of study will contribute to making them independent thinkers and autonomous learners. Independent study and collaborative research with faculty are also encouraged. Faculty and students view themselves as partners in the educational enterprise. "Liberal learning" is taken to mean studying a broad range of disciplines in order to understand the relation between different ways of knowing. A premium is placed on the creativity and innovation that independent thought and multidisciplinary exploration make possible.

Hampshire

The curricular requirements at Hampshire are, perhaps surprisingly, more structured than at some other Working Group schools, but students have considerable freedom in designing how they will meet these requirements, and they have increasing independence as they progress through the three “divisions” that structure their four years of study.

In Division I (“Basic Studies”), students pursue foundational studies in the liberal arts by designing a first-year curriculum in which they satisfy a distribution requirement (one course in each of the five interdisciplinary “schools” that take the place of traditional departments: Cognitive Science; Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies; Interdisciplinary Arts; Natural Science, and Social Science). In Division II, students explore their chosen field of emphasis (the “concentration”) through an individually designed program of courses, independent work, internships, or fieldwork. This culminates in the production of a “portfolio” that must meet with the approval of a faculty supervisor. In Division III (“Advanced Studies”), students complete a substantial independent study project centered on a specific topic, question, or idea that they develop in consultation with a faculty advisor.

Throughout the three divisions, students collaborate with faculty to design highly individualized programs of study. There are no grades or credit hours. “The emphasis is on independent work from day one,” according to a faculty participant at the conference. One sign of the close interaction between students and faculty, another participant reported, is that faculty often develop new courses in response to the interests students bring to them and enlist students as co-teachers and partners in researching and designing courses.

Interdisciplinarity is one of the most important values at Hampshire. In each of the three divisions, multi-disciplinary investigation is encouraged. The existence of interdisciplinary schools in place of departments is an organizational structure that facilitates the crossing of epistemological boundaries. If faculty were inclined to keep within a particular intellectual niche, the students push them to see and make connections with other areas because of the problem-solving, issue-oriented approach they take in their Division II portfolios and Division III projects.

New College

New College’s student-centered and inquiry-based approach to learning is epitomized in its unique “contract” system. In order to graduate, a student must complete seven “contracts,” one-semester programs of full-time study that are designed in collaboration with a faculty “sponsor” who monitors the student’s progress and certifies the successful completion of the contract’s specific, agreed-upon terms. Narrative evaluations are provided for each course or academic endeavor included in a contract, and these form the basis of the sponsor’s end-of-semester certification as well as of the negotiation between student and sponsor of the successive semester’s contract. This process of negotiating a contract, monitoring and certifying its completion, and constructing the next one creates an ongoing, interactive partnership between the student and the faculty sponsor.

Students must also complete three independent projects during January “interterms.” A senior thesis and oral baccalaureate exam are required for graduation as well. Close and frequent collaboration between a student and a faculty sponsor are integral to all of these requirements. Their overarching intention is to encourage the development of a capacity for independent, inquiry-oriented intellectual work.

As the only public institution in the Teagle Working Group, New College faces unique pressures and demands. In response to a new accreditation process in 2002, New College added a general education requirement that documents proficiency in writing, mathematics, and computing as well as a distribution of courses in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. It is expected that students will complete contracts that meet these goals. Oversight by the Florida Board of Governors requires state colleges and universities to specify content knowledge, communication skills, and critical thinking skills expected of graduates. New College has attempted to meet this need for accountability by demonstrating that the evaluation of student proficiency and the supervision of “contracts” foster individualized learning in a context of rigorous, demanding faculty expectations.

Sarah Lawrence

The commitment to individualized education at Sarah Lawrence is perhaps best seen in its “conference” system. Not only are the vast majority of courses at Sarah Lawrence taught in small seminars limited to at most 15 students; in every course, a student and teacher also meet in “conference” every week to explore what the student needs to know and to determine the most appropriate ways for acquiring such knowledge. In these conferences, individualized programs of reading and research are developed that speak to the evolving needs, interests, and questions of the particular student. The assumption of the conference system, as a Sarah Lawrence representative explained, is that “there is no single path to an ‘educated person.’ Rules designed to apply to all students too often are useful for none.” The conference system leads to an unusual variety of work within a single course, with projects covering a wide range of related topics depending on questions students pose in response to the material of the course and on the ways in which conversations with the teacher then refine, analyze, and (where appropriate) redirect these inquiries. The goal is to build on students’ own desire to learn by teaching them how to frame questions, develop a testable thesis, evaluate sources, and present a cogent argument.

The general graduation requirements at Sarah Lawrence similarly accommodate wide variation. Students must take coursework in at least three of the four academic areas (humanities, creative arts, social science, and natural science and mathematics). No more than 50 of the 120 credits required for graduation can be taken in any one discipline within these areas, and there are also upper limits on how many credits may be earned in each area (60 in the creative and performing arts, 80 in the others). Students are asked to enroll in no

more than three courses per semester in order to encourage depth of study and the sustained, probing inquiry that conference projects require. This emphasis on depth of intellectual engagement is accentuated by the predominance of year-long courses.

The collaborative nature of education at Sarah Lawrence can also be seen in how faculty design courses. Rather than inheriting a required syllabus or having to fit into a pre-defined slot, faculty regularly develop new courses as their own interests evolve in response to the interests of the students they are working with. This collaborative process of exploration also encourages interdisciplinary work, because conference projects typically address problems and issues that cross disciplinary boundaries and require a multi-disciplinary approach. The absence of pre-set courses leads to a flexible curriculum that is inherently open to change—to new fields of study and to new interests on the part of students and faculty.

Smith

An open curriculum was adopted at Smith in 1970 by a narrow faculty vote. The prevailing view was that the kinds of knowledge and expertise it would be desirable for students to acquire were too varied and complex to distill into a uniform structure of requirements. Rather, “in the spirit of individual liberty and largeness of opportunity,” faculty agreed to emphasize to students their “options” for study through advising. Each student achieves depth in her field by completing a major. Breadth is achieved by the requirement that each student complete half of her courses, or 64 credits, outside the department of the major.

In a move to encourage study across the curriculum, the faculty voted that, beginning with the class entering in 1994, students who wish to be eligible for Latin honors must take at least one course in seven fields of knowledge: literature, historical studies, social science, natural science, mathematics and analytic philosophy, the arts, and foreign language. Completion rates for Latin Honors have ranged from a high of 65% of the senior class (in 1998 and 1999) to 53% in 2005. Understanding this decline is a current topic of faculty concern and discussion.

A major revision to the open curriculum took place in 1997, when a writing requirement was instituted for first-year students. Each first-year student must successfully complete one course designated “writing-intensive.” These courses are spread throughout the curriculum and gain their designation based on review by a college committee. Revisions to the writing-intensive course requirements were made in 2005, and discussion continues about how best to ensure that the goals of good writing are addressed throughout a Smith student’s undergraduate career.

A growing concern about the quantitative abilities of Smith students has led to several initiatives, though not as yet to a requirement. In general, a consensus for adding requirements does not now exist at Smith, and there is some skepticism about the adequacy of the “coverage” model to do justice to student learning. The president at Smith has encouraged the faculty to

ask what “capacities” they expect students to develop during their college years, and she has taken a practical, outcomes-oriented approach to this issue by asking alumnae in conversations around the country to describe the “capacities” they found most important to their lives and careers after graduation. The areas of agreement that emerge in these discussions with faculty, students, and alumnae will shape future debates and decisions about the curriculum.

Wesleyan

As at many schools, Wesleyan’s curriculum has swung back and forth between more or fewer requirements in a pendulum-like fashion for over a century. In 1970, Wesleyan dropped non-major requirements and established an open curriculum. In 1978, the faculty established general education “expectations” that encouraged students to take three courses, distributed across at least two different departments, in each of the three major areas of the curriculum (humanities and the arts, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics). Whether to fulfill general education expectations is optional, although students must do so in order to be eligible for certain departmental and university honors.

The emphasis on “expectations” rather than “requirements” leads to a particular kind of advising conversation that is both collaborative and critical, supportive and challenging, open-ended and structured. The language of “expectations” suggests an education designed in partnership with faculty (who have certain goals and desired outcomes for their students) as well as the importance of student choice (that will respond—or not—to these challenges and aspirations in any number of ways). Students at Wesleyan must also engage in focused study within a major during their final two years. As many as a third of these majors are interdisciplinary in structure, and up to 40% of Wesleyan’s graduates are double majors.

Seventy-six percent of the Class of 2005 met Wesleyan’s general education expectations, and 88% completed at least two courses in each area. Not content with a coverage approach, however, the Wesleyan faculty recently defined ten “capabilities” that set goals for student learning: competence in writing, speaking, interpretation, quantitative reasoning, logical reasoning, creative design, ethical reasoning, intercultural literacy, information literacy, and effective citizenship. The purpose of defining these capabilities is to provide a structure of expectations that will guide advising, course selection, and curricular planning as well as to challenge faculty to clarify how their courses and teaching serve these goals. Again, the approach taken by Wesleyan’s faculty is to establish expectations to guide student choice and the design of individualized programs of study in collaboration with advisors and teachers.

Technology is an important tool at Wesleyan for promoting individualized study and collaboration with faculty. In addition to providing extensive resources to encourage the use of technology in the classroom and in student learning, Wesleyan emphasizes the use of electronic “portfolios” to document student performance and to encourage students to reflect about the relations of their different studies and thereby to better integrate their intellectual

development. Portfolios are advising instruments that test student choices against faculty expectations and provide opportunities for conversation with advisors about a student's evolving goals and interests. The goal is for each student to develop "individualized curricular coherence" without a core. Technology as an instrument of communication and exploration has become an important medium for facilitating student-faculty interaction at Wesleyan and for supporting creativity in the pursuit of individualized learning objectives.

Summary

As this brief survey suggests, an "open curriculum" is not defined by a particular set of curricular structures but is more appropriately understood as a culture of learning and teaching based on shared values and beliefs. The different curricular structures described above are all informed by a commitment to granting students the freedom to direct their own learning in partnership with faculty mentors who have the responsibility to challenge, criticize, inspire, guide, and support them. This commitment can be institutionalized in a variety of forms. The duality of promoting student exploration while steering and shaping it through intensive faculty collaboration marks the signature programs of open curriculum campuses—for example: the "contract system" at New College, the "co-op" program at Antioch, or the "conference" system at Sarah Lawrence. Even when a curricular structure at such a school seems conventional—the existence of "majors" or "concentrations," for example, at Brown, Amherst, or Wesleyan—the culture of freedom and collaboration can make for important differences in practice. At Brown, for example, concentrations are typically characterized by great flexibility, leaving considerable latitude for choice and individual exploration even when requirements and prerequisites exist. At Amherst and Wesleyan, the encouragement of independence and innovation is reflected in the prevalence of interdisciplinary concentrations and double-majors, which for some students are a means of creating new possibilities of inquiry by combining disciplines and crossing boundaries.

Despite the differences in the curricula of the Working Group institutions, its conversations returned again and again to similar themes: the passion for learning that student choice promotes, the challenges of advising to encourage the responsible use of freedom, the excitement of open-ended collaborative learning, the importance of flexibility and versatility, the need to encourage breadth and discourage easy choices. The common opportunities and difficulties that these conversations pointed to suggest shared experiences with a culture of learning that may take different shapes but is nevertheless distinctive and recognizable. A vital tradition is characterized by continuity and variation as common values are tested and explored in different contexts and evolve over the years in response to different challenges and possibilities. The "open curriculum" is a tradition in this sense—a tradition that has demonstrated its vitality through the variety of experiments it has fostered even as its central defining values have endured.

III. Assessment

A great deal of assessment regularly takes place at the participating institutions, as is also the case at campuses across the country. The surveys in which the Working Group schools take part include the CIRP Freshman Survey, the Admitted Student Questionnaire, the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and various COFHE (Committee on the Financing of Higher Education) surveys of graduating seniors, alumni, and enrolled students. The institutional research offices at our campuses also routinely gather data on course distribution, graduation rates, student satisfaction with faculty teaching, and other matters. Data from these studies informed the Working Group's discussions and are reported in the analyses of various issues throughout this report. Several problems, however, complicated the effort to use these data to conduct comparative assessments of our curricula. To begin with, our institutions do not all participate in the same surveys (for example, only Antioch and New College participate in NSSE; only Hampshire takes part in CLA; and only Amherst, Brown, Smith, and Wesleyan belong to COFHE). Some data, as with the COFHE surveys, were collected on the understanding that they would not be shared publicly. Comparing our curricula to one another based on common data was consequently difficult, and comparing ourselves as a group to other colleges with different curricular models was impossible.

Nevertheless, the Teagle project created some unusual opportunities for cross-institutional comparisons which we were eager to take advantage of. The Working Group conducted two assessment exercises that began to evaluate the learning outcomes and the educational cultures associated with an open curriculum: interviews of recent alumni and focus groups of current faculty. These exercises demonstrated the value of cross-institutional assessment and suggested other projects that might be undertaken in the future.

The Working Group decided that alumni interviews would be useful for a number of reasons. If our shared values do indeed have the outcomes we connected with them, then one would expect that recent alumni of our different institutions would report finding that their educations had prepared them for their post-college experiences in a particular, predictable set of ways. Interviewing a randomly selected group of alumni could test whether their experiences during and after college matched up with the values and outcomes that the Working Group identified as characteristic of an open curriculum. Such interviews would also provide evidence of the strengths as well as the weaknesses of this curriculum as these had been experienced by graduates who had had time to reflect on the consequences of their educations but were still close enough to their college years to remember them in some detail. Without a control group, it would be impossible to sort out which experiences were unique to an open curriculum and not simply characteristics of a liberal arts education, but commonalities across alumni from different institutions would nevertheless be instructive.

Faculty focus groups were thought to be potentially informative because they could test whether what we say about our curricular values bears any relation to what actually happens in the classroom. Do teachers in an open curriculum find that their students are learning in ways that the values of such a model would predict? Although once again a control group would not be available, a cross-institutional perspective could be created by comparing the experiences of recently arrived faculty with the views of faculty who had taught at an institution for many years. As with the alumni interviews, a set of questions would be devised that would interrogate whether and how the postulated learning outcomes manifested themselves in practice.

Neither alumni interviews nor faculty focus groups can be considered decisive evidence about the worth of an open curriculum. Assessing the practical value of a curriculum is a complex, non-trivial challenge, and no single measure will be adequate to the task. “We want to surround the problem with data,” as one Working Group member explained. “What we want is to look at what is going on from many different angles and see how the evidence converges.” Quantitative data about student performance, narratives about the experiences of alumni, and reports from faculty about the learning they observe are all part of a portfolio of indicators that are necessary to understand whether and how a curriculum works. The Teagle project began to assemble such a portfolio, and the Working Group’s discussion of the challenges of assessment suggested some additional collaborative activities that might be pursued after the grant is over. These will be briefly described at the end of this section.

A. Alumni Interviews

Each Working Group institution conducted telephone interviews with a sample of 8-12 alumni who had graduated ten or so years ago. A total of 73 interviews were conducted during January and February 2006. Alumni were randomly selected from the classes of 1994-96, with the selection corrected as necessary to achieve a roughly equal distribution of majors in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. Interviewers assembled at Amherst to refine the questions and to receive training before beginning the exercise, and they met again afterwards to report and evaluate the results. More than half of the alumni contacted agreed to participate, a gratifyingly high response rate that indicated a significant degree of willingness to contribute to a discussion that was perceived as meaningful and substantive. Interviews on average lasted 40-45 minutes, but some continued for more than an hour.

A short list of open-ended questions guided each interview:

- What were the main reasons you chose to attend [your college]? How important was the open curriculum in your decision?
- What was your experience of discussing course choices with your advisor?

- Who else influenced your decisions about which courses to take?
- Were there subjects you intentionally avoided?
- In your experience, did the student culture have a tendency to support either broad exploration of many subjects, or focusing on one or a few and avoiding others?
- Review the interviewee's history and ask what they've been doing since graduation. In what ways have you felt well or badly prepared by your undergraduate education?
- Are there any subjects you didn't take that you have since wished you had studied?
- Do you think you learned anything from having the experience of choosing all your own courses? How has what you learned been useful since graduation?

The study used a very small sample, and it should not be assumed that the responses are statistically representative of the entire population. In analyzing the responses, however, attention was paid to the relative frequency with which various themes arose, especially those not asked about directly. A summary of the findings follows, and a full report of the responses is given in Appendix B.

Three positive themes were most prominent, receiving 10 or more mentions among the 73 respondents:

1. The alumni enjoyed having the freedom to choose their own courses (“It’s a more adult way to learn”–“Everybody felt that it was special to be able to choose”–“It helped free me up to the idea of choosing my own path in my career and personally outside of college”).
2. This freedom opened them up to new subjects and areas (“People took all sorts of crazy classes! I do remember people taking everything under the sun”–“People were taking all kinds of stuff. It was an exciting time”).
3. It fostered a passion for learning (“Everybody was really into what they were doing because they were choosing what they wanted to do”–“[This curriculum] caters to a hungry mind. You get to mold, plan, and select what and how you want to study. You could take courses for the sake of taking them”–“It gave me the flexibility to structure my academic program around my desires”).

Three negative themes were also prominent:

1. In retrospect, some alumni felt they had not been mature or knowledgeable enough as students to make wise choices (“I was 17, what did I know?”–“That freedom could be daunting, especially when you’re 18. Sometimes you benefit from a little structure”).
2. Some felt they did not receive sufficient guidance and made unnecessary mistakes (“I didn’t always know what to choose. It was kind of recreational stabbing in the dark”–“Guidance was lacking and therefore students waste time or make mistakes”–“With too

much freedom it can be hard to focus. Without proper guidance, you can get lost in too many choices”).

3. Some alumni reported that they had avoided challenging courses or subjects (“If there had been requirements, I wouldn’t have been able to get out of some things, [and I] would’ve faced up to those fears. It’s very much about staying with what a person is good at” – “If you have bad habits, [it] encourages your bad habits as much as your good habits”).

The primary outcomes that alumni attributed to their experience of making choices in an open curriculum were decision-making skills, responsibility, and personal growth. A few said they had accrued these benefits because they made mistakes or bad decisions. Various alumni described themselves as well-prepared with respect to increased confidence and ability to meet unexpected challenges: “It prepared me well in my ability to enter a field I do not know or understand and find my own course through it. . . . I can learn what I need to learn instead of being told what to learn.” “I learned it’s OK to be wrong and raise your hand without fear because it’s important to investigate—those skills have been so valuable to me.” “My education made me fearless. It made me not afraid to take chances in my career. . . . I’m not afraid to challenge the norm.” “It taught me to follow my own intuition and to be less of a gerbil on the wheel.” “I got used to making decisions on my own. I can shift gears and change, switch jobs and fields, and do so confidently and competently.” “It’s an experience that empowers a person, having to go to your advisor and negotiate with them and explain what you want to do, to have to provide a rationale for your choices.”

Some felt very well prepared for graduate study, although a few felt that they had not received the appropriate educational breadth and depth. Seeking a career was the main thing for which alumni found themselves poorly prepared. Some felt that their college work was too “theoretical” and divorced from real-world concerns, and others complained about a lack of career counseling to orient them to the challenges of life after college. Some alumni saw these problems as issues having to do with liberal arts education in general rather than the curricula of their particular schools (for an illuminating analysis of this question, see the chapter on “Preparing for a Career” in Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006], pp. 281-309).

Alumni reported avoiding some subjects, especially math (mentioned by 53% of the respondents) and science (cited by 44%), and a few said they had chosen a school with an open curriculum in order to avoid those subjects. (These numbers are considerably higher, it should be noted, than the percentage of students who actually fail to take a course in these areas, according to the institutional research at participating schools; see the discussion below of “Curricular Breadth.”) Foreign language and classes emphasizing writing were not mentioned as areas avoided. Several alumni also remembered not challenging themselves, taking easy courses, and trying to avoid low grades.

Contrary to such responses about avoidance, there were a number of positive comments about how the curriculum encouraged exploration. Alumni reported exploring many unplanned subjects, especially in the visual arts (49%) and the social sciences (33%), and also music, film, dance, philosophy, physics, biology, environmental studies, computer science, and religion (mentioned by 3 to 10 respondents in each case). The reputation of a professor was cited as an important influence in the selection of courses outside of a student's interest ("Take the professor, not the course" is a mantra at several Working Group campuses). Friends with wide interests also tended to encourage exploration, supporting the notion that peer advising is an important complement to faculty advising in fostering a culture of risk-taking and wide-ranging inquiry (although the advice of peers can also promote avoidance).

Here is a selection of comments about how alumni had felt challenged as students to expose themselves to new areas: "There was an assumption that with the academic freedom and resources open to students, they would do great things. I did whatever I wanted. There was no pressure to conform or be a certain type of student. I didn't avoid any subject; there just was not enough time to take everything. It wasn't weird for a chemistry major to take a social science course or vice versa. I really think what they told us was true, that each student is responsible for their own education." "The student culture was such that everybody was interested in a lot of things." "Even 'diehards' took some classes outside their fields." "People talked about and reveled about courses they were doing on the side, outside of their major focus." "[The alumnus's college] let education be a process that widens rather than narrows. I looked ahead and my options sort of branched out."

Again, it should be emphasized that many of these comments reflect experiences that are desired outcomes of a liberal arts education and may not be unique to an open curriculum. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that the responses of these alumni reflected common educational experiences even though they had attended different colleges with distinct institutional identities. Some members of the Working Group had wondered whether the alumni would not recognize the "open curriculum" as a shared experience but would instead give reports of their college years that would bring out the differences among our institutions. Quite to the contrary, interviewees did not resist or challenge the notion implicit in the inventory of questions that they were alumni of institutions with shared curricular values and goals. Their reports of the outcomes of their educations seemed to the interviewers to reflect experiences with curricula informed by shared values that had produced comparable outcomes—and these for better or for worse, whether alumni felt they had been encouraged to explore new areas and to develop responsibility for their choices, as many did, or had been allowed to avoid certain subjects, as some also reported. The comment of one alumnus is a good summary of the collective experience: "The very fact that you are allowed to make decisions about how you're going to spend your time is very important. The process is an absolute mess, and I think therein lies the genius."

B. Faculty Focus Groups

The purpose of the faculty focus groups was to ask whether the experience of teachers at our institutions showed that learning was occurring in particular ways associated with the values and outcomes that the Working Group had identified as characteristic of an open curriculum. Dinners that lasted two to three hours were conducted with groups of faculty from across the major disciplinary areas (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences). Faculty were invited who were veterans of the institution as well as more recent arrivals who had taught there for at least two years, the expectation being that they would thus be able to compare their experiences with an open curriculum against their experiences teaching in a different institutional context that was still fresh in their memories. Two separate dinners for these cohorts were held at three of the Working Group institutions, and one or two dinners of mixed groups were held at the others.

A short list of questions was developed to guide discussion:

- What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of [our school's] curriculum? For faculty? For students?
- How much does it matter to you that [our school] has an open curriculum?
- Does our curriculum function primarily to allow students to avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid, or to enable students to explore areas of interest to them in more depth than they could in a more defined curriculum?
- Do we provide sufficiently strong advising to enable students to develop a liberal education in the absence of a core curriculum or distribution requirements?

One Working Group member led the discussion, with a staff assistant taking detailed notes. Full reports of the meetings are given in Appendix C, and this section summarizes common issues and responses.

There was a strong consensus among all of the groups that allowing students to choose most of the courses they take creates a much better learning environment than one in which students enroll in courses to fulfill requirements. "Students are invested in the curriculum from the beginning because they choose their courses and so they come to class eager to engage in the work," according to one Sarah Lawrence faculty member, adding "They do not have to wait until they are seniors to do the work they 'really' want to do." Another Sarah Lawrence colleague concurred: "The students are invested in what they do and it makes it very easy to teach them. They meet you more than half-way." The new faculty at Antioch similarly reported that "choice changes the climate within which we have a discussion. When people feel they have choice, they feel more intellectually alive."

Although the faculty at Smith disagreed among themselves about the wisdom of not stipulating distribution requirements, they agreed that it was good not to have “prisoners” in one’s classes. Wesleyan faculty reported that “students are far more motivated because they have picked a course,” and some who “had experience at other institutions or with required courses at Wesleyan . . . commented on the difficulties of teaching students who feel compelled to take their course.” New College faculty members noted that “what sets our students apart is motivation, not ability,” and they felt that making students partners in designing their programs (as the “contract” system does) contributed greatly to their interest and engagement with their studies. The Amherst group agreed that “the open curriculum raised the level of engagement of both students and faculty in their curricular choices and in the actual classes” because “no students were ‘forced’” to take them. A Brown faculty member similarly declared, “It’s soul-destroying to have students in your course who don’t want to be there.”

Even professors who teach “disliked” courses required for particular programs (introductory chemistry, statistics, or methods courses in the social sciences or humanities) reported that an open curriculum helps to create a positive learning climate in these courses inasmuch as students understand they are there because they have chosen a particular program. Other faculty complained, however, that the absence of core requirements meant that students came to some of their courses with varying degrees of background and preparation, creating difficulties in teaching these courses. One skeptical Smith faculty member noted that “it would be easier to be enthusiastic about the open curriculum if more students were strong in basic skills,” and another agreed that “high school preparation today is an issue” because “it is difficult to address the wide range of needs that students bring.” Some faculty at Amherst reported reluctance to require prerequisites for their courses for fear this would dampen enrollments and create an impression of a problem with a course or the instructor.

Another advantage that many faculty reported is their freedom to develop new courses or to teach a course according to their own interests and abilities. The junior faculty at Wesleyan noted, for example, that the freedom “to select and design courses without the constraints that come with requirements” was a factor in their decision to accept positions there. Faculty in several of the focus groups expressed satisfaction that they do not have to cover set courses prescribed by distribution requirements or structure the scope and content of their courses to fit into a fixed curriculum. For some faculty, this freedom is welcome because it allows them to teach to their area of specialization. According to one Sarah Lawrence faculty member, “the autonomy to offer courses in your areas of interest, and to develop new ones as your interests change” is “the pearl of great price for a faculty whose teaching load is so intensive that time for their own research is limited. Obviously, students also benefit, . . . since they are taught by teachers who remain engaged and delighted by what they teach.” The New College faculty reported that the flexibility of the curriculum encouraged them to explore new areas along with the students: “Teaching here is dialogical. What we hear back from the students

is really important. Teaching is not one-way.” For some New College faculty, this meant that they “don’t have to worry about stepping on the toes of other faculty if they include related disciplines in their teaching.” Others worried, however, that “it is hard work to create new classes” every semester instead of developing and refining a regular set of courses.

Some Antioch faculty doubted whether excellence can be achieved in such an “improvisational” environment and expressed concern about the depth of a student’s preparation for further study in such a fluid curriculum. A Sarah Lawrence faculty member similarly worried that unconstrained freedom to teach “can allow the college’s curriculum as a whole (or even the curriculum of any given discipline) to take a haphazard form.” A colleague added: “Precisely because the faculty is free to teach what they think best, we really need to think about what is best—i.e., what is most needed by the students. We have more freedom than professors at most other schools, but by that same token we carry more responsibility.” But one Brown faculty member summarized the consensus of the focus groups: “It’s a win-win situation: Students take courses they are interested in; professors are encouraged to teach well by students’ interest in the material.”

All of the groups on each campus spent a good deal of time discussing advising. There was a broad consensus that advising is essential to the success of an open curriculum and also that advising in such a curriculum places significant demands on the faculty. Some groups welcomed the challenge of advising and saw it as a responsibility that goes hand in hand with the benefits of the openness of the curriculum. Other groups noted that advising in such a curriculum is a burden on faculty who are already increasingly pressed for time. Every group noted weaknesses in their institution’s advising system, and there was a feeling among many faculty that advising is not sufficiently recognized or rewarded despite its important educational role.

Among the issues most commonly mentioned by the focus groups were a concern that insufficient numbers of faculty were willing to engage students in an advising relationship or that faculty did not know enough about other departments to be effective advisors (comments voiced at Brown). An Antioch faculty member noted the importance of being “more collegial” and learning more about other colleagues’ teaching and scholarship in order to be an effective advisor. One Hampshire faculty member observed that the mandate “Learn what you love” makes the problematic assumption that students can love something before they know what it really is,” and so advising usually involves “broadening” students. A Wesleyan faculty member pointed out that “working with advisees who don’t know what they want or those who are certain that they know requires time, so a low ratio of students to advisors is critical.” Almost all of the groups called on their institutions to devote more resources to the training and support of advisors. The Amherst faculty agreed that “they were left to figure out advising for themselves,” and the New College group called especially for more attention to the “mentoring of new faculty” about the values and goals of its approach to education. Several groups also discussed the need (as one Smith faculty member put it) “to educate

students about being a good advisee. Students don't know what to expect" in a relationship with an adult who is not their parent, a guidance counselor, or a high school teacher. Better training and support of faculty to help them be more effective advisors and more education of students as to their responsibilities as advisees were widely perceived needs at all campuses.

There was disagreement about whether students use the freedom of the curriculum to explore and take risks or to "play it safe" and avoid challenges, and this disagreement suggests that both are probably occurring. The Brown faculty group "agreed that most students use the freedom of the open curriculum to do extraordinary things, while acknowledging that some students do not take full advantage of the flexibility the curriculum offers. Overall this tradeoff was seen as desirable." There was "a strong consensus" among New College faculty that "few students actively avoid courses" in certain areas, although one person voiced concern about "holes" in some students' "scope of knowledge," and another commented that students who "need more structure . . . don't do well here, but this should not be used as a reason to further structure the curriculum." Several faculty groups thought that whether students used or abused their freedom varied according to their abilities and interests. A Smith faculty member observed that an open curriculum "seems to serve our strongest students particularly well" whereas "for weaker students it probably allows more avoidance and also reinforces a consumer-oriented, narrow, single-minded approach to their college experience."

The Amherst faculty group "found that about half of their advisees demonstrated resistance to venturing out in areas of study that were new to them or out of their comfort-zone," although the reasons had less to do with the student's ability than with a desire not "to risk a 'hit on their GPA' by taking something they are not familiar with or that does not play to their strengths." According to some faculty, this tendency was exacerbated by parents who view Amherst "as a credential to the next stepping stone rather than a wonderful opportunity to explore and expand one's interests." The Wesleyan faculty worried about "a 'culture of satisfaction.' Students believe they should be able to pick and choose what they want to learn. The faculty participants believe that it is good for students to do things that they don't want to do. It was suggested that it is the obligation of the faculty to 'push' students to take subjects that they are avoiding." A Sarah Lawrence faculty member strenuously disagreed: "Why shouldn't students 'avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid'? Is the assumption that if you don't like it, it must be good for you? . . . Coercion doesn't always educate the palate; sometimes (I speak from youthful experience) it just leaves a nasty taste in your mouth."

Some Brown faculty worried that the open curriculum "creates a sense of entitlement in students." As one faculty member put it, "students don't feel they need to take prerequisite courses" but should just be able to jump right in, which may represent admirable courage or blind hubris but in either case can have undesirable consequences. Another Brown faculty member voiced the concern that the consumer mentality of student "shoppers" fosters "a culture of dilettantism; some students want a 'taste' of research and do not want to commit

to a long-term research program.” The Antioch faculty worried that students tend to choose courses that reinforce their intellectual prejudices and consequently “only learn points of view that already support their way of looking at the world,” which in turn “leads to a cultural climate on campus that can be repressive of ideas outside those that are already accepted.”

If a culture of student choice can go wrong in these various ways, several comments by the New College faculty recall the positive results that can come about from giving students the freedom to learn: “We push students to find the spark that drives them and then we watch them take off. Our students have responsibility for their choices, autonomy, at an earlier point in college than students at other colleges.” Because their independence as thinkers is fostered, “Our students are able to frame questions . . . and figure out what they want to know.” As a result, another New College colleague concluded, “Our students are more independent, stronger, more self-confident when they graduate compared to when they arrive.” The reports from the faculty focus groups suggest that these good results are common and widespread but by no means guaranteed. Student choice can lead to dilettantism, narrowness, credentialism, or complacency, or it can promote exploration, independence, creativity, and personal growth. The faculty who participated in the focus groups offered realistic testimony about the dangers of the open curriculum even as they endorsed its values because of their positive experiences with the learning it makes possible when its freedom is used responsibly.

C. Future Assessment Activities

The Working Group’s discussions of the importance of assessment and the difficulty of doing it adequately gave rise to suggestions about several assessment activities that would be worth considering as projects for future collaboration. For example:

- It would be informative for the institutional research offices of the different participating campuses to continue sharing data about student performance as they began to do under this grant. As this project has demonstrated, such discussions of comparative data provide insight into whether what we observe at our institutions is unique to our campus or common to schools with similar curricula. How to go about measuring the impact of our curricula is a question we have more to learn about from one another, and continuing to share and compare data would be useful toward that end.
- The evaluation of advising is an especially urgent need and an area where assessment instruments are particularly deficient. The strides that have recently been made in the evaluation of teaching have not even begun to take place with advising. Advising is an expensive activity because of the faculty time it consumes, and it is incumbent upon us to develop better ways of monitoring its quality and improving its effectiveness. Because of the extensive attention that has already been paid to advising on campuses with an open curriculum, our institutions are especially well-positioned to lead an effort to develop

more effective instruments for assessing it. Such measures must go beyond student “satisfaction” if only because a satisfied student may be one who has not been sufficiently challenged by her or his advisor. A project to improve the assessment of advising would seek to develop an inventory of measures that would ask: How well has a student been advised? Is an advisor effective? Is an advising system functioning well? If measures along these parameters could be developed, they would be useful to institutions with many different kinds of curricula.

- As informative as the interviews with alumni and the faculty focus groups were, they left out the perspective of an important constituency: current students. A project of extensive interviews of students along the lines of Richard Light’s perceptive book Making the Most of College (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001) might not only be revealing about how students experience the culture of learning made possible by an open curriculum but also offer guidance about how to help students better navigate its possibilities, avoiding its dangers and embracing its transformative potential.
- The absence of a control group makes it difficult to know how many of the experiences of students and faculty at our institutions are common to schools with a liberal arts philosophy. It is consequently not always clear where and how we differ in the outcomes achieved by colleges with other curricular models. Joint assessment projects with schools that have different educational outlooks would be useful and informative, including alumni interviews, faculty focus groups, and surveys of current students. If Brown were to partner with Columbia, say, or Amherst with Williams on such a comparative project (each Working Group school might invite a potential interlocutor), the results would provide an interesting perspective on the extent to which different institutional values lead to different learning outcomes (or not).

These are a few of the projects that might be undertaken if the sort of collaborative activities begun under this grant from the Teagle Foundation were to continue. Whether such activities would be of mutual benefit and whether other institutions with similar (or contrasting) educational philosophies should be invited to join are topics that the Teagle Working Group will continue to explore.

Summary

It is not surprising that the strengths and the weaknesses highlighted by the assessment exercises in this project often turn out to be two sides of the same coin. The benefits of any curriculum are accompanied by certain defining costs and risks, and that is as much the case with an open curriculum as with any educational approach. The particular advantages and disadvantages, virtues and vulnerabilities, of an open curriculum define its profile as a distinctive approach to liberal education. Alumni reported enjoying the freedom they had and confirmed that it enhanced their motivation and engagement, findings echoed by the faculty focus groups. But alumni also noted that they sometimes felt insufficiently wise or knowledgeable to make good choices, just as faculty worried whether advising programs at their campuses were sufficiently robust to provide students with adequate support and guidance. These findings did not come as news to the Working Group: You don't give students so much freedom without running the risk that some will misuse it or feel overwhelmed. You don't place so much emphasis on collaboration between students and faculty in creating their programs of study without the danger that some students will feel neglected or adrift. What can go wrong with an open curriculum is the reverse of what can go right. The assessment activities confirmed what many Working Group participants already knew about the challenges of making this sort of curriculum work and pointed to areas of concern that are lively topics of discussion and debate on our campuses.

The fact that the risks of an open curriculum are well-known and are correlated in predictable ways to its benefits is not, however, grounds for complacency. At these campuses, there is typically a commitment to formative assessment that strives to learn from experience and continually test improvements, without assuming that the problems will ever be solved once and for all. For example, no advising system can ever guarantee that students will never feel they made bad choices. Making mistakes is part of how students learn. Choice by its very nature carries the possibility that the option not chosen may in hindsight seem preferable. But knowing that mistakes will happen—and that students can learn from them—is a reason to try to improve advising so that this learning and growth will occur. The question of how to enhance advising and measure its effectiveness is consequently a lively issue of concern at many open curriculum institutions.

Campuses can and should use evidence about how students are learning to improve their structures of advising and academic support. The evidence must be rich and complex, however, if it is to be meaningful and useful. Assessment must include evidence from multiple sources (alumni, faculty, current students) and of multiple kinds (surveys, interviews, focus groups, performance data) if it is to suggest with sufficient accuracy, nuance, and scope what is actually being experienced by students and faculty. Measuring a culture of learning requires a multi-layered portfolio of indicators.

Assessment is integral to the values of the open curriculum. A commitment to exploration goes hand in hand with a desire and need for evidence to test hypotheses and refine theories as part of the process of discovery. Granting students freedom requires evaluating how they use it in order to determine whether the transformative potential of the curriculum is being realized. The variety of experiences made possible by the culture of freedom and individuality at an open curriculum campus should also make one skeptical, however, that any assessment will capture the “truth” of the educational experience for all students and faculty.

IV. Issues and Concerns

A. Advising

An open curriculum cannot succeed without effective, engaged advising. Whatever the differences between our curricula, there was unanimity among our many institutions on this point. Advising in the context of an open curriculum is conceived of as an extension of the teaching responsibilities of the faculty because it is a crucial way in which faculty collaborate with students in guiding, shaping, and facilitating their learning. As a Smith faculty member explained at the opening conference, “my colleagues see advising as part of their teaching, as an effort to help students develop intentionally, as another way in which faculty engage critically with students so that they can understand their own intellectual ability.” Most of our institutions require a faculty signature to approve a student’s course-choices, but advising at these schools entails more than checking off requirements. Rather, advising is viewed as a dialogue about a student’s intellectual and personal development in which the faculty member plays the role of a supportive critic.

The open-ended, collaborative nature of advising at an institution with an open curriculum makes it a potentially much more interesting and rewarding activity for faculty than the mechanical business of supervising the fulfillment of requirements. Faculty at schools with distribution requirements often complain that they feel incompetent as advisors because they may not understand or remember all of the rules and technicalities that an advisor in such a system must keep track of, and they typically say they find advising unsatisfying and uninteresting. By contrast, advising in an open curriculum foregrounds the role of the faculty member as mentor, teacher, and intellectual collaborator. Engaging in dialogue about a student’s interests, educational experiences, and goals is a process in which the capacity of the faculty member as a teacher and a scholar to pose questions and analyze a proposed program of study can be vitally engaged. Being a mentor in this way is more rewarding to faculty—and a more appropriate use of their knowledge and wisdom—than having to serve as an answer-book or a policeman.

Advising of this kind is difficult, demanding work, however, and it requires a considerable commitment of time and energy from faculty if it is to be done well. At some institutions, faculty are skeptical that this work is sufficiently appreciated in such material ways as salary increases or consideration for promotion. This problem is related to the fact that instruments for identifying and assessing effective advising are less well-developed than measures for evaluating teaching (even if these too are admittedly imperfect). Work that cannot be evaluated in a publicly recognizable manner is likely to go unappreciated and unrewarded. Developing more effective procedures for assessing advising is an important challenge that must be met if this work is to receive the recognition it deserves.

Because the kind of advising required by an open curriculum is integral to teaching and learning, it cannot be consigned to a cadre of professional staff but must be undertaken by regular faculty. Large numbers of faculty must be involved (at most of our institutions, all faculty are required to advise first- and second-year students), and advising meetings with students constitute a significant addition to the regular teaching workload. The ratio of students to advisor must also be kept small enough to allow extensive and intensive conversation. Not surprisingly, although such advising can be intellectually engaging and professionally gratifying, faculty also often find it time-consuming and burdensome. If it is done well, this kind of advising is important and challenging work. Such work is typically both energizing and draining, and it competes with other demands for faculty time and attention.

Advising in a curriculum without pre-scripted requirements requires more rather than less support from the institution. Training and professional development are essential to help faculty learn how to engage in effective advising. Promoting dialogue among faculty about the goals of the curriculum, the purposes of advising, the needs of students, and the resources and opportunities available to them must be encouraged. Orientations for all freshman advisors at the start of the year, special training sessions for new advisors, faculty lunches to review advising programs—these and other activities to facilitate an exchange of ideas among faculty about advising are important, even essential events at most institutions with open curricula. Also important are publications and web-based materials that give students and faculty information about educational opportunities and issues to consider in developing programs of study. At some institutions (as with Brown’s Meiklejohn program or Smith’s “student academic advisors”), specially trained student peer advisors have proved to be a valuable complement to the perspective of faculty on the options and opportunities available to students. (For peer advising programs to succeed, however, the experiences of the Working Group’s participants suggest that careful selection, extensive training, and clear guidelines are crucial.) Most of the Teagle participating institutions devote considerable effort to supporting faculty advising, but they also agree that they do not do enough.

It also cannot be assumed that students understand their role and responsibilities in an advising relationship. Many students regard the advisor as an “answer man” who will provide them with useful information or as an authority whose duty is to explain and enforce rules and regulations—or, in the worst case, as the safe that must be cracked to unlock the computer code necessary for registration. Just as an open curriculum expects students to be active learners and collaborators in their educations in the classroom, so it requires them to be partners in a dialogical relationship with their advisors and not passive recipients of instructions and information. The idea that advisees and advisors are interlocutors in an open-ended process of inquiry does not come naturally, however, and must be learned. Toward this end, for example, Brown has developed an educational program for entering students to help them understand their responsibilities in the “advising partnership” and to encourage them to see advisors as

“supportive critics” who will assist them in clarifying their objectives but are not there to tell them what to do or make their choices for them. Other Teagle institutions have experimented with similar programs to educate students about what to expect from their advisor—and what their advisor will expect from them.

Good advising programs at institutions with an open curriculum are continually trying out new ideas and methods because these schools view advising as an open-ended, never-fully-perfected intellectual and professional challenge. A sign of a practice that is taken seriously by an academic community is that it is constantly being criticized, interrogated, and evaluated in an effort to improve it by introducing and testing innovations. If advising is as serious and challenging an enterprise as teaching, then it too must be subject to the ongoing scrutiny and renewal that characterizes vigorous intellectual activity. And that is the case at institutions with successful advising programs.

B. Curricular Breadth

Although coverage is not seen as an end in itself at these institutions, all share a concern with encouraging breadth, and most take periodic stock of how expansively their students are studying. One of the aims of an open curriculum is to encourage exploration. Advisors at such institutions consequently push students to take advantage of their freedom to explore new areas of inquiry, and the results are often quite extraordinary. Despite the advice and encouragement they receive, however, some students may choose to focus their studies narrowly, but data suggest that this is a small minority. To recall statistics cited in the previous section, more than half to two-thirds of recent graduates at Smith qualify for Latin honors by studying in seven different fields of knowledge, and 76% of the most recent graduating class at Wesleyan satisfied the general education “expectations.” At Amherst, 97% of students from three recent graduating classes took at least two courses in the humanities, and 96% did the same in the social sciences, although the number drops to 69% in the natural sciences and 53% in foreign language. At Brown, among graduates of a recent class, 95% of non-majors took at least one science course and 72% took three or more, 98% of non-majors took at least one humanities course and 89% took three or more, and 93% of non-majors took at least one social science course and 72% took three or more.

These figures suggest that a large majority of students at the Teagle Working Group institutions use their curricular freedom to study broadly. Students who say that they came to a school with an open curriculum because they don’t have to take science probably won’t leave without doing that (and alumni who remember avoiding it may be forgetting that they nevertheless took one or more science courses). Furthermore, as was confirmed by the faculty focus groups, teachers of “avoided” courses report that students are more engaged in the work of the courses they select in areas outside of their concentrations for the very reason that they are choosing to study them rather than reluctantly or resistantly fulfilling a requirement. In

any case, these statistics are not an accident but at least to some extent reflect the time and effort devoted to advising at open curriculum institutions.

Despite this successful record, the breadth of a student's program of study is not a matter for complacency. Working Group participants reported concerns on their campuses not only with ensuring scientific literacy and competence in quantitative reasoning but also with promoting the study of foreign languages and facility with writing and speaking. Faculty are nevertheless reluctant to introduce requirements to address these concerns because (among other reasons) they are skeptical that requiring one or two courses can by itself guarantee scientific literacy or competence as a writer. The strategy of enacting a course-requirement to meet an educational objective is understandable but more often than not has disappointing results (look, for example, at the many campuses with excellent freshman composition programs where faculty complain that students still cannot write effectively). Developing ways in which students choose to meet such objectives or do so in the process of pursuing aims they themselves have selected is not a panacea, but it is the preferred approach at an institution with an open curriculum.

A distribution requirement in the sciences can often result in the creation of "gut courses" that allow science-phobic students to get past the requirement without learning the power of scientific thinking. Scientists seeking to reach a general audience at a school with an open curriculum have tried instead to use the excitement and beauty of scientific thinking as an attractor. For example, Hampshire has developed an "inquiry-based" approach to science that departs from the normal progression of coursework (with broad surveys coming first) and instead immerses students in small "mode of inquiry" courses right at the outset in order to expose students to "real science" and involve them in scientific problem-solving and hypothesis-testing. Introductory survey courses come later and provide a context for case-based or problem-oriented advanced work, with a strong emphasis on student-initiated independent study. The science faculty at New College have developed "labs without walls" that introduce students to the process of experimentation without requiring a formal laboratory setting. They have also introduced courses like "General Biology in a Cultural Context," "Seeing the Light," and "Introduction to Aquarium Science" that give students a chance to learn the principles and methods of scientific inquiry by exploring everyday topics.

Unable to rely on a requirement to attract students, the science faculty at Brown have developed a number of courses appropriate for non-concentrators and potential concentrators alike that undertake serious study of specific topics and are intended to convey the excitement of scientific inquiry: for example, "Plants, Food, and People," or "Earthquakes, Volcanic Eruptions, and Other Geologic Hazards," or "Beautiful Theories of Physics: From Harmony of the Spheres to Superstrings." All of these approaches to getting students to appreciate the power of scientific thinking are based on the idea that what students need to learn is scientific inquiry as a method of solving problems rather than the content of a particular field.

(An unresolved issue is whether students also need a special introduction into quantitative reasoning, and what shape this should take if they do, and this is actively under discussion at several Working Group campuses.)

Writing is another basic skill that is often required but cannot be “fixed” by a single course. Some Working Group schools have writing requirements, typically in the context of disciplinary inquiry (the model at Smith) where writing is taught as a mode of thinking and not as a mechanical matter of applying grammatical rules. New College and Sarah Lawrence have writing-intensive curricula which put the development of writing competence at the center of the educational process. Most faculty at these two institutions engage in the teaching of writing in every one of their courses, and students perforce cannot graduate without learning how to write even though they never take a required composition class (and none are offered).

Brown also has a writing requirement, but not of the usual kind. Instead of stipulating that everyone take a freshman composition course, Brown mandates that no student may graduate who is deficient in writing and gives the Dean of the College the power and the responsibility to enforce this expectation. Faculty are asked on their grade-sheets to identify students whose writing they deem inadequate, and students who receive two “writing deficiency checks” are then refused permission to register until they have developed with the assistance of an advisor an individualized program to achieve competence in writing, whether through coursework or through tutorials arranged with the Writing Center. Consistent with the values of an open curriculum, the requirement is individualized, tailored to the particular needs and circumstances of the student. The advantage of such an approach is that it can be designed to fit a student’s abilities and needs, although the disadvantage (not to be underestimated) is that there is no guarantee that all students with writing deficiencies will be identified and helped.

Competence in foreign language is another area of concern in discussions of curricular breadth, and here again Brown’s experience may be instructive. Brown students do not point to foreign language acquisition as a strength of the curriculum, but the data suggest that they study language as much as they would if it were required (in a recent year, approximately 1,700 students, or 30% of the resident student body, enrolled in two-semester language acquisition courses). The lack of a requirement means that more students attempt new and unusual languages that were not available to them in high school (instead of continuing with a language they had started there in order to get done with the requirement more quickly). Enrollments are strong, for example, in such languages as Arabic, Hebrew, Czech, Swedish, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, Latin, and Greek. Many students begin acquiring a new language in their freshman year in connection with plans to study abroad. One of the areas of the curriculum where the instructional budget at Brown has been most under pressure recently is in the increasing demand for language courses, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels necessary for foreign study. Language departments that have been particularly

entrepreneurial in recruiting student interest by developing attractive study-abroad programs or creating concentrations that can be pursued as double-majors with international relations or economics have seen their enrollments prosper. In a culture where student choice is a dominating force, developing programs of study that encourage good choices is a smart thing to do, and foreign language faculty at schools with open curricula have generally preferred this strategy to the introduction of a requirement that would be resented by students and discourage interest in starting a new language.

The discussion of breadth often focuses on subject areas that are either covered or neglected. The debate at institutions with an open curriculum is typically oriented instead toward the “capacities” students need to develop so that they can meet the challenges of an ever-changing, unpredictable world. An emphasis on “capacities” assumes that it is more important to be able to create, manipulate, and apply knowledge in a variety of ways than to master subjects whose content may soon change or be irrelevant to the problems students face in later life. Antioch, Hampshire, New College, Smith, and Wesleyan either have or are developing inventories of “capacities” or “capabilities” they expect students to acquire. Hampshire’s list is typical: “learn to read and interpret intellectual or artistic works,” “write critically and analytically,” “understand quantitative methods of analysis,” “develop creative abilities in expressive modes,” “effectively present ideas orally,” “conceive and complete project-based work,” “understand multiple cultural perspectives.” Antioch’s list reflects its commitment to social justice: “knowledge and inquiry,” “skill and innovation,” “critical thinking,” “intercultural effectiveness,” “social engagement,” “deliberative action.”

The development of such inventories is potentially an important exercise because it challenges faculty to articulate the goals of their courses and to ask how these contribute to the outcomes intended by their college’s curriculum. Faculty at institutions with different educational models may develop lists similar to these, and for similar purposes. At a school with an open curriculum, however, the language of “capacities” and “capabilities” carries special significance because it signals the priority placed on enhancing the agency of the learner rather than providing coverage of a field or exposure to a canon.

The question about a student’s program of study in such a model is not only whether it has sufficient scope (not understood as “coverage,” however, but as the development of the broad range of abilities that critical thinking and effective citizenship in the twenty-first century demand). It is also whether the student’s program is integrated and coherent. For example: Does the collection of capacities represent a set of disconnected skills, or have students shown themselves able to synthesize their knowledge? Have they developed an integrated ability to think critically and express their ideas? Do they know how to move from theory to practice and back again in a mutually illuminating manner? Can they apply knowledge effectively and learn from the experience? Are students able as citizens to meet the new and unexpected challenges of their worlds by deploying their abilities to

think, communicate, collaborate, negotiate, and learn? Tests for integration are tricky, but “coherence without a core” is a goal shared not only by Wesleyan’s “portfolio” approach but also by New College’s “contracts” and Hampshire’s progression through three “divisions” to a self-constructed major. Again, these are aims that other institutions committed to the liberal arts may share, but they have a special relation to the values of an open curriculum. If such a curriculum intends to create active, life-long learners, the capacity to integrate knowledge and move with facility across different ways of knowing is more important than any particular standard of coverage.

C. Students and Faculty

There was considerable discussion in the Working Group about whether the students at their institutions were self-selecting and therefore uniquely able to meet the challenges of such a program. An open curriculum may not be appropriate for all students. Students who apply to such schools and succeed there, it was agreed, are likely to have the maturity, motivation, and ability necessary to do independent work in collaboration with their teachers. At the several schools in the Working Group that are highly selective, a further screening occurs as their admissions offices attempt to choose students who are best equipped for the challenges and opportunities of such an environment. This selectivity, whether by a student’s choice about where to apply or by an admissions decision about whom to accept, also makes it difficult to assess whether the learning outcomes associated with an open curriculum are solely or primarily the results of the experiences students have in such a culture—or whether they have as much if not more to do with the kind of learners these students were beforehand and might also have become in another environment. Self-motivated, autonomous learners may gravitate toward and thrive in a culture that promotes self-motivated, autonomous learning. If this is circular and self-reinforcing, that is not necessarily a bad thing. These are the kinds of students most institutions like to recruit, and schools with an open curriculum provide them with an especially attractive alternative.

Some Working Group members argued that the defining principles of an open curriculum are good educational practice from which all students would benefit, regardless of background, ability, and interest. The claim that students learn best what they choose to study, for example, is not dependent on a student’s preparation or ability but has to do with how learning benefits from motivation and interest. Giving students a sense of investment in what they are learning is simply good pedagogy. Similarly, the attitude that education is not the absorption of another’s authoritative knowledge but the development of a capacity to inquire, analyze, and criticize independently is likely to stimulate autonomous, self-motivated learning regardless of the level or preparation of the student. Pedagogical practices that promote problem-solving and creative, independent inquiry can be of use to teachers at schools with other curricula because these are competencies that all students need.

There was some discussion in the Working Group about the changing characteristics of students and their readiness for an open curriculum. A curriculum that is oriented toward the learning of the student can adapt to a variety of backgrounds and learning styles. Nevertheless, students who come to college with radical deficiencies in high school preparation will find their opportunities restricted and their prospects for success diminished regardless of the curriculum they choose. A curriculum that expects independent decision-making may be beyond the capability of students who need significant remediation.

Students who are the first in their families to come to college may also find special challenges with an open curriculum that are not experienced by students whose parents have had a liberal arts education and may consequently be able to act as “coaches” to help them navigate the confusing landscape of college. Such guidance is nothing that good faculty and peer advising cannot also provide, however, and an open curriculum may have advantages for these students. The experience at some of our campuses has been that the flexibility of an open curriculum can seem less exclusionary and restrictive to newcomers and more open to innovation and welcoming of different perspectives than curricula steeped in tradition. For example, both Smith and Brown have long had successful programs for non-traditional students which have benefited from the flexibility of their curricula.

Just as an open curriculum is not necessarily appropriate for all kinds of students, it may not suit all faculty equally well. Recruiting and selecting faculty with the interests, abilities, and skills to thrive in an open curriculum and enculturating them to its demands and rewards are non-trivial, ongoing challenges for institutions of this kind. As the reports from the focus groups confirmed, faculty find that teaching in such a culture has positive as well as negative aspects, advantages but also disadvantages.

For example, if students find it exhilarating to have the freedom to design their programs of study, faculty similarly say that it can be liberating to have the freedom to teach unbound by conventional curricular structures. Faculty also note, however, that it is hard work to be continually developing new courses in response to student interests. If such courses take a multi-disciplinary approach to problems and issues, as they often do at these schools, the need to acquire expertise in other disciplines can be an exciting opportunity but also a burden. Interdisciplinary teaching is harder work than teaching traditional, discipline-based courses that follow well-known models. Similarly, faculty may find it energizing to their own intellectual interests to join with students in the kind of open-ended inquiry that an open curriculum encourages, but this is also demanding and time-consuming work that competes with their own scholarly projects and publication needs as they pursue tenure, promotion, and professional advancement. Faculty may find their intellectual growth stimulated by the challenges of responding to student exploration in a multi-disciplinary environment, but they may also feel that this is a distraction from their own professional interests and disciplinary commitments.

In some sense this is just another version of the longstanding conflict between the demands of teaching and scholarship. One could argue—and many faculty do—that the freedom and flexibility of the open curriculum make it more possible for them than in other curricular models to combine their research and teaching in mutually productive ways. Nevertheless, faculty time is limited, and student-centered teaching and advising are time-intensive activities that may run up against other faculty priorities.

Another set of trade-offs for faculty has to do with the ways in which students choose courses. Having students in one's class who have elected to be there may promote motivation and self-directed learning, but the process of “shopping” whereby students compare their curricular options before settling on a schedule can be disruptive and distracting. Faculty complain about the confusion of the “churn” as students come and go while the teacher is trying to introduce key concepts and establish expectations for a course. This is why Sarah Lawrence has introduced a shopping period before the start of classes, where students meet with faculty in extended office-hours to find out about a course, but this would not work at a larger institution like Brown. Even when the mechanisms of course-selection function smoothly, however, the language of “shopping” suggests that a faculty member is a commodity. Student choice can be a response to the call to “learn what you love,” or it can seem like a matter of selecting a pair of shoes or surfing channels, and some faculty resent having to cater to student interests in order to keep enrollments up because this smacks of the culture of consumerism and entertainment. Again, as elsewhere, placing a premium on choice can have negative as well as positive consequences.

V. Conclusion: A Curriculum for the 21st Century

The curricula at most of the Teagle participating institutions were conceived and instituted in the 1960s and early 70s. The history of granting students “freedom to learn” goes back much further, however, at least to before the Civil War when many leading American universities experimented with alternatives to classical models of higher education. As Derek Bok explains in his recent book, Harvard’s “President Charles W. Eliot not only rejected the old prescribed classical curriculum, he urged that all requirements be abolished, leaving students free to study whatever appealed to them” (Our Underachieving Colleges, p. 15; original emphasis). Similarly endorsing more flexible degree requirements and a greater number of electives, Brown’s President Francis Wayland recommended in 1850 that “the various courses should be so arranged that, in so far as practicable, every student might study what he chose, all that he chose, and nothing but what he chose” (Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education, 28 March 1850). Their contemporary Ivy President Andrew White at Cornell was also an early advocate of student choice: “The attempt to give mental discipline by studies which the mind does not desire is as unwise as the attempt to give physical nourishment by food which the body does not desire. . . . Vigorous, energetic study, prompted by enthusiasm or a high sense of the value of the subject, is the only kind of study not positively hurtful to mental power” (quoted in Bok, p. 15). More recently, another important precursor of the open curriculum is John Dewey’s philosophy of progressive education, especially his view of learning as an experience of both personal and social growth. Dewey’s call for teachers to focus on the student as a learner and his emphasis on education as a process of development rather than the acquisition of content were important influences on the founding of the open curriculum at many of the Working Group institutions and continue to resonate powerfully.

Although these precedents show that a recognition of the value of student choice can claim a longer history, the versions of the open curriculum currently practiced at our campuses do bear traces of the tumultuous period in which they were born. The climate of the times in the sixties encouraged rebellion against authority and was conducive to curricular reforms that broke with tradition, promoted innovation, and questioned hierarchical relationships. Experimental institutions like Hampshire and New College were founded with an explicit mandate to be laboratories for exploring non-traditional alternatives to such conventions as grades, course-based credits, majors, departments, and even tenure. At institutions with long histories like Brown and Amherst, the time seemed right to overthrow programs of general education that had come to seem authoritarian and unresponsive to the interests, needs, and desires of students and younger faculty. A curriculum that gave primary authority to the student to direct his or her own program of study and that viewed students and teachers as equals reflected the anti-hierarchical tenor of the times. The goal of giving students “freedom to learn” similarly had romantic, counter-cultural overtones, viewing conventions and requirements as constraints on the realization of an individual’s potential.

Conservative critics who view the open curriculum as a product of a rebellious bygone era are not entirely wrong. The open curriculum has not stood still, however. If it originated in the sixties, it has not stayed there. These curricula have demonstrated unanticipated strengths and capacities that go beyond the assumptions and aims of their founders. Anti-traditional in its impetus, the open curriculum has become a tradition in its own right, and its history over the last four decades shows how traditions preserve themselves by adapting to changing circumstances and by showing their power to address new challenges. The open curriculum has shown itself to be surprisingly resilient and adaptable.

For example, the original notions of empowering the learner and questioning the authority of the teacher may have had their source in the rebellious rhetoric of the counter-culture, but this language now has a different resonance in light of recent research on the power of student-centered pedagogies that emphasize active learning and see the teacher as a “coach” rather than the sole source of knowledge and information. What was regarded in the sixties as a way of defying convention and emancipating students from the constraints of tradition has evolved into an approach to learning that promotes motivation and builds on a student’s interests in order to encourage inquiry, critical thinking, and discovery. If questioning the teacher’s authority was originally fueled by a spirit of rebellion against hierarchies and conventions, the open curriculum’s conception of learning as a collaborative process has come to be understood as an exercise in reciprocity that builds a student’s powers while drawing on a teacher’s knowledge and abilities in a facilitative manner. If, as Dewey argues, education involves both personal and social growth, the emphasis on student-teacher collaboration that has become stronger over the decades represents an important correction of the romantic individualism of the sixties. The culture of learning on these campuses has evolved from rebellion against authority to a dialogical model of the student-teacher relationship.

Similar changes can be seen in the evolution that has occurred in the meaning of interdisciplinarity. In the sixties, refusing to be restricted to a particular mode of thought was often seen as a way of resisting specialization and promoting the development of the whole person, against the idea that education is primarily a preparation for a career or a profession. Multi-disciplinary inquiry was thought to make possible the pursuit of wholeness that specialized disciplinary and professional knowledge thwarted. Interdisciplinarity was a way of being anti-disciplinary. Increasingly in recent decades, however, practitioners in a variety of fields have found that important problems can only be solved by combining the techniques and resources of different disciplines. Programs of instruction like those at campuses with an open curriculum that encourage students to develop facility in multiple ways of knowing have great value in preparing them for advanced work of this kind. Because the field of knowledge seems much more heterogeneous and complex in the twenty-first century than it did even fifty years ago, equipping students with the ability to navigate different epistemologies is no longer a way of promoting anti-careerist self-actualization but, rather, is necessary preparation

for professionally respected, intellectually advanced academic work. Again, in a Deweyan manner, an excessive emphasis on personal self-realization has been corrected by a recognition of the social dimensions of knowledge as interdisciplinarity has come to be understood as a way of doing collaborative work across the boundaries separating disciplinary communities.

The concern of the open curriculum with navigating different ways of knowing also offers an important response to the challenges of democracy in a heterogeneous world of conflicting values and beliefs. Here too the landscape has shifted since the sixties, both nationally and internationally, and will no doubt continue to change in unanticipated ways. It seems to many informed observers that the United States has never before been more diverse and is likely to become even more so. The world may not be any more heterogeneous than it ever was, but technology and the global economy have made it a smaller place in which different attitudes, customs, and ideologies are more prone to collide and clash. The open curriculum's goal of helping students learn how to navigate epistemological difference is good training for a future citizen of a country and a world in which different systems of knowledge and belief challenge each other's claims and need to learn to co-exist and, if possible, benefit from their differences. That is not an easy task, and students cannot learn what they will need for the future from just one place. Nevertheless, an open curriculum has much to offer these students to the extent that it can deliver on its promise of producing active life-long learners who have the flexibility and agility of mind to move among different ways of knowing with grace and understanding and who have the ability to converse and collaborate with others with different sets of outlooks and abilities.

A product of the sixties, this approach to liberal education has evolved into a curriculum for the twenty-first century. Many of the most frequently cited features of this still-new century call for capacities that the open curriculum seeks to cultivate. The explosion of knowledge means that an adequate education for the future cannot simply tell students everything they need to know but must prepare them to become life-long learners who are energized by novelty and unafraid of the unfamiliar. The development of new fields and the proliferation of different ways of knowing require students to become versatile, flexible, responsive to change, and comfortable with ambiguity. Rapid development of new technologies calls for nimbleness, adaptability, and even playfulness—an ability to learn quickly new ways of doing things and an imagination for exploring and exploiting their possible applications, finding them not a threat but an occasion for creativity and an opportunity to expand our capacities for expression and discovery. Instead of training for careers that currently exist, students need to be able to learn how to equip themselves for jobs we cannot now imagine. This is a world that will reward entrepreneurship and risk-taking. This kind of world will disadvantage students who are only comfortable when staying within the bounds of scripts they already know and will advantage adaptability, creativity, and intellectual agility. This world will define “rigor” not only as the ability to master pre-established conventions

but also as the imaginative capacity to bend, twist, extend, and overturn the rules in response to new challenges. The qualities of mind and character that an education for such a world should cultivate include versatility, flexibility, resilience, and agility. A curriculum designed to develop fearless, independent thinkers and to nurture adventurous spirits would seem especially attuned to its challenges and opportunities.

Institutions interested in fostering these qualities can learn from the experience of schools with an open curriculum. Promoting student choice and encouraging freedom and exploration in a flexible curriculum that empowers the student-teacher relationship are the central features of an open curriculum, and institutions can embrace these aims to a greater or lesser extent while maintaining requirements and teaching canonical texts. Giving students the power to direct their course of study has a variety of beneficial consequences that this study has attempted to describe and document. For such a curriculum to succeed, faculty must also be supported in ways that will make it possible for them to engage fully as collaborators with student-learners. The successes of this model, as well as its risks and dangers, are a reflection of the good (and bad) things that can happen when education is understood as a partnership between faculty and students and when students are regarded as true collaborators in the enterprise, with the freedom and self-determination such status entails. If student-centered learning and collaboration with faculty can occur in a variety of institutional structures, an open curriculum takes the chance of giving them maximum room to play, in the hope and conviction that exciting things will result. This is not a wager that every institution will want to make, but the experience of the students, faculty, and alumni at the schools that have participated in this project has been that it is a risk worth taking.

Appendix A: Curricular Structures

Amherst College

| Student Choices | Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum |
|---|---|
| <p>Outside Major:</p> <p>Total choice with the exception of the First Year Seminar requirement.</p> <p>Inside Major:</p> <p>Must fulfill departmental requirements</p> <p>Other:</p> <p>Students may take two courses Pass-Fail, though only a third of students do.</p> <p>Approximately a third of students elect two majors.</p> <p>Students can design their own major.</p> | <p>-32 full-semester courses</p> <p>-A First-Year Seminar</p> <p>-8 semesters of residence (no credit for A.P. exams)</p> <p>-Completion of a departmental major with comprehensive exam.</p> |

Antioch College

| <p>Student Choices</p> | <p>Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum</p> |
|---|--|
| <p>Outside Major: Students have limited choice. Their first year courses are chosen from a core curriculum. They are required to take three terms of co-op work, as well as four credits of physical education, and mandatory participation in the "Summer of Choice" Inside Major: Majors are entirely student designed.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students are required to complete a minimum of 112 academic credits and a minimum of 36 cooperative education credits. - Three full time study semesters in residence and 54 of the 112 credits completed at Antioch - Three terms of cooperative work, with the option of a fourth independently designed semester right before senior year. - Each student must complete one cross-cultural experience through either a co-op or study term - Must show proficiency on the Writing Skills Assessment, and Quantitative Skills Assessment - Four Physical Education credits are required. - Two semester-long team-taught interdisciplinary learning communities. - A Senior Project devised with their advisor. |

Brown University

| Student Choices | Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum |
|--|--|
| <p>Outside Major:</p> <p>Total choice</p> <p>Inside Major:</p> <p>Must fulfill set departmental requirements; 10-14 courses for most AB concentrations; 14-20 courses for most ScB concentrations. A small number of students design an independent concentration.</p> <p>Other:</p> <p>Students may take any and all courses S/NC</p> <p>Courses with "NC" do not appear on external transcript</p> | <p>Graduation requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - demonstrate competence in writing. - be enrolled full-time for eight semesters of instruction, at least four of which must be in residence at Brown - pass 30 courses out of at least 32 attempted - complete a standard or independent concentration |

Hampshire College

| <p>Student Choices</p> | <p>Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum</p> |
|---|--|
| <p>Outside Major: Students have limited choice. 5 of their 8 courses in the first year must be from set fields. Additionally one of these five must be a First-Year Tutorial. The student's entire four years at Hampshire are scheduled with requirements for each year (or Division). Inside Major: Majors are entirely student designed.</p> | <p>-The four years are broken into 3 "Divisions" each with its own set of requirements. Completion of these requirements must be demonstrated by the preparation of a portfolio at the end of Division I and II and with the completion of a student project at the end of Division III. -Students must complete one course in each of Hampshire's five Schools of thought: Cognitive Science; Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies; Interdisciplinary Arts; Natural Science; and Social Science in their first year. Additionally one of these courses must be a First-Year Tutorial -Students must meet the Multiple Cultural Perspectives and Community Service requirements</p> |

New College

| Student Choices | Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum |
|---|--|
| <p>Outside Major: Students have limited choice. Though students design their own course of study they must meet several requirements, including taking courses defined as "Liberal Arts Curriculum"</p> <p>Inside Major: Must fulfill set departmental requirements</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Satisfactory completion of at least one Liberal Art Curriculum (LAC) course from each of the three Divisions: Humanities (including Visual Arts), Social Sciences (including behavioral sciences & history), Natural Sciences (including mathematics) -Completion of at least eight courses designated as LAC -Demonstration of basic competence in mathematics. -Clear evidence of proficiency in writing and oral communication. -Demonstration of basic computer proficiency. -A senior thesis project and oral baccalaureate examination |

Sarah Lawrence College

| Student Choices | Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum |
|---|--|
| <p>Outside Major:</p> <p>Students have total choice with the exception of a distribution requirement, and a requirement that students take two full year lecture courses.</p> <p>Inside Major:</p> <p>Majors are entirely student designed.</p> <p>Other:</p> <p>Any student in good academic standing may audit a course with permission of the teacher. A full load is three courses per semester. In exceptional cases, a fourth course may be taken by a particularly strong student.</p> | <p>-Students must take course work in at least three of the four academic areas.</p> <p>-Students must take two full-year lecture courses prior to their senior year</p> <p>-120 credits required for the B.A. degree</p> <p>-60 credits may be taken in the creative and performing arts, up to 80 in history and the social sciences, up to 80 in the humanities, and up to 80 in the natural sciences and mathematics.</p> <p>-No more than 50 of the 120 credits may be earned in one discipline</p> |

Smith College

| Student Choices | Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum |
|--|---|
| <p>Outside Major:</p> <p>Total choice with the exception of one “writing intensive” course in the first year, and a distribution requirement for honors eligibility.</p> <p>Inside Major:</p> <p>Must fulfill set departmental requirements.</p> | <p>-Students must take one “writing intensive” course in the first year</p> <p>-In order to be eligible for Latin Honors at graduation, students must take one course in each of the seven fields (literature, historical studies, social science, natural science, mathematics and analytical philosophy, the arts, and a foreign language)</p> <p>-Students must complete a major</p> <p>-Students must take at least half of their courses outside the major</p> |

Wesleyan University

| <p>Student Choices</p> | <p>Student Responsibilities Specified in Curriculum</p> |
|--|--|
| <p>Outside Major: Total choice. Wesleyan does have "general education expectations" but these are required only for eligibility for certain departmental and university honors Inside Major: Must fulfill set departmental requirements.</p> | <p>-Student requirements are (1) satisfaction of requirements for a concentration (2) 32 course credits, (3) a cumulative average of 74 percent (4) at least six semesters in residency at Wesleyan - No more than 14 course credits in any one department (15 with a senior project and 16 with a two-credit senior thesis). -To be eligible for honors, students must meet the general education expectations: a minimum of three courses in each of the three major areas of the curriculum: the humanities and the arts, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural sciences and mathematics. Stage 1 compliance involves six courses, each of which must be taken in different departments. Stage 2 compliance involves a third course in each area.</p> |

Appendix B: Alumni Interviews

Each institution conducted telephone interviews with a sample of 8-12 alumni who had graduated about ten years ago. A total of 73 interviews were conducted during January and February of 2006.

This study used a very small sample, and we should not assume that these responses are statistically representative of the entire population. However, we should pay some attention to the relative frequency with which various themes arose, especially those not asked about directly. The questions asked are listed at the end of this report. The majority, but not all, of the related quotes obtained in the interviews are included below.

Executive Summary

For many students, the open curriculum had been a positive recruitment factor, but it was a bigger factor at the experimental institutions than at the more elite ones.

Comments on advising fell into three approximately equal categories: those for whom it had been extremely important, those who wanted it but were dissatisfied with what they had received, and those for whom it had been unimportant. In addition, many of the comments that were critical of the open curriculum focused on the potential for students to make mistakes in the absence of appropriate guidance.

Many students said they liked the freedom of doing whatever they wanted, and some noted a campus climate supporting this. Some argued that having every course be one you wanted to take fostered a passion for learning. A few noted a tendency for students to respond to this freedom by staying within their own interests.

Students had explored many unplanned subjects, especially fine arts and social studies. Having friends with broad interests tended to encourage exploration. There were a number of positive comments about opening up to new areas and learning about oneself.

53% of respondents had intentionally avoided math, and 44% had avoided the sciences. A few had chosen an open curriculum school so they could avoid these subjects. Economics and foreign languages were each avoided by about 12% of our sample. There was also a tendency for some students to avoid challenging themselves, taking easy courses and avoiding low grades.

Various alumni described themselves as well-prepared with respect to increased confidence, and to graduate study. Seeking a career was the main thing for which alumni had found themselves poorly prepared, although this was not a unanimous view, and some felt well prepared for their careers.

The main things alumni attribute to their experience of making choices in an open curriculum are decision-making skills, responsibility, and personal growth.

RECRUITMENT

In general, alumni from the more elite institutions tended to say the open curriculum was a positive factor but not the deciding one; in fact, not all had known about it when making the decision to attend. The open curriculum was a more important factor for the more experimental institutions, though not for everyone who attended them. Some of those who explained its importance focused on the potential for exploration, while others stressed the absence of requirements and the opportunity to avoid things (see “Avoidance”).

- “I think it was something I liked about Smith, but it wasn’t the defining factor in my decision to attend the college.”
- “The curriculum was definitely a part of my decision to attend Smith...one thing that I liked about it was that I wasn’t required to take anything.”
- Came to New College because it was “quirky and small” – quirky in that “it was pass/fail, you could design your own curriculum, and people were strange.”
- New College– “I liked the experimental nature of the school... I talked with the interviewer and she explained the kind of curricula at the school, that there were no grades and the contract system and that there was lots of independent study.”
- Most important factor in choosing Sarah Lawrence College. “To finally be in an academically rigorous environment but knowing that I’d be able to choose all my subjects was exciting.”
- Most important reason to attend SLC. “I didn’t want to be stuck taking requirements.”
- “I don’t know that it factored in while I was making the choice to attend Antioch, but as far as staying there and enjoying it...it helped in that way.”
- She had no appreciation of the open curriculum, her only concerns were size and reputation. She came to Amherst determined to pursue the pre-med program so she felt that the freedom of the open curriculum would not play a large role in her studies.
- It was appealing, but not the deciding factor in why he applied to Amherst.
- Ability to choose course of study was a main attraction to Hampshire. Wanted to study in areas of interest, not get bogged down wasting time with requirements. Was interested in the other students this type of school would attract.
- “I knew I wanted to study land restoration but I didn’t know what that entailed. I liked that I could design my own curriculum and study what I wanted... In other colleges I [might] be channeled into an already defined path that might not fulfill my needs.” (Hampshire)
- Had a strong idea of what she wanted to do and didn’t want to be told how to do it or to “waste time” taking core courses. Instead, wanted some structure but also flexibility to learn in a variety of ways according to own interests. (Hampshire)
- “Part of why you went to Hampshire was so you could have the freedom to explore even if you were studying a particular field. You wouldn’t be put in a box. You could study a particular thing but still have the flexibility and room in your schedule and be supported in studying a true liberal arts scope of things. It sure makes you a better student to be able to study one thing specifically but then feed other parts of your brain.”

For one student, the open curriculum was a negative:

- The open curriculum “was something that was a drawback” in the decision to attend Antioch. “I was probably the least open student there.” Had a particular focus on career-oriented education and didn’t need the lack of requirements in an open curriculum.

One liked Hampshire's combination of flexibility and requirements:

- "Hampshire was the best of both worlds... I had a specific idea of what I wanted to do but liked the idea of being forced to do things I wouldn't otherwise do. You could design your own education but there were also requirements. That gave Hampshire a lot of credibility for me."

ADVISING

Experiences of and reflections on advising fell into three main categories: those for whom advising had been extremely important, those who thought it would have been helpful but for whom it had not been, and those for whom advising had not been influential and felt it was not necessary.

Extremely important:

- "I recently looked at my old contracts and I was glad, because I had personal goals on them and I now appreciate that I had to integrate personal and academic life and had to think about what's going on with my life. I had to be reflective, I had to ask 'what are you going to do with yourself as a person' not just academically or personally. I could reflect on the rest of my life in my contract." (New)
- Adviser encouraged this student to explore the humanities, and now the student has a PhD in philosophy – "my adviser's guidance was very important to me." (New)
- "I really respected my major adviser's opinion about what courses I should take. The first thing he did was ask me what I wanted to do when I graduated and I was only a first year at that time. I told him I wanted to be a college professor and he helped me prepare for that goal. I wanted to do everything: foreign languages, biology, government, literature, social ethics, etc. I found the advising sessions quite helpful." (Smith)
- She got better at choosing her courses over time with the help of her major adviser. "He had a lot of insight about pursuing a career in psychology, going to graduate school, and doing an internship. He advised me to take courses that would prepare me for these pursuits like advanced statistics and research design...He was a great professor and a great person. I was his research assistant for a couple of years." (Smith)
- If don actively involved, core issues could still be covered, in a more personal way. Some people came out with uneven educations. His don, a writer, was involved, guided, helped him make choices that would help him in a writing career. Kept him focused but did not push him. (SLC)
- Don advised her to cover areas she'd missed, similar to distribution requirement. Encouraged her to study with certain profs. (SLC)
- Freedom was scary at first, everything had been so disciplined in high school, and then she had freedom of choice. Don was supportive of everything that fit her interests, encouraging, made suggestions, noticed her panic about choices, would recommend other courses, talk her through. With help of don, constantly honed knowledge base, embarked on a focus, worked on discipline of dealing with openness. Doesn't think she would have done as well with fewer options or less guidance. Don relationship VERY important. (SLC)
- She discussed theories and ideas with her advisor, was challenged by the advisor, who also suggested independent study ideas and helped develop her scientific critical thinking. With her first advisor, curricular breadth was "not discussed, just implied." (Antioch)
- Adviser "was very good at keeping me focused on branching out [in a non-random way]." Didn't talk to the adviser much about connections between courses and co-ops. (Antioch)
- She became very close with her two academic advisers, including working on a research project with one after graduation. A professor who was not formally her adviser was also helpful. Her adviser helped her focus on an area of study. "The temptation at Antioch is to go too broad."

- “Of course it’s academic, but it didn’t feel too structured, it didn’t feel too rigid.” Chose a co-op at a women’s shelter in the northeast – adviser “really talked me into it...really pitched it in a way that I got excited, [which] was a huge motivator to go out there and do something I wouldn’t otherwise have done. It catapulted me into a life of service, that was a real turning point in my life.” (Antioch)
- In pre-major advising, she recalls “being told to go out and try what looks interesting but you need to have an end goal.” “My major adviser was great, she really understood where I was coming from and gave me room to try stuff that hadn’t been done.” (Antioch)
- “His influence in recommending the non-science courses resonated with what I wanted to do, and it was not just about getting into medical school, so I could better enjoy my education and can be better educated.” (Amherst)
- “Having an adviser was critical; otherwise it was hard to figure out how to balance my schedule. The open curriculum was good but it requires direction.” (Amherst)
- Without adviser’s push to focus “I would have ended up with a [concentration] with lots in it but no focus. I explored multiple areas in [Hampshire Div II] but it was specific and focused in terms of what I was doing... My adviser helped me to articulate it, to know what I was doing and how to focus it. This prepared me for my [senior project] because it was clear: this is what I want to do. So that when my committee thought it was too much I could be really clear and say it’s not too much, here’s how I will do it.” The concentration adviser insisted on helping her focus, identify connections between her interests, take classes that would combine her interests, and learn to articulate her interests. This drove her crazy but later she realized that this insistence made the process easier for her compared to peers she saw struggling. It helped her make sense of everything she was doing. Her first-year adviser was also influential – encouraged her to slow down and check out options. If she had proceeded with her initial plan she would have gotten quickly overwhelmed trying to do everything right away.
- Adviser was demanding, pushed her to write better, analytical, critical. Forced her not to stay narrowly focused. She wanted to study law/social justice and women’s issues. He got her to broaden her knowledge of women’s studies outside the law, so she took courses that helped her look at women’s studies from different angles and aspects. He knew this was important in the law. (Hampshire)
- Both advisers influential in offering support for her decisions, guidance towards strong professors, immediate comfort, “made me feel at home.” One was someone she admired and emulated. (Hampshire)

Lacking, but would have been helpful:

- Didn’t get guidance in how to figure out what liked, what good at, how to make that a career. (Brown)
- Advisers had a great responsibility for helping students decide. They didn’t come through. There were great personal mentors, but badly structured advising. No one ever asked “what’s the picture of your learning going to look like?” (Brown)
- Appreciated the role of the contract: “It was important to have moments of reflection and to talk with your advisor about your choices... But I didn’t take enough advantage of the advisor system. I was too shy and wasn’t comfortable initiating meetings with professors, so we met the minimum number of times and didn’t build a real relationship. I don’t think I really understand how it was supposed to work. I would take much more advantage of them now.” (New)
- “There was very little advising on their part. It would have been helpful.” (New)
- It would have been nice to have some guidance; choosing courses was frustrating, a struggle. And yet “that’s sort of how things go.” Happy to be “unbound, but more difficult than having courses prescribed.” (Wesleyan)

Appendix B

- Regrets avoiding English, history, and religion (“things that didn’t have finite answers”), but feels that it was not his fault because he didn’t receive the guidance or structure he would have needed. (Wesleyan)
- “When one is seventeen or eighteen years old, sometimes it really is a shot in the dark... Good guidance work is essential... Overall, Wesleyan threw me to the wolves, especially in the music department. I felt really underserved that way.” She felt completely on her own because of an unhelpful adviser. She definitely grew as a result of having so many choices, but feels that the system only really works when there is a great deal of guidance. (Wesleyan)
- “More rigorous oversight from dons would be helpful.” (SLC)
- Should have listened more to first adviser [but] already had definite ideas. Relied heavily on grad adviser and followed her lead. (SLC)
- “Antioch throws you to the dogs. You had to figure it out – it was really sink or swim.”
- My adviser “was not familiar with the degree plans...so it was pretty disastrous. She thought I had another year left [when I was about to graduate].” (Antioch)
- His major adviser could not advise outside of his major. (Amherst)
- Advising did not seem an essential part of his adviser’s job, teaching and research seemed to be his focus rather than advising. He has a complaint about his experience with individual professors – unlike the ideals held as an institution, the professors tended to be fairly closed-minded and looking solely from their discipline’s perspective. (Amherst)
- His major adviser did not encourage or discourage curricular breadth because he already knew what he wanted to take and his adviser just signed off on it. He felt he could have used more advising about choosing courses. He also felt there were not “many points to take time out and look at the bigger picture.” (Amherst)
- She did not receive much advice that was helpful. “It was not an active thing for me. I didn’t seek it out. I did what I wanted... More can be done about advising, in particular encouraging students to try things outside of their interest.” She wanted her adviser to push her outside of her comfort zone because she was not pushing herself. (Amherst)

Not influential or necessary:

- “Except for the number of courses I took each semester, the advisers were not influential at all in my course decisions.” (New)
- “I was mostly self-directed. I looked at my own interests, though my 3rd and 4th year choices were influenced by my advisor. I loved how he taught so I studied with him and then I sort of followed on his coattails.” (New)
- “I found my first contract sponsor, the one they assigned me to, a bit forbidding, and I wasn’t mature enough to get over the shyness so I didn’t set up any additional meetings. He gave me a stern evaluation that I didn’t like then but I would appreciate more now... My [other] adviser basically OK’d what I was taking, she didn’t advise much...never suggested courses, just how many I should take.” (New)
- “I had five advisers while I was at Smith. I guess I was good at picking the ones that were going to go on sabbatical. I’ve always been very organized and efficient...my advising experiences were pretty quick. They usually just signed my card but I had friends that would spend hours with their advisers talking about what they should study and also what they should do with their lives. I would just look at the requirements in my major/minor and make decisions. My friends who were less organized needed more help.”
- Dons not a big influence, though she respected them and was impressed by their knowledge when she did seek advice. (SLC)

- Don not an overwhelming influence in course choices, but encouraging, never commented on what he should be doing, more of a support mechanism. Helpful guidance, not restrictive. (SLC)
- Didn't click with don, but she did suggest options, had good advice about teachers. (SLC)
- First don not a big influence on course choices, though helpful in coursework. Second don very opinionated, told her what he thought she should do because he saw talent and potential in her, but he didn't try to limit her from exploring other courses. (SLC)
- "My major advisers made sure that I took the right amount of required courses for my majors. One guided me toward a particular seminar." (Smith)
- Student culture was very much about the student being in charge and not needing help. (SLC)
- Experienced some "lack of guidance." Some advising situations were experienced as "another hoop to jump through." (Antioch)
- "I mostly just read the catalog...and course descriptions... For advising, I mostly did it myself." Was really self-directed and didn't use the guidance of advisers to figure things out. (Antioch)
- "I'm very self-propelled... [my adviser] was encouraging but it was mostly my idea.... I have always been an independent person cutting my own path." (Antioch)
- Advising had no influence on his curricular choices. He did not find advising valuable. (Amherst)
- "Advisers did not think through course choices with you, they just signed the paper." (Amherst)
- Made course choices on her own. Adviser encouraged, approved, supported but didn't push her in any direction. Peers guided her to excellent profs or told her ones to avoid. By second year was focused on a narrow track of interests; adviser didn't push her to move outside her core interests. (Hampshire)
- Adviser supported what she wanted to do but didn't direct her or urge her to explore other areas; was not influential but was a 'friendly face.' Was self-directed; researched and chose courses she wanted to take, was clear on her interests, was not overly influenced by others in course selections. Didn't always get as much guidance as she might have liked but that "worked for me because I like to do it and learn from my mistakes." (Hampshire)

Two of the main criticisms of the open curriculum relate indirectly to advising.

Students aren't ready, and don't think about the big picture of their whole education:

- Didn't think much about the open curriculum while a student, but now is generally opposed – students are too young to choose and miss important building blocks. It's kind of arrogant to think you can do without that history. (Brown)
- That much freedom could be daunting, especially when 18. Sometimes you benefit from a little structure. (Brown)
- Early on a bit too free – didn't always know what to choose. Kind of recreational stabbing in the dark. (Brown)
- The open curriculum was "not such a big deal." No one paid any attention to the bigger picture of one's future transcript. The open curriculum requires careful selection for students who can be trusted with it. (Brown)
- "I'm a reactive person more than proactive, and if I had been more proactive I could have been getting a lot more. Each semester it was 'oh, what can I do?' without specific goals in mind." (New)
- Open curriculum was more challenging than she thought. Parents and the school encouraged exploration, but she felt that lack of structure, no guidance counselors to help her apply her education to life. The open curriculum allowed her freedom to structure her academic schedule around other

goals, but also let her miss out on some of her passions because her primary goals were schedule and time commitment. (SLC)

- “I didn’t feel like I got the full spectrum of the liberal arts... I had so much autonomy that I got breadth and depth in the major but not in the traditional liberal arts sense... The general education program was a bit of a crapshoot.” (Antioch)
- “There was so much freedom... [for many people] the big picture of why they were there didn’t get done.” (Antioch)

In the absence of guidance, students make unnecessary mistakes:

- Guidance was lacking, and therefore students waste time or make mistakes, end up making arbitrary choices rather than choosing courses that will help them toward a successful career. Felt that some students are mature enough to handle that freedom, and some students know what they want to do already, but for the rest more structure is necessary. (Wesleyan)
- “I don’t think the open thing is that great because [the students] are not encouraged to take courses outside of their major.” Her major adviser did advise her to take courses outside of her major but when she repeatedly told him that she wanted to accelerate, he and other faculty members in the department helped her to create a fast-tracked program (including summer school) that allowed her to finish in three years. “I’m not sure that planning my own curriculum taught me too much – it made me unafraid to look through a course book, but I’ve always been pretty good at planning my own course in life.” (Smith)
- “Smith did a really tremendous job of opening my mind to different people and ideas. I think that the freedom to choose different courses was important for me. But I can see how it could have really backfired for somebody who wasn’t already interested in rounding out their education.” (Smith)
- With too much freedom, it can be hard to focus. Without proper guidance, you “can get lost in too many choices.” It was useful to her, but also precluded her from following interests that might have actually been more accessible with distribution requirements. She sees the value of a core curriculum and thinks it might have given her broader exposure. (Brown)

FREEDOM

Many students said they liked the freedom of doing whatever they wanted.

- “Everybody felt that it was special to be able to choose.” (Brown)
- “It’s a more adult way to learn.” (Brown)
- “By letting students choose in school it helped free me up to the idea of choosing my own path, in my career and personally outside of college.” (New)
- “It was nice that I could pretty much take control over what I wanted to take. I felt generally free to take what was interesting to me.” (Wesleyan)
- “It’s not a trade school – it’s a liberal arts school! You have eight bazillion options and you have to decide for yourself.” (Wesleyan)
- “It was nice to direct my studies in a way that was exploratory at first... That process [of selecting courses] is intrinsically valuable.” LOVED the open curriculum because she didn’t know exactly what she wanted to do. (Wesleyan)
- She liked the open curriculum at Smith, especially since she had transferred from Middlebury where she “hated that she had had to take all the core courses.”

- “I don’t think I would have flourished in a core curriculum environment.” (SLC)
- “I didn’t go to college and get this degree so that other people could tell me what to do with my life.” (SLC)
- “[Gen ed expectations] weren’t too much of a stranglehold on me. Wesleyan fertilized my brain in ways that I wouldn’t have. [The curriculum was] loose enough that I could still have my own individual emphasis. Those four years are so formative, it’s like you live a lifetime in those four years...and you only get it once.”
- “Yeah, absolutely [I learned something], because like I just said I suck at that, on the one hand I’m kind of a natural at it because I don’t like doing, dealing with bureaucratic process...so I like the freedom, and it also did give me some self-discipline. I’m not saying I didn’t have any or I don’t have any but I would have much less if I hadn’t done my own major, if I hadn’t had all that freedom there.” (Antioch)
- “Much of my Antioch experience was about exploiting the system [of limited requirements]... it gave me the leeway and freedom that I needed to blossom academically.”
- “It gave me the freedom to do exactly what I wanted. I was willing to push the limits of what Amherst could offer me. Since then, I have not been afraid to push the barriers in society.”
- “I was already really independent and responsible, so I thrived.” (Amherst)
- “I liked having an open curriculum – it worked for me.” (Amherst)
- “I enjoyed making choices and not feeling constrained... I was glad I did not have to take a bunch of core classes that I may or may not have been interested in and it was easy to switch majors.” (Amherst)
- “No one was challenging me [to do what I didn’t want to do], and it was good to be trusted to learn what I wanted. I was always pretty confident in what I wanted to do and what my next step would be; I was able to make decisions by myself, intuitively. After college, I didn’t feel the impulse to check with others about my decisions.” (Hampshire)
- “I was hungry for my own way. I liked the openness, the idea of choices, not being told what to take, being given the freedom to choose the classes I’d like to take. I was very motivated academically. I knew very much what I wanted to study and I didn’t think I’d find what I wanted in a traditional school. I was up for a challenge after being in a very normal high school which never really excited me too much.” (Hampshire)

Some noted a climate in which you could do whatever you wanted:

- “You could be focused or wide and you wouldn’t get ostracized, you could do whatever you wanted.” (New)
- “Basically, the culture was supportive of whatever you wanted to do.” (New)
- “I got the sense that if you were doing well academically, the faculty were supportive of your decisions.” (Smith)
- “You’re sort of encouraged to do whatever you want with almost no repercussions. There’s no one driving you, you have to be self-driven.” (SLC)
- “Everybody followed their passions.” (SLC)
- “We could have learned a lot more than we did, but the school would probably say that as long as you’re aware of that then the education is working. I guess that’s part of the ‘in the final analysis’ thing.” (New)

Some argued that having every course be one you wanted to take fosters a passion for learning.

- Brown fed my intellectual curiosity.
- Brown caters to a hungry mind. You get to mold, plan, and select what and how you want to study. You

could take courses for the sake of taking them.

- His three siblings had a core curriculum and they talk about college as an extension of high school. For him it was an independent and growing experience. Can't remember a course he hated. It was great for him and he took full advantage of it. Any weaknesses were seen as mistakes he made. (Brown)
- "I loved Independent Study Projects because they were hard work, but it's work you chose, and that made a difference on how you viewed the project. You took it for granted that you would be in charge of your own decisions. 'In the end every student is responsible' – we got that back when I was there, but it was part of the culture, this is how you do things at New College. I enjoyed the freedom to choose and was motivated to learn, because I could put my energies towards what I wanted to learn and not other things."
- "I thought to myself, I'm here, so why not do something I can't do somewhere else in life. I didn't feel like I had to take classes for the degree, so I could take whatever classes I wanted. My first semester I felt overwhelmed. I wanted freedom but 'oh wow,' this was the real thing. I learned how to learn at New College, it opened me up to education. It was exciting seeing what my classmates were into with their independent study projects, classes, tutorials."
- "During my first three semesters I really felt like I was there to grow. When I came back after taking some time off, they welcomed me with open arms. I remember being in love with academics while I was at Smith because every course I took was of my own choosing."
- "As a college professor, I think that most curricula could be more open than they are so that [students] develop a love of learning and knowledge." (Smith)
- "It gave me the flexibility to structure my academic program around my desires." In the end this allowed him to think more broadly about everything he has encountered since. (Amherst)
- He felt that the flexibility of the Amherst curriculum was very important, "giving students the flexibility to pursue their own incredible experiences."
- "I knew I did better in courses I wanted to take and less well in courses I didn't want to take so I wanted to be able to choose." (Hampshire)
- "Everybody was really into what they were doing because they were choosing what they wanted to do. They talked about it all the time. It's infectious, the sense of wanting to know as much about something as possible. It rubs off on you. You learn so much from your peers." (Hampshire)

A few noted that students tended to stay within their own interests:

- "You quickly met like-minded students and hung out with them a lot – I hung out with people in the humanities, didn't occur too much to go beyond these subjects." (Brown)
- Felt it was less open than advertised. But took advantage of it to focus on a specific interest. (Brown)
- He came to Amherst knowing exactly what he wanted to study (biology). He was going to every course in that department and if there was room outside of those courses he would fill those slots. His single-mindedness did not leave a lot of room for exploration. He didn't not feel or think much about it.
- He chose not to explore the open curriculum, instead focusing on fulfilling a major that might allow him a job after graduation. (Amherst)
- If you have a special interest, you tend to go with that. (Brown)

EXPLORATION

Who else influenced your decisions about which courses to take?

- Reputation of professor
- Reputation of course among friends
- Curiosity/interest
- Brown Critical Review
- Sarah Lawrence practice of interviewing professors
- Parents' influence (rare, but powerful in those cases)

Were there subjects you explored that you hadn't expected to take?

- Fine arts – 36 (49%)
 1. Studio art and art history – 16
 2. Music – 10
 3. Film/photo – 7
 4. Dance – 2
 5. 1 each – acting, storytelling
- Social sciences – 24 (33%)
- Philosophy – 5
- 4 each – foreign languages, English, physics
- 3 each – women's studies, environmental studies, computer science, religion, biology
- 2 each – architecture, technology studies, astronomy, journalism, peace studies
- 1 each – scientific writing, horticulture, classics, statistics, geology, psychology, public health, organizational design, mediation, business, legal studies

Friends with wide interests tended to encourage exploration:

- Friends were mostly in the sciences (many pre-med), all took courses outside. It was just in the culture. Seeking out mentors and research projects was expected. (Brown)
- “There was an assumption that with the academic freedom and resources open to students, they would do great things. I did whatever I wanted; there was no pressure to conform or be a certain type of student. I didn't avoid any subject; there just was not enough time to take everything. It wasn't weird for a chemistry major to take a social science course or vice versa. I really think what they told us was true, that each student is responsible for their own education.” (New)
- “People took all sorts of crazy classes!... I do remember people taking everything under the sun – that characterized Wesleyan for me.”
- Student culture supported both a broad exploration of subjects as well as an in-depth exploration of one or two subjects. “People were taking all kinds of stuff. It was an exciting time.” (Smith)
- Student culture was such that everybody was interested in a lot of things, interdisciplinary. Never felt judgment in doing her own thing. (SLC)

- Even ‘diehards’ took some classes outside their field, enriched course. (SLC)
- General consensus among students was to explore as much as possible. Students did want a more varied curriculum. (SLC)
- “The mainstream was supportive of studying a diverse range of subjects within a major – so there was breadth within the major.” (Amherst)
- She appreciated the Amherst student culture of taking courses in different disciplines than the declared major. The process treated her like an adult which made the experience “much more rewarding.”
- “People talked about and reveled about the courses they were doing on the side, outside their major focus.” (Amherst)
- Peers talk about their work and illuminate connections between seemingly distinct areas. You may think what you’re doing is different but you find a peer who is also looking at social change but instead of psychology is doing it through art and architecture, which opens up your interests to the possibilities of this unexplored area. (Hampshire)
- Was heavily influenced by informal campus activities, environment that encouraged exploration and academic work outside of a course context. (Antioch)

There were a number of general positive comments about opening up to new areas and to learning about oneself.

- “It was an environment for figuring yourself out with all the resources and support possible.” (Brown)
- “I was exposed to lots of wacky and interesting things. Tutorials opened up your mind, people doing and creating their own projects had an influence [on how I saw education] – why do tried and true things?” (New)
- “I was passionate about learning. I spent lots of time in the library, which contrasts with my graduate school experience.” (New)
- “Studying within my own discipline didn’t explicitly explore other fields like science but I did foster a desire to learn, and now I find science fascinating, and I don’t know if I would still find science or learning in general fascinating if I had a course crammed down my throat in college that I didn’t want... I liked the curricular freedom in the contract system. I didn’t want to take a math class, and I liked being able to focus on what I wanted to study.” (New)
- “I loved literature. I loved being able to read all day and to write papers all day. I was one of those students that there was never enough time to take all of the courses I wanted to take. I wish I could go back.” (Smith)
- SLC “let education be a process that widens rather than narrows. I looked ahead and my options sort of branched out. You’re coming out of a place that rewards everything the real world doesn’t reward. The very fact that you are allowed to make decisions about how you’re going to spend your time is very important. The process is an absolute mess, and I think therein lies the genius.” It offered latitude to explore what works. Allowed for successes and failures, all with broad education. Appreciated opportunity to figure out what he believed in.
- “I really like it because it enabled me to combine my interest in the environment with communications and writing experience, [because after exploration on co-op I] realized I wasn’t going to go on with science.” (Antioch)
- He appreciates the open curriculum because it allowed him to major in two very different subjects (political science and music). He believes the interdisciplinary aspect of the curriculum allowed him to develop thinking synthetically with problems he encounters, often thinking outside the box. (Amherst)

AVOIDANCE

Were there subjects you intentionally avoided?

- Math – 39 (53%)
- Science – 32 (44%)
- Economics – 9 (12%)
- Foreign languages – 9 (12%)
- Art/art history – 6
- Literature – 4
- Social science – 4
- 3 each – communications, computer science
- 2 each – history, physical education
- 1 each – engineering, theater, classics, psychology, religion, Black studies

Math/Science Avoidance

A few had chosen an open-curriculum institution to avoid these subjects:

- “I only applied to colleges with an open curriculum. I’m not a math person. I have had some bad experiences with math and I didn’t want anybody telling me to take math. Because I went to a private literature/art high school, I knew that I was more of a literature-minded person.” (Smith)
- “I’m not mathematically or scientifically inclined. I didn’t want to spend my time studying something that I wasn’t going to use.” (Smith)
- “You mean I don’t have to take math? Okay!” (SLC)

Some comments about the decision to avoid them:

- “Could take math/science at a community college if needed.” (Brown)
- Sciences ignored because “considered them less relevant to personal life than humanities and social sciences taken.” (Brown)
- “I took things more for me personally. I wasn’t really inclined to go outside my comfort zone or interest zone...I didn’t want to waste my time in a science or math class.” (Smith)
- Wouldn’t have taken classes in math or science if given the choice, lack of interest and confidence, didn’t do well in these areas in high school. (Hampshire)
- “Math is not my strength, not my interest.” (Antioch)
- Didn’t take science because she believed a person either got it or didn’t. She was into literature, so she didn’t believe she was good at science. Regrets it now that she understands that science is everywhere. (SLC)
- She had sciences in high school so didn’t feel like she needed them. (Amherst)
- Didn’t enjoy math or science; not interested in learning more. (SLC)
- “I was comfortable reading and writing, but math was outside of my comfort level. I was intimidated.” (Amherst)
- He could have attained a better quantitative education. (Amherst)
- He felt that Amherst did not provide him with strong quantitative skills.

Hampshire College provides an interesting contrast, since it has distribution requirements in the first year. Here are some stories:

- Took a science course on AIDS and lucked out; it was really interesting. She was glad to have taken it; it didn't affect her later work but she was informed by it in ways she valued highly. She had to try to be scientific in her writing. "I was glad the science classes weren't just geology or biology but included things like health. It seemed more friendly."
- Was interested in questions in math/science areas but was intimidated by the need to know formulas to access the information. In retrospect wishes she'd taken classes in these areas due to on-going interest. Due to Hampshire's distribution requirement, she studied muscular movement in dance – didn't think science was connected to her interests but found that it was.
- Took a science course to fill distribution requirement, and did some math in that course. It was hard but "I came out of that experience a much stronger learner and more confident in my ability to do academic work." Afterwards has thought that maybe he should have done more science. Was afraid of math, never was good at it in high school and in retrospect realized he'd had bad teachers and dreaded going to their classes. He teaches math now and enjoys it.

One person from another institution also had a good experience exploring a science unexpectedly:

- Marine biology – mostly curiosity, no scientific background needed. Influenced him to this day, now volunteers to work on coral reef preservation because of that class. (SLC)

Some students choose to avoid challenging themselves:

- If there had been requirements, wouldn't have been able to get out of some things; would've had to face up to those fears. It's very much about staying with what a person is good at. (Brown)
- Loved the open curriculum, but it allowed a lack of academic rigor. Would've appreciated a bit more structure, encouragement to realize potential – there was too much room for people to skate along in the middle. (Brown)

- “I felt I was not held to as exacting academic standards and responsibilities as my classmates. I felt my analyses were at a more juvenile level, there weren’t higher expectations.” (New)
- “If you have bad habits, SLC encourages your bad habits as much as your good habits.”
- Down side is not getting out of your comfort zone. Distribution requirements might have opened other areas for him. (SLC)
- He wasn’t very productive as an undergrad – “was not satisfied with my productivity,” and felt he let his primary academic adviser down. (Antioch)
- He feels that the academic culture of Amherst is not to be lazy or a slacker, but he believes it resulted in the appearance of doing work instead of being transformed by it. He believes it was an inefficient use of energy.
- She feels that she was granted the freedom but used it to coast. “Amherst College was excellent and it challenged me. I could have challenged myself more, but sometimes I backed off and took the easy way out... There was enough flexibility but I did not push myself outside of my comfort zone. The student culture embraces exploration, but it becomes easy for individuals not to push themselves out of their comfort zone.”

When asked if they had any regrets, two said they wished they had challenged themselves more.

- “I wish I had pushed myself a little further...” (Wesleyan)
- Wishes she had done more work in the classes she did take. She was very smart and could get away with doing less than her best. (SLC)

Some reported a preference for taking easy classes, at least partly to avoid low grades:

- His group of friends did not encourage broad exploration of the curriculum. Rather there was an emphasis on taking easy classes outside of the major. (Wesleyan)
- She was a pre-med major when she arrived but her pre-major adviser was Head of the English Department. “I think because [of that] I was more inspired by how wonderful the courses in the department were and I ended up taking the maximum amount of English courses that I could.” Because she was not getting good grades in her pre-med courses, she switched almost entirely to courses where she could achieve a B+/A- average. Since she was required to take half of her courses outside her major, she filled the gaps in her schedule with classes in her minor, Studio Art. Because she accelerated, she didn’t have very much time to liberally explore courses in other disciplines. “I did what I was good at and what entertained me...I feel like I have other areas of strength that weren’t developed.” (Smith)
- Intensity of classes kept her from dabbling. Thinks that adding less intense required courses, without changing other classes, would have been helpful. (SLC)
- Was interested in a broad array of courses, but with less rigor, didn’t push self
- Avoided physics – knew she wouldn’t be successful, too challenging for her. (Hampshire)

Others credited ungraded options with their willingness to explore:

- Amazing opportunity to push students with the pass/fail option – could encourage students to use it to explore things, see if they can get something from a class they’re afraid of. (Brown)

- He could take more advantage of S/NC option than students planning graduate, medical, or law school. (Brown)
- “It wasn’t about getting that extra Ω point on the assignment, it was a more appropriate focus for the role of student, that of asking ‘do I care?’ and ‘what do I want to know?’ rather than asking what is going to be on the test.” (New)
- “I took Human Biology pass/fail because I was so worried about getting a low grade. I ended up getting an A in the class, but I know that it was because I didn’t feel the pressure to perform. I was able to just relax and enjoy the class.” (Smith)

PREPARATION

A number of people described being well prepared with respect to confidence:

- Got a sense of confidence that comes from an Ivy League education – sense that there’s nothing she can’t do. (Brown)
- “I felt very well prepared academically. I felt comfortable learning about things I know nothing about.” (New)
- “I felt well prepared by my Smith education. I feel like my college experience made me an independent thinker. It helped me feel good about my ability to make my own choices.”
- She felt well-prepared by her Smith education especially with regard to speaking and writing. “Those are the two most important skills in the workforce.” She was also thankful for the confidence she gained from being in a supportive, all-female environment.
- “I learned that it’s OK to be wrong and raise your hand without fear because it’s more important to investigate – those skills have been so valuable to me.” (New)
- At first unprepared to fit into real world structures, nothing felt quite right. In time realized he was prepared to figure out what he wants, how to learn it and make it happen, how to identify and achieve goals. Discomfort creates a driving force to figure out what you believe. Confident that he could figure out how to create his career, even without a specific skill set. Learned to make and learn from his decisions, and be proactive in asserting opinions. (SLC)
- SLC made her confident that wherever she went she’d be fine. Disciplined, impassioned, able to do it.
- “It prepared me well in my ability to enter a field I do not know or understand and find my own course through it... I can learn what I need to learn instead of being told what to learn.” (Amherst)
- “We always joke that a Hampshire student can walk into a room of strangers and convince someone to work with them because that’s what you had to do at HC.”
- “My education made me fearless. It made me not afraid to take chances in my career, and to bring that sensitivity, and also be a little more analytical and more aware of how what I’m doing impacts the bigger world. I’m not afraid to challenge the norm. I was comfortable taking the initiative, and that’s what college made me able to do.” (SLC)
- “SLC really prepares you for thinking on your feet....It just forces you to be more confident about what you want.”

Several felt very well prepared for graduate study:

- “Having gone through the thesis experience did worlds making me at ease writing papers, so grad school wasn’t this big scary thing it can be for some people.” (New)

- “I found myself ahead of my classmates in graduate school because I had simply read more than them because I didn’t have to use my time taking courses in chemistry and other areas I wasn’t interested in.” (New)
- “I went straight to law school and I felt very well prepared. I have also felt very well prepared for my job [in publishing]. (Smith)
- “I felt very well-prepared by my Smith education. I felt like one of the best-prepared students [in my PhD program].
- “I felt well prepared by Smith. I went into graduate school for Technical Education and always felt like I could write papers.”
- Compared to other grad students, not afraid to challenge professors and ask questions. (SLC)
- Was nervous applying to graduate school but “I actually felt like it was a lot easier because I had to do so much writing and so much of my own work at Hampshire. I was actually over-prepared. I had a reverse experience where graduate school was more like undergraduate school and Hampshire was more like graduate school. It wasn’t that I didn’t go to an academically challenging graduate school. It was that Hampshire asked so much more of you.”

A few felt that they had not received the appropriate educational breadth/depth.

- One student concentrated in creative writing, but took no literature courses. When he reached graduate school he realized that this “didn’t serve him well.” He didn’t have the language or knowledge needed for discussion or debates, not as well-read as grad school peers because he was “horribly read” in the canon, felt “deeply ignorant” about the history of literature. The confidence he had gained was undermined in grad school. Lack of rigor, balance, and training. (SLC)
- Felt lacking in history, political science, and the “standard canon” within the fields she did study, as there was more focus on contemporary readings than those of historical significance.” (Antioch)
- Took two mid-level philosophy courses without much background in the history of that era, and felt that she “didn’t have enough context and was therefore just going through the motions.” (Antioch)

A few compared their good preparation for academia to their poor preparation for careers:

- “Hampshire prepares you for the world of academics but not necessarily for a career world.”
- After graduation she didn’t feel at all prepared for a career (this hadn’t been her initial goal). Got a teaching certificate and now that she’s applying to graduate school, realizes that Hampshire prepares you excellently for work in academia. She learned how to write, was encouraged to be active in class discussions, present and speak in public, design own projects, carry out a thesis. If she’d known she wanted to be a teacher she could have done it more quickly, but she didn’t know this was what she wanted while at Hampshire.
- “SLC students become such good learners that they start to think that’s the only thing they’re good at.”

Some felt well prepared for their careers:

- Definitely gave broad exposure to different ways of thinking and different people – all the people and discussions are very applicable to his current work. (Brown)
- Feels that he took courses broadly enough that in his current career as a screenwriter, he is well equipped to research whatever he needs to. (Wesleyan)

Appendix B

- “I’ll see something, and I don’t take for granted that other people see it from that same perspective... challenge assumptions, my own and other people’s...challenge the given.” Learned how, “whatever position I’m in at the agency I’m working at, to really find the different connections between myself and the agency and the client...find out how I can make changes on all levels. It doesn’t matter what part of the agency I’m in, I can have a conversation across the board about their departments and position. Whatever the issue is, I can see connections, how it’s connected to my work.” Well prepared for non-profit work by classes, student government, activism: people skills, work with difference, social justice, work in various communities, critical thinking skills. (SLC)
- Feels her education has been relevant to her jobs since: publishing, graphic design, academic affairs administration. Taught her to think critically, to write different things well. Skills served her in further education, professional and personal life. (SLC)
- Currently doing work that combines multiple areas. “I got my current job because of the mix of what I can do...my dad is a specialist so it really kind of blows my mind that I’ve made a career of [being a generalist].” (Antioch)

However, seeking a career was the main thing for which alumni found themselves poorly prepared.

- Lack of training for, or even interest in, the real world – terrifying to have no sense of how to support oneself with skills/knowledge from one’s concentration. Came from a poor immigrant family – has a sense of fear due to her economic background and tied to desire to make a living in what she loved. (Brown)
- Lack of preparation for jobs and the real world in general, but sees that more as the nature of college than as Brown’s fault.
- On-campus jobs were better preparation for the real world than most class-work. (Brown)
- “It’s probably true everywhere, but I had no idea how hard it would be to find a job when I graduated.” (New)
- “I was not badly prepared, but I didn’t take courses that gave financial stability, so I spent 6-7 years struggling and I was unsure of how to work things out on a day-to-day level after college.” (New)
- There was no real-world application for the theory he was learning while he was in college. (Wesleyan)
- She seems frustrated with her career and is hoping to switch from teaching English in a community college to working in accounting/personal finance. She is still haunted by a comment her adviser made to her about her dream of becoming an English professor when he told her, ‘Don’t get a PhD in English! It is so competitive and you will probably end up teaching at a community college in the middle of Kansas. Get a master’s degree and become a high school teacher instead.’ She found his remark unacceptable especially since she would be in a large amount of debt after graduate school and high school teachers are poorly compensated. She wishes that Smith had required her to take more government and economics courses because they are more applicable to life. She mentioned that Smith should have more ‘life skills’ classes.
- “As much freedom as an open curriculum offers a student, there are outside experiences that define a student’s behavior and choices...Looking back from an employment perspective, there are little things like a background in design/art that would have really helped me in my job. I think about going back to school for design.” (Smith)
- “Most people I knew who graduated from SLC graduated not knowing what the hell to do.” Lack of career guidance was a problem. The track seemed to be college, then grad school to figure out what you’re doing. Not a lot of guidance or coursework to prepare for what’s after college. Last semester, a poetry professor encouraged him to apply for grad school – this was the only real guidance he received.

- First five years after college felt generally unprepared. College not like real life, very insular. No real career counseling or preparation for real life or job searching. (SLC)
- Alumni and career programs “sucked,” not helpful. Took a long time to find a job in field, no support or resources from career center. (SLC)
- He felt “unprepared toward a certain culture of work.” (SLC)
- Badly prepared to deal with money. “The world we live in is so money-oriented [and that] wasn’t a part of the education they gave you.” (Antioch)
- If the geology major had included more water-related studies, he would have been more prepared to work in the field. He was relegated to the lowliest work when working with geologists. (Amherst)
- She wishes there was more guidance on how certain course offerings link to particular careers. (Amherst)
- It was clear that Hampshire didn’t prepare her for the corporate world, which wasn’t what she wanted, and she was glad that this wasn’t the focus. But it would have been good to have more role models for career building, based upon what alums have done.

The main regret people expressed was having avoided subjects that would have prepared them for their current careers.

- Taking more science would have helped her in her current profession as a nurse-practitioner. (Wesleyan)
- After an econ course that “kicked her ass,” avoided econ. Now that she’s a tax policy analyst, wishes she would have stuck with econ a little more. (Wesleyan)
- Regrets not taking theater and following her heart’s desire. It would also have helped her career, either in pursuing acting or in her current writing work. (SLC)
- Wishes she’d taken psychology, as she ended up going to grad school to become a school counselor. (SLC)
- Wasn’t interested in math; is now building things and wishes she had more math skills. (Hampshire)
- Wishes she’d taken some courses on the theory of economics, which is relevant to her current work. (Hampshire)
- Thinks that maybe having to choose a direction would have helped her advance further in career sooner. (SLC)
- More requirements would have helped her find a career path sooner. (SLC)

Here are some other ways in which people said they had been well prepared:

- “It just prepared me in general, it didn’t prepare me for my work except at a higher level way, because the specifics didn’t play into the job but I learned about my learning style, like I’m an interactive learner, and this helped me in my career.” (New)
- “I know that beyond my career I’m on a constant search for wisdom, and at New College most of my courses and encounters with my professors tied into that theme.”
- Only in that he learned to deal with different sets of people. (Wesleyan)
- “I felt very well prepared by my Smith education, especially in regards to analyzing, writing, and communicating...Overall it was a really good experience for me.”

- Small class sizes and high writing standards were beneficial, having opinion valued, making analytic judgments on the spot. Feels he could walk into any number of jobs and figure them out, and do a good job. Might not have the language, but has the skills – due to curricular breadth, walking into courses and being expected to participate and get up to speed. (SLC)
- SLC gave him “the ability to look at what I’m doing in life, if I’m happy, and if I’m not, what to do about it. Constant reflection on what’s important to you.” Prepared to be independent thinking and creative person.
- “SLC is where I found my independence.”
- “At Amherst I learned how to think, by definition across disciplines by integrating frameworks within other disciplines that are not aligned. Learning how to think across frameworks has been my primary key to success.”
- “Since there’s no punishment for not doing your work at Hampshire (you can’t really ‘fail’), it was you deciding what you wanted to do with your time and the money you were spending to be there. That prepares you for life... I did all that soul searching and drama of that age at the right time as opposed to later. It allowed me to mature faster... I did the classes I wanted and then in the evening I’d go to performances, lectures and things that were of interest to me. Everything had meaning.”

Here is one other way in which someone felt unprepared:

- One of the ways Hampshire doesn’t prepare you is that the rest of the world doesn’t care as much as the faculty and students at Hampshire did. She received so much support for her work and decisions, and it’s not always like that “when you leave a safe place like Hampshire.”

LEARNING FROM THE OPEN CURRICULUM SYSTEM

The main things alumni attribute to their experience of the open curriculum are decision-making skills, responsibility, and personal growth. A few say they learned these things because they made mistakes/bad decisions.

Decision-making:

- Learned – afterward – to think about long-term implications of decisions and to get advice before making decisions. (Brown)
- It taught me to like making my own choices. (New)
- “At that time I always knew what I wanted, now I admire that quality in people and I don’t know that I have that anymore... During that time I was fabulous at knowing what I wanted to do, though they weren’t always the best choices in retrospect, but I’m glad I got to make them... I had inner knowing and spontaneous decisions because I trusted myself and my choices because I never damaged myself, and I had a lot of great experiences, I traveled overseas and gave papers. I loved that time. I’m much less a risk taker now, and whether they were good or bad choices I deliberated and made the choice, which is important.” (New)
- Felt that the open curriculum helped her learn decision-making skills, balance personal and academic lives. (Wesleyan)
- “At Smith, I made all kinds of decisions and I felt good about it. I don’t have a problem making those same kinds of decisions today...I think there is a caliber of student at Smith who is a good consumer of information as a citizen in general.”

- “I do think I learned something from the process and responsibility of making my own curricular decisions. College is a really good opportunity to start to make choices and to see the consequences of those choices. It gave me a sense of pride that I could choose my own classes. I really wanted to make the most out of my experience and in the end I felt more confident.” (Smith)
- Learned to be independent, not rely on what’s already there, blaze specific path. Independence gained at SLC ties into his work as an independent producer, making decisions with each project.
- Helped him find his voice. Depth emphasized more than breadth. Gives skills, tools to become an expert in your area. Gained confidence to pursue own ideas and direction, follow instincts and direction. Made him reflect on his direction. (SLC)
- Learned planning, relationship-building, and focus on institutional structures. (Antioch)
- Helped him think broadly about all the decisions he has made since college, and in problem solving in the workplace. (Amherst)
- “It taught me to follow my intuition and to be less of a gerbil on the wheel because the bright and ambitious people go after the cheese.” (Amherst)
- “I got used to making decisions on my own. I can shift gears and change – switch jobs and fields – and do so confidently and competently.” (Amherst)
- Enjoyed process of researching courses, planning a schedule, negotiating projects. “I was always planning the next step in my trajectory.” Honed those skills at Hampshire, which are central to her current work as registrar at an art institute.
- “It’s an experience that empowers a person...having to go to your adviser and negotiate with them and explain what you want to do, to have to provide a rationale for your choices. Even in your choice of courses you deal with the world in a Socratic way – it was a very challenging and very accommodating experience at the same time... Hampshire is the perfect Socratic institution. They teach you how to ask question after question and at some point you actually get to the bottom of things.”
- The open curriculum “helped me learn to identify issues and different ways to approach them. I get hit with new issues every day so [it’s about] being independent in figuring out how you’re going to go about [finding out what you need to know]. You start with an infinite landscape and then you pare it down, must be able to take the broader issue and pare it down into one that’s coherent and manageable.” (Hampshire)
- “I feel prepared to make decisions...to look for the different pieces I needed to get myself to a point or a goal. In the business world I had problem solving skills a lot of people didn’t have. I’d been faced with challenges. I took pride in the work I did. It’s so much more about the journey and not just taking a bunch of classes. You may know what you want to study, but how will that turn into a concentration? The process helped me make better choices and feel empowered.” (Hampshire)

Responsibility:

- Out of that responsibility, you make mistakes and have to live with them. The open curriculum teaches you to do it yourself and be responsible for your decisions.
- Didn’t learn from the process at the time because “didn’t consider it a responsibility.”
- Learned to take responsibility for own decisions.

- “I do feel like everything that I did including the openness in course choices taught me to be responsible for myself, taught me that every decision that I made was a valid one and an important one for me.” The type of responsibility one has to exhibit in an open curriculum has been crucial for her breaking into her current profession, having the confidence to believe that her opinion matters even among more experienced people, “expect to be respected.” (Wesleyan)
- Choosing her own courses made her focus, that responsibility for choices, helped with grad school – choosing a program, find a way to make it happen, able to be goal-oriented, not afraid to pursue a good fit. Confident to go after what she wanted in terms of career and academic program.
- Independence required her to choose courses and conference work taught her about deadlines, time management, seeing things through. Learned to take responsibility for her choices, handle freedom, show up prepared, account for time, and make her own decisions.
- Choices meant responsibility; if you’re not happy, it’s up to you to make changes. (SLC)
- It’s “helpful in teaching personal responsibility and the direct result of” one’s actions.
- Learned a lot about how her “choices affect other people around me.” She avoided travel, to such an extent that she backed out of a co-op she had planned, which really upset her co-op adviser who had spoken to the employer about how excited the student was about the job. She felt she let her adviser down. Her adviser “was pretty encouraging” in helping her overcome being scared by the idea of travel. (Antioch)
- “I think I learned more of a self-determination, a responsibility for where I ended up.” (Antioch)
- He felt that the open curriculum put the responsibility on him to respond to the challenge of choosing his own course of study and thereby became part of the learning process itself.
- “I really liked the way the Hampshire program prepared me for dealing with people in authority positions. When I left Hampshire and was out in the world I never felt nervous...because from a young age you’d be expected to present yourself confidently, negotiate with professors. And that’s a skill that only helps you more and more.”

Personal growth:

- Despite an initial feeling of being overwhelmed with choices, the open curriculum helped her grow as a person/in her personal life, even if it didn’t affect her ‘academic growth.’ (Wesleyan)
- “It was a hard process, but also a growth opportunity – it mimics life that way.” (Wesleyan)
- Learned how to deal with bureaucracy and to account for the role of personalities in navigating bureaucracy – “it’s more than a set of rules, it’s the people.” (Antioch)
- Learned to be flexible, adaptive, and to pick one’s own experiences, but a lot of the learning wasn’t about the classes. (Antioch)
- “I learned who I was. That was one of the things about Hampshire. Not only did I learn to write and how to think, but because I had to decide about what I was going to study, classes I was going to take, the questions I’d be asking in my studies, and explain to others why I was making those decisions, it made me realize those things for myself in a larger sense. I’ve had to do that in different areas later on, in terms of making choices about life and in graduate school, and in my ordination process. I have to talk about where I am, what I’m doing, and why I know how to do that. I feel like it’s easier for me than for others in similar processes because I had to do that at Hampshire.”

- “I learned a lot about my own motivation, my ability to get through to learn something, to do something because of my will. Hampshire teaches you how to do things yourself... It was really empowering being taken seriously in putting together the things that I was going to do and studying what I wanted.”
- Process helps build initiative. “I already had [initiative] but Hampshire channeled it in a direction and allowed me to be more focused and efficient about everything in my life. It was a whole process that was a potent exercise in turning adolescents into adults... All of the responsibilities that go along with this process are an essential part of the Hampshire learning experience. That’s why so many Hampshire alums become entrepreneurs because you’re forced to be a mini-entrepreneur there.”
- “I probably learned more that way, I probably learned more from all the independence and by necessity having to figure things out when so young, than anything else. We all did, we all had to figure things out.” (Antioch)

A few said they do not think they learned anything from choosing their own courses:

- She did not think that choosing her own courses gave her an edge in life; she felt that the courses themselves are what contributed to her analytical abilities and professional success. (Smith)
- She liked being able to pick her own courses, but she didn’t feel that the act of choosing them taught her something she didn’t already know. (Smith)
- “Not particularly” – felt that the curriculum had less choice than advertised. Co-op had “insufficient weaving into the classroom.” (Antioch)
- He did not learn anything because he feels he was not a “good candidate at the time, I was 17, what did I know?” He did not feel comfortable utilizing the open curriculum because he did not have a good idea of what he was doing. (Amherst)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the main reasons you chose to attend [your college]?
 - (If they mention the open curriculum) – how important was the open curriculum in your decision? Why was it important to you?
 - (If they did not mention the open curriculum) – was the open curriculum a part of your decision? How did it factor in?

2. What was your experience of discussing course choices with your faculty advisers?
 - Your first-year/pre-major adviser?
 - Your major adviser?

Specifically, how much did they encourage curricular breadth? Express opinions about your course choices? How much did they influence you?

3. Who else influenced your decisions about which courses to take? To what extent did they influence you to explore subjects and to what extent did they influence you to avoid things?
4. Were there subjects you intentionally avoided? If so, what were they?
5. In your experience, did the student culture have a tendency to support either broad exploration of many subjects, or focusing on one or a few and avoiding others? Please give examples.
6. Review interviewee's history – ask what they've been doing since graduation.
In what ways have you felt well or badly prepared by your undergraduate education?
7. Are there any subjects you didn't take that you have since wished you had studied?
If so, why do you feel this way?
8. Do you think you learned anything from having the experience of choosing all your own courses?
If so, what? How has what you learned been useful since graduation?

Appendix C

Faculty Focus Groups

Summary List of Themes

Advising

All the groups at each campus spent a great deal of time on advising. There was general consensus that advising is essential to the success of an open curriculum and also that advising in an open curriculum places significant demands on the faculty.

There was also consensus that advising is not done well for all students at all of our schools. Faculty in all the groups suggested more support and/or more training, or even mentoring, for advisors.

Teaching

There was general consensus that, under the open curriculum, students choose most of the courses they take, and all agreed that this creates a much better learning environment than one in which students are taking courses to fulfill distribution requirements.

Even professors who teach “disliked” courses required for particular programs (intro chemistry, statistics, methods courses in social science and humanities disciplines) said that the open curriculum creates a positive learning climate in most of their courses, and even in these required courses, students understand that they are there because they have chosen a particular program.

Another advantage of the open curriculum is that faculty have more freedom in the courses they teach. They do not have to “cover” the various courses required by a distribution requirement or core. A related advantage mentioned by some is that they can teach more “robust” courses. They do not need to offer “watered-down” courses to be taken by reluctant students fulfilling a distribution requirement.

Several professors said that the lack of core requirements means that students come to some of their courses with varying degrees of background in the material, creating difficulties in teaching these courses.

Demands on Faculty

There was consensus that working in an open curriculum institution places significant demands on faculty for advising and for mentoring students in individual projects.

There was also a feeling among many faculty that advising is not sufficiently recognized or rewarded by their institution.

Opportunities for student-faculty interaction

Several faculty members at the various institutions said that the open curriculum gave students the time and motivation to work with faculty members on individual scholarship projects, even in the early undergraduate years.

Freedom from/for

Some of the groups specifically addressed whether the disadvantages of allowing students to develop their own plan outweighed the advantages of ensuring that students were “exposed” to a broad range of disciplines. There was consensus that the open curriculum enables students to explore topics in depth, often across multiple departments (for those schools that have departments).

Several faculty members said that they have been frustrated in their efforts to encourage some students to take a broad range of courses. Some faculty members characterized this behavior as students staying comfortably in the areas of their strengths rather than actively avoiding courses they dislike.

There was also consensus that exposing students to a discipline in one or two required courses is, for many students, not effective in creating an understanding and appreciation of that discipline.

Amherst College

Four junior faculty members from Amherst College met with the Director of Institutional Research on February 24, 2006 for a discussion on the open curriculum. There were representatives from the natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities at the discussion which lasted just over one hour.

How does Amherst's version of the open curriculum affect your role as an instructor, advisor, or in faculty governance?

The faculty found that there was more pressure working in an open curriculum environment than there might be in a curriculum that had core or distribution requirements. They found the additional pressure in all aspects of their job: advising, teaching, course development, and faculty governance. But, they also found that the open curriculum raised the level of engagement of both students and faculty in their curricular choices and in the actual classes. They found this to be so because no students were "forced" to take any of their courses by core or distribution requirements. These faculty found that they were able to put out a more robust and challenging course, especially in the introductory courses, because it didn't have to be a "gut" to accommodate large numbers of students who "had" to take it.

Advising was found to be more challenging because each course involved a decision making process. These faculty found that about half of their advisees demonstrated resistance to venturing out in areas of study that were new to them or "out of their comfort zone." They found the student culture at Amherst to be one where students tend to stay in areas of study in which they are strong and to which they find themselves well-suited. They find students very conscious of grades and the imagined negative consequences (not getting into the best law school, grad school, med school) of getting a B. They do not want to risk a "hit on their GPA" by taking something they are not familiar with or that does not play to their strengths. A good portion of this feeling was perceived as being planted and nourished by parents who have set their kids up to get into Amherst and now they have to get them through to the next step. Amherst is viewed as a credential to the next stepping stone rather than a wonderful opportunity to explore and expand one's interests.

There was a lot of discussion about the large number of pre-med students at Amherst and the fact that they have created a de facto set of distribution requirements (the courses required to apply to medical school.) Some wondered about the wisdom of choosing a career path at age 18. They also wondered about the correlation between being good in chemistry and being a good doctor.

In terms of faculty governance, they found that the absence of distribution requirements prevented the fights they had witnessed at other schools about what courses would qualify as a requirement or as a core course. They believe that the debates at Amherst are different where recent faculty meetings have focused on critical skills requirements, but not required subject matters. They do anticipate a rather lively discussion on the recommendation in the report of the Committee on Academic Priorities that all students be required to take a writing intensive course.

It was noted that advising is an incredibly important part of the open curriculum, yet they found Amherst focused very little on advising in terms of training resources, oversight, evaluation, sharing "accumulated wisdom". They felt they were left to figure out advising for themselves and by the time that trickled down to students there was not much more they could do other than redirect the student to an office or another faculty member.

There was also a good deal of concern expressed about the preponderance of study abroad programs and the pressure on advisors to approve these when they knew very little about them and found very little guidance from the College on which were the good programs and which were not.

How much does it matter to you that Amherst has an open curriculum? Did it influence your interest in coming to teach here? Does it affect your feeling about working here?

One faculty member was wary of working in an open curriculum, but eventually warmed up to the idea. What was most remarkable to this faculty member was that in practice an open curriculum yields students in their class who are choosing to be there versus those that are forced to there through distribution or core requirements. The students were found to be more motivated to attend class and to do well in class.

Some faculty were advised not to put prerequisites on their courses as it might adversely affect enrollment. Some faculty felt that there is added pressure at Amherst because enrollment levels are used by some to be an indication of the value of a course or instructor.

How do you see the open curriculum affecting the education students receive here?

Overall, these faculty found grade inflation and the unwillingness of students to enroll in courses that meet in the morning to be the biggest threat to optimizing the effectiveness of the open curriculum. They also fear that “curiosity will get socialized out of them” because the student culture at Amherst is to play it safe and get good grades rather than to pursue their interests outside of their comfort zone.

Have you observed particular qualities in students that seem to go with being well or badly suited to working in an open curriculum? What qualities do you think a student needs to take advantage of our system?

The open curriculum works best for students who are very intellectually curious, gifted and undecided about their major. Those Amherst students who are narrowly focused and on a career path are less likely to take the risks that are inherent in exploring academic areas outside of their comfort zone.

Antioch College

Senior Faculty Focus Group

February 21, 2006

Present: Dennie Eagleson-Photography, moderator; Louise Smith-Theater, scribe; Hassan Rahmanian-Social Global Studies, Tom Haugsby-Co-op, Hassan Nejad-Social Global Studies, Jill Yager-Biology, Kab Butamina-Chemistry, Chuck Taylor-Physics, Bob Devine-Communications

Introduction:

The colleagues present at the Senior Faculty Focus group dinner have all been at Antioch over ten years. Several of them have held multiple positions in the institution. We had a former President of the college, a former Dean of Faculty, Dean of Co-op, Associate Dean of Faculty and former Chair of the Faculty Executive Committee. Initially, we spoke about the definition of an open curriculum. It was agreed that Antioch has a hybrid curriculum, which incorporates requirements for general education and majors, but also has the cooperative education and community aspects which contribute the sense of open-ness more broadly defined. We agreed to talk about the old curriculum as the basis of our experience; the new curriculum being still somewhat untried in the upper levels and only partially in place. We agreed that the level of student choice was a major factor in defining ourselves as having an open curriculum. We also agreed with many of the other values asserted in the Teagle “white paper”: agility of mind, freedom “for” rather than freedom “from”, etc.

Having come to some agreement about the territory we were exploring, we answered the questions posed by the Teagle project for consideration.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages for students and faculty in the open curriculum of Antioch College?

The open curriculum at Antioch draws students who are interested in being empowered learners. As one faculty put it, students at Antioch never ask, “Is this going to be on the test? They expect the unexpected.” Another colleague put it this way: “Students learn how to learn from themselves.” It was agreed that the structure of cooperative education with alternating sequences of work and study pushed the agenda for an open curriculum within the institution. It is very difficult to maintain strict sequential learning, for example, when students are coming and going on co-op. Students become more like colleagues in the co-op system since they engage with the world of work much in the same way we as faculty do; holding real jobs with real responsibilities, they return from co-op “two years older” in one semester than when they left.

There is a tension within the institution and a constant debate about the level of freedom and choice students need to have in our system. Students come to us for structured learning and we invite them into a very different experience; one which values integrated learning and blurred boundaries between disciplines, flexibility, versatility and choice. For some colleagues, there is a concern about the new curriculum being paradoxically too prescriptive and too loose at the same time. Because all of our upper level classes are linked and clustered, some colleagues felt that we were not trusting the students to find the integration but rather were “serving it up” which is ultimately disempowering and goes against the stated purpose of an open curriculum. There was a concern expressed that students would become “passive consumers of integration” rather than the active learners we want them to be.

A disadvantage of the open curriculum had to do with what is perceived as the improvisational nature of it, both on the part of the institution and on the part of the students. Can excellence be achieved in a curriculum that is “constantly in a start-up phase” as it responds to student interests and demands? We also discussed the disadvantage of losing the distinctiveness of the disciplines. By opening our curriculum to so much choice and integration, are we forfeiting disciplinary depth? There was a concern expressed that we will not be able to attract faculty who are interested in pursuing research. Other colleagues countered the argument with the idea that in our newly articulated curriculum of integrated learning, we learn from each other.

We all agreed that open curriculum provides both students and faculty with an opportunity for self-formation that is personally and intellectually dynamic. One colleague put it this way: “If students are engaged in self-formation, faculty need to be ready to do this along with them. This constantly pushes me to go beyond my own little box. Faculty, like students, are not finished products.”

One disadvantage to students that was expressed was the possibility they would not be comparable in depthful learning to students in similar disciplines in other more conventional colleges. It was agreed that we need to think about recruiting students who can benefit from and appreciate the level of freedom and choice that they gain in an open curriculum. The possibility of class bias was raised by one colleague who felt that students from disadvantaged backgrounds or first generation college-goers would not know how to use or appreciate the open curriculum.

Overall, our focus on this first question really centered on a current debate on campus having to do with integrated learning and team teaching. Open curriculum for us meant integrated curriculum, and we debated long and hard about the benefits and disadvantages of linking and clustering our classes, team teaching in the core program and allowing students to design their own majors in several disciplines at once.

2. How important is it that you teach at a school with open curriculum?

It was hard to get this question across. The idea that students are in a process of choosing their educational experiences was very important. However, there was a concern about teaching at “Fluff U” as one colleague put it. Along with choice, equally important was academic excellence and rigor. The idea that we encounter our students “where they are” was another value colleagues expressed. One faculty member put it in terms of agency: the fact that students at Antioch have agency was a key factor for this colleague. It was agreed that the faculty load had a major impact on the ability to deliver an open curriculum effectively; advising being a very key part of how it works well.

3. How much can students avoid taking certain subjects?

Hands down, our faculty felt that our students avoid math and science on a regular basis. There is too little proficiency expected of our students, even with basic math and science proficiencies required in the old curriculum. The distribution requirement of the gen ed program was whittle down over the years. It was felt that the new curriculum needs to build a culture of expectations in these areas but that there is a danger for students to avoid math and science more easily.

4. Advising:

Advising has a crucial curricular role at Antioch. Faculty help students make sense of where they have been and where they are going in a holistic conversation that should include co-op and community experiences as well as classroom. There was concern expressed on the part of senior faculty that with the new curriculum, which is emergent in nature, we will spend more time manufacturing new courses than delivering to our students. This will have a strong impact on our ability to advise, as there will be instability in the course selection. There was concern that time be made in our faculty workload and in the calendar of the institution for advising. It was also noted that we need to be more collegial in order to better advise students. We discussed the idea of an on-line bulletin board of recent faculty research as well as interests for future collaborations. Workload issues were a major factor in our discussion. All agreed that advising is a crucial aspect of the open curriculum’s success.

Newer Faculty Focus Group February 28, 2006

Present: Louise Smith, Associate Dean of Faculty; Hassan Rahmanian, facilitator; Beverly Rodgers, Associate Professor of Anthropology; David Kammler, Assistant Professor of Chemistry; Jill Becker, Associate Professor of Dance; Jahwara Giddings, Associate Professor of Africana Studies; Isabella Winkler, Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies; Julie Gallagher, Assistant Professor of History; Dennie Eagleson, scribe.

In clarifying the discussion about an open curriculum at Antioch, we agreed that we would use best practices from the past, and will be commenting on the “openness” of the new curriculum.

Initially there was some discussion about the idea that our resources severely limit how truly open our curriculum can be. Student choice is severely curtailed in an environment where a limited such number of courses can be offered in any given discipline. “It is one thing to say that Brown has an open curriculum and quite another to say Antioch does”, said one colleague. These concerns undergirded the whole evening’s discussion.

Advantages or disadvantages of open curriculum:

Disadvantages:

Student point of view:

- Lack of clarity about how to get to graduation. There is so much freedom. We haven't established standards, so it is difficult to answer that.
- The opportunity to be exposed to methodology, broad categories. When you remove requirements, students lose the opportunities to engage, and for us to introduce students into a broad range of inquiry. The Core program exposes students to a range of methodologies, thus maximizing openness within limited resources.
- In liberal arts model, science is an important component. There is a lost opportunity, to consider a path to have deep interest and passion. "I wish I could have taken a history class..."
- In the Core community. People who were in the core who didn't want to take dance brought down the whole level. There were some people who took a dance class who got really excited about it.

Faculty disadvantages:

- There is a communication problem with the outside world if students can name the major whatever they want. What does a major in Liberal Arts mean? They can't say that they major in Chemistry. It gets into the integrity of what we are doing. (Faculty's sense of integrity.)
- There was concern expressed about effectively covering writing and quantitative skills.
- Students may not be getting challenged enough.
- One of the problems is long range planning. Now we have to constantly renew what it is we are going to be able to offer. Does the open curriculum mean a lack of identity as faculty? We are all "lone wolves". We are carrying our disciplines as individuals. We don't have a team of historians, or humanities. Professional development is undermined by time obligations to a curriculum that is extremely advisor-heavy and undefined.

Advantages of open curriculum:

For students.

- The new curriculum holds the possibly (linked clustered connected curriculum) of providing greater detail, greater depth on a theme than an individual class. Native American + historian + political science.
- Now, multiple facets, perspectives are fantastic, unplanned. Are the students progressing faster when learning? Is the synthesis that they are getting happening in a more sophisticated way?

The idea of an open curriculum was conflated with the new curriculum underway at Antioch currently. This made for a difficult discussion because the features of the new curriculum, some of which were not open, were examined as exclusively representing open curriculum at Antioch. This is not the case. Our "old" curriculum was also open.

How important is it to you that there is an open curriculum at Antioch?

One faculty member put it this way: "Everyone working with the individually guided major asks students to reflect on how their learning coheres. This will require each student to think their own way through their own education. It won't be an off the shelf or out of the box kind of thing. It gives me more freedom. If we had a prescribed curriculum, I would have to teach those things. Now, I get to teach a part of the same content, in other packages, and I get to stay fresh."

Faculty agreed that choice changes the climate within which we have a discussion. When people feel they have choice, they feel more intellectually alive.

Does it matter to the school?

However, one colleague framed it more negatively: “I think it is more honest. We can’t offer disciplinary pursuits or honest fields of study with integrity.”

Most faculty agreed, however that an open curriculum brings students that are open to diverse approaches. Students bring a different view of curriculum.

Another faculty member said: “There can be very high levels of engagement possible here. Whatever is going on, there is a reputation that precedes this school. People know about what this school represents. Antioch tends to attract students who want to be more self-directed learners. Students want to be able to do things in their own way, rather than please everyone.”

Does this open cracks and holes, or opportunities? What does it allow them avoid?

Faculty agreed that students can more easily avoid areas unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them in an open curriculum. They expressed concern that students only learn points of view that already support their way of looking at the world and that this leads to a cultural climate on campus that can be repressive of ideas outside those that are already accepted.

One faculty put it this way: “The holes and cracks exist if the standards allow them.”

Another reminded us: “We are relaxing requirements, not relaxing standards. “

There was concern expressed that students do not get the ability to look at frameworks of historical knowledge and events. Another expressed the concern that students do not get enough tools for analyzing the contemporary world around them..

How does advising play a role? How strong is our advising?

Faculty had concerns about the time that will be required in our new curriculum for advising. There was a desire expressed for more formal scheduling of the advising component of the Antioch education in the form of “bookends” on the term in which students and advisors met. There was a desire to see good advising as a stronger part of students and faculty culture.

There was concern about the faculty load with regard to advising. Are 20 advisees too much in the new framework?

Faculty also discussed the amount of informal advising that goes at Antioch all the time.

All agreed that advising needs to be more consciously considered as part of teaching in the new curriculum.

Brown University

Faculty Focus Groups

21 faculty participated – ten senior faculty on Feb. 21; 11 faculty at Brown from 2-5 years on Feb. 28.

Effects of voluntary enrollment in courses

All agreed that, under the open curriculum, students choose most of the courses they take, and all agreed that this creates a much better learning environment than one in which students are taking courses solely to fulfill distribution requirements.

“It’s soul-destroying to have students in your course who do not want to be there.” (A professor who previously taught at a small liberal arts college)

“My previous institution (a large state university) had a number of ‘phony courses’ that fulfilled the distribution requirements; we have few of those here.”

“Required courses at [another Ivy League university] were a joke.”

Even professors who teach “disliked” courses required for particular programs (intro chemistry, statistics, methods courses in social science and humanities disciplines) said that the open curriculum creates a positive learning climate in most of their courses, and even in these required courses, students understand that they are there because they have chosen a particular program.

Advising

Both groups raised this issue at the beginning of the discussion. The faculty were unanimous in their view that advising is the key to success in an open curriculum.

They also felt that advising places significant demands on the faculty who are increasingly pressed for time.

Weaknesses in our advising system:

There are insufficient faculty willing to engage students in an advising relationship.

Faculty do not know enough about other departments to be effective advisors.

Freedom from/for

Faculty agreed that most students use the freedom of the open curriculum to do extraordinary things, while acknowledging that some students do not take full advantage of the flexibility the curriculum offers. Overall, this tradeoff was seen as desirable.

The open curriculum creates a sense of entitlement in students.

“Students don’t feel they need to take prerequisite courses; this is particularly a problem in the social sciences.”

“The open curriculum encourages a culture of dilettantism – some students want a ‘taste’ of research and do not want to commit to a long-term research program.”

Perception

“Some students think that the open curriculum is laissez faire, but Brown has a lot of guidelines and requirements – it is more rigorous, not less, than a curriculum with distribution requirements.”

“Our graduates since 1972 are leaders in our field (computer science). We do produce some lumps, but so does every other school.”

“I have a very difficult time convincing some students to take foreign languages.”

Does the open curriculum require elite students?

There was not a consensus on this question.

“I did well in the structured curriculum of the University of Chicago; I’m not sure I would have had the creativity that Brown’s curriculum requires”.

“Students who decide not to attend Brown because they want a more structured curriculum are probably making a good choice.”

“Brown’s curriculum attracts entrepreneurial students.”

“The students at Brown inspire each other to take risks and study hard. This is one of the most important benefits of the open curriculum.”

Does the open curriculum affect your work?

“It doesn’t affect what I teach, but my courses are more satisfying for me because the students want to be in the courses.”

“I can teach my interests”

“It’s a win/win situation: students take courses they are interested in; professors are encouraged to teach well by the students’ interest in the material.”

“The open curriculum gives students the freedom to work on research with professors – this is a valuable part of their education. Even freshmen feel empowered to approach me to work in my lab.”

Hampshire College

Faculty Discussion on the Open Curriculum

20 February 2006

Present: Steve Weisler, Carol Trosset, and 4 current regular faculty members representing Cognitive Sciences and Social Sciences.

Faculty and student attitudes toward curricular breadth

All faculty members present said that although Hampshire students may tend to be either too broad or too narrow, as advisers they do more broadening (though it may not work) than getting students to focus. A concentration can either mask or cure students’ hyper-focus. A departmental major would fix that by prescribing the desired breadth. Hyper-focus among students is a common advising problem. One person said that when he tells students that a certain subject would be beneficial for their interests, they tend to listen and respond. The fact that they can choose between various flexible paths to do this probably makes them more likely to respond to the advice than if there were only one way to do it.

As an adviser, one person said he can see the difference between students who got a good liberal arts education in high school – in Div 1 they do well across the board. The other students can only do

good work in areas in which they're already interested, balking at the other subjects and doing poorly. These latter students are often highly motivated in their area of interest, but do not have broad intellectual curiosity. In response to hearing of findings at some other colleges, one person said that if science students think that being broadly educated includes all fields, but art students don't think so, or don't value being broadly educated, then this is a problem for our culture. Another suggested that math and science are coming to be viewed as technical skills rather than part of a general education.

On the other hand, some students are too broad. These never get to advanced work in any area, just dabble. Some Div 2s get connected in retrospect rather than having a planned focus – these tend to be marginal students who at most colleges wouldn't do a senior thesis.

Hampshire doesn't truly have an "open curriculum" – it has a distribution requirement for the first year, so that students must take at least one course in each of the five schools. All present agreed that this program was not motivated by any philosophy of education, but rather by the need to get students to complete more courses than they had been doing, and wanting to even out course enrollments across the schools. Some schools (NS and CS) depend on the requirements to recruit enough students for higher-level work. However, there is an institutional tension between having distribution requirements and saying that students who come here can and should study whatever they want. Even NS, which really wanted the requirement, is conflicted; they insist that students must be exposed to the sciences, but dislike teaching the students who don't want to be there.

As noted above, many students arrive at Hampshire strongly focused on a particular interest, and these students may fight against the distribution requirements. Of students in one person's 100-level classes, about \circ are really interested, about Ω take them for distribution and a few of those might become interested, and the other \circ are just curious and some of them might become interested. One person noted that we could do a better job of explaining to students why we require distribution across the schools. It seems likely that many professors do not discuss this with their advisees. Another person suggested that part of the rationale for the distribution requirement is to combat the fact that "learn what you love" makes the problematic assumption that students can love something before they really know what it is.

Two other difficulties (besides student resistance) were noted with the distribution requirements. One person pointed out that NS always worked hard to develop enticing introductory courses. Now that there are requirements, they don't have to do that since students have to enroll in their classes anyway. SS, HACU, and IA don't have recruitment problems and so don't have to think about what courses would attract students. Probably it's better to have to think about it.

Another difficulty appears to lie in the way the schools are defined and the fact that they serve various non-pedagogical purposes. It was noted that the current school organization has many political motivations, and that there are still institutional scars resulting from the reorganization seven years ago. Also, the fact that faculty hiring and reappointments take place by school enhances competition between the schools for resources, which may inhibit pedagogical discussions. One person suggested that a network analysis of which faculty work together on committees would reveal more meaningful aligned clusters of faculty than the schools do.

If there is a philosophy of education underlying the distribution requirement, it has to do with giving students exposure to the "modes of inquiry" that are believed to vary by school. It was suggested that CS and NS seem to have a clear sense of what science consists of, while SS has a more dynamic model which starts with stuff in the world blended with theories and with critiques of those theories, so their mode of inquiry is a bit harder to define. One person claimed that mode of inquiry used

to be taken more seriously as a pedagogy than it is now, and said there is not much difference now between 100 and 200-level courses, which are defined more by where we need to fill seats than by serious thinking about how teaching should work differently at different levels. It was suggested that if the college were clearer about the various modes of inquiry, we could use them instead of the current list of learning goals. The perfect Div 1, one person said, crosses all areas but in subjects that are linked in some way – for example, visual art, psychology of perception, biology of vision – which results in broad exposure and a sense of how the different modes of inquiry contribute to each other.

One person said most Div 2s she sees are interdisciplinary, though they may involve two advisers from different fields who take basically the same approach. Concentrations could be more interdisciplinary if the two advisors really thought differently and used different modes of inquiry so the students had to confront different assumptions more than they do in many cases.

Hampshire's curriculum becomes truly "open" after the first year, at which point students design their own concentrations. There are no college-wide rules defining or guiding what individual students can negotiate with their advisers. There are no departmental majors, and one effect of this is that faculty members almost never talk with each other about what it means to be well-educated or to study a particular topic. In some areas faculty members have found that they were unable to explain to students what it meant to concentrate in that area, and found this unsatisfactory.

This problem is compounded by the tendency of some students to pick one little piece of a topic and not find the other bits of it. Many faculty members want to feel that they are getting students to engage with more than one approach to a subject. They also sometimes find students requesting funding to do a Div 3 project for which they have no preparation. One person noted how odd it is that students can do a focused Div 2 and then do something totally different for Div 3, something for which they have no preparation. This person is starting to refuse to accept such students. One person suggested that the ideal Div 2 structure would be for the student to pick the topic but for the faculty to tell them what they had to study in order to pursue that topic.

Several areas are starting to define models or even impose requirements for what students must study in order to pursue a Div 2 or Div 3 in that area. The areas mentioned as doing this included Culture/Brain/Development, animation, film/photo/video, studio art, and philosophy. Something similar can happen in any area in which faculty members refuse to work with students who don't have adequate preparation, although advisers have more clout doing this if all the professors with a certain expertise agree on what is recommended for students in that area.

What kinds of students are well or badly suited to Hampshire's curricular structure?

Well-suited students were described as highly motivated, independent, and having a passion for something. The best students, people said, need only a small amount of advice. It was noted that some students blossom after arriving, due to having some experience or intellectual exposure that leads them to an intense commitment. Sometimes there's an ordinary student for whom things suddenly really came together – the person who mentioned this finds them more interesting to work with than the brilliant ones who would do well anywhere.

Students not well-suited to Hampshire were described as dependent, unmotivated, and not committed to anything or having any strong interests. The unmotivated students, it was said, really eat faculty time. They come here, people said, because they don't know what they want to do and Hampshire will let them do anything.

Why do faculty members come to Hampshire?

Three said they liked the experimental, inter-disciplinary, counter-cultural nature of the college. One of these had taught elsewhere and two turned down other offers from more traditional institutions.

Two wanted the freedom to teach whatever they wanted; both would not have gone to a traditional department where they had to staff “standard” courses. One wanted a non-traditional departmental structure that would best fit his interests.

None came because of the students having an open curriculum, but at least three came mostly or partly because the curriculum was open for the faculty.

New College

Discussion with Senior Faculty

March 1, 2006

What do you see as Advantages and Disadvantages of the New College curricular approach for Students?

Advantages:

- The kinds of students we attract have a desire to take initiative – there are at least a dozen special program graduates each year.
- Our open curriculum receives a big boost from tutorials where students interested in a sub field can design a really specialized course of study.
- In comparison with Carleton College, our Liberal Arts Core (LAC) is comparable to their distribution requirements, but Carleton doesn't have tutorials and students only specialize while writing the thesis.
- Tutorials add versatility and allow students to work on a faculty member's research and contribute to a publication or presentation.
- Tutorials add depth and variety to curriculum in areas that aren't a specialty of the faculty – at times this is walking a thin line.
- LAC was a good step, prior to LAC it was possible for students to stay in one division and graduate without really having a liberal arts education.
- What sets our students apart is motivation, not ability.
- Students need to discover their own reasons to do great work here.
- Their education is their education (ownership).
- Narrative evaluations are great because they eliminate grades, so students can explore instead of competing with each other for grades and class rank.
- Contract allows students to experience other disciplines without the risk of failing.

Disadvantages:

- Students might benefit from the shared academic experience of core courses.
- As we grow, faculty expect that fewer students will be ready to take advantage of our open curriculum and thesis experience.

- Current high school graduates have not been prepared to work well in this academic program; we need to think strategically about this.
- Many students resist taking full advantage of the open curriculum. They choose three courses they want to take and say nothing else interests them.
- Some students can lose financial aid if they fail classes and have incompletes.

What do you see as Advantages and Disadvantages of the New College curricular approach for Faculty?

Advantages:

- Tutorials allow students to work on a faculty member's research and contribute to a paper.
- We don't have a curriculum committee which is good and adds flexibility but this means it requires more work to develop your own curriculum.
- New classes often emerge out of group tutorials which are developed around student interests.
- Our faculty would need extra incentive to teach traditional Liberal Arts Core Courses.
- One advantage of our lax LAC requirement is that students can put it off until their third and fourth years when they are better integrators and can make richer connections.
- There are no limitations on what faculty choose to teach.
- Many faculty teach one familiar (taught before) class each semester and a second experimental or new class each semester.
- Teaching here is dialogical – what we hear back from students is really important; teaching is not one-way.

Disadvantages:

- It is more work for faculty to advise special program students.
- It is an extra burden on faculty to do tutorials.
- Tutorial system allows some faculty to teach overloads but also allows other faculty to teach 2 classes and have no tutorials with no accountability, no negative consequences.
- A drawback is that sometimes faculty teach something they really are not prepared to teach.
- Faculty members are allowed to teach only their specialty and never broaden or interact which is a downside of the open curriculum.

How much does it matter to you that New College has an open curriculum?

- Open Curriculum is a defining feature of the college. Many students do far more here in four years than they ever expected, and go on to do great things in graduate school.
- Because our students have to make choices and make connections they take more responsibility and are more engaged and emerge as strong students.
- The value of our curriculum is seeing strong students emerge: our 11/1 student faculty ratio allows this to work since this mostly happens when faculty give students individual attention and one-on-one feedback. Students will push the faculty to push them.
- Faculty are willing to take risks and ask questions.
- We can use the contract system to push students to reflect on the process of their education and articulate their next/evolving goals.

- It is rewarding to work with students who have never before had a chance to find personal motivation for their academic work.
- E-mails from graduates one year out from NCF in graduate school give good testimony about how special our academic program is.

Does our curriculum function primarily (a) to allow students to avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid or (b) to enable them to explore areas of interest in more depth than they could in a more defined curriculum?

Most students seek the breadth that is recommended.

Do we provide sufficiently strong advising to enable students to develop a liberal education in the absence of a core curriculum or extensive distribution requirements?

- The open curriculum is time consuming for faculty in terms of advising.
- Mentoring of new faculty needs to be better, they need to be shown the NCF way of relating to/ advising students so that new faculty won't fall back on the way they already know how to teach. Older faculty are retiring and we need a way to pass the torch.
- In our marketing, we need to package the sense of inquiry and experimentation as essential to the NCF experience. Faculty who work well here get this.
- We need to do a better job with mentoring junior faculty on how to be advisors: they have no advisees their first year and then they are hit with as many as 8 their second year.
- Letters of evaluation from Division Chairs do not devote much attention to advising and advisees, and if they did it would make faculty more conscious of the importance of this role.
- Students have proposed evaluating faculty as advisors, but the faculty have nixed this.
- There is not common agreement on what constitutes good advising, some faculty don't think they need to be advising any students who are not seniors in their discipline.
- During the first two years, advising is really important, and if a faculty member doesn't see students in class it is difficult to track them down.
- Many students arrive wanting to limit the scope of their inquiry, but good advising would encourage them to explore more.
- Advising should help students figure out how to sequence their disciplinary classes and fit in their desire to go abroad and study other disciplines.
- Advisors need to make sure the first year is rich in liberal arts experiences and incorporates reflection with advisor on academic goals. A 3-course contract is not sufficient for a rich first year experience.
- AOC requirements may actually be fairly structured and stringent – e.g., Psychology and Art History

Discussion with Junior Faculty Feb. 27, 2006

What do you see as Advantages and Disadvantages of the New College curricular approach for Students?

Advantages

- Allows students to hone in on specific interests, and research experience and depth look good to graduate schools
- Interlocking networks of knowledge occur in the classroom and within each student. Students are capable of this integration on their own, and don't need it to be prescribed by the curriculum.
- Contract allows students to take a stretch class that they might fail without fear of penalties.
- Contract system allows a student to fail a class and take it a second time and pass – this flexibility allows students to succeed.
- Contracts can be structured to allow senior students to drop a class if they need to focus on their thesis in order to graduate.
- Math AOC students can explore Judaic Studies before they have to focus on math.
- To succeed in art, self-initiative is very important, and our students acquire this.

Disadvantages

- At Kenyon, there was a very careful three course sequence to make sure biology students learned the complete scope of biology – our students have “holes” in this scope of knowledge
- SASC (Student Academic Status Committee – academic review) wants a tighter curriculum.
- Some students need more structure and don't do well here, but this should not be used as a reason to further structure the curriculum.
- Some students need more structure and get close to graduating before they realize that they are not prepared to write a thesis and should have chosen a different college.
- Increased vigilance is required for students heading for medical school – they are required to report any incomplete or unsatisfactory classes.

What do you see as Advantages and Disadvantages of the New College curricular approach for Faculty?

Advantages

- Faculty benefit by being able to do an “exploration” course: students are interested in a topic and faculty constructed a class combining her strengths and their interest.
- Faculty benefit by having the freedom to teach non-standard experimental classes – they may teach one standard class for the discipline and can experiment with other classes. At other colleges, would have the chance to teach an experimental class once every 3 years.
- Faculty can teach introductory classes in flexible ways that build on their personal strengths and are fun.
- Teaching the same two classes with a prescribed textbook all the time would be boring.
- Faculty benefit from group tutorials – they choose a book they want to read and reading it with students enriches their scholarship – better than reading the book alone.
- Faculty use tutorials to teach students how to use a new piece of analytical equipment, this is more enjoyable than learning how to use it themselves.
- Faculty don't have to worry about stepping on the toes of other faculty if they include related disciplines in their teaching, able to include literature and philosophy when teaching history.
- In some courses, Faculty may choose which students can enroll in their classes

Disadvantages

- Faculty suffer because it is hard to create new classes – requires a lot of work.
- Art faculty have to combine the content of 3 or 4 classes into one class to prepare art students for creative work.
- Faculty find it hard to teach classes with mixed levels of students' preparation and ability.
- Some lack of clear coordination among disciplines.
- Faculty dislike capping classes on the first day of class, and pre-registration would help, but that may not work with the open curriculum.
- Junior faculty feel pressure not to cap LAC classes - concerned this could affect tenure.
- Faculty need to teach more introductory classes, but this means that they will be able to teach fewer classes of their own choosing.
- Senior faculty tend to cap classes and junior faculty are told not to cap classes, so students flow toward junior faculty.
- Curricular changes happen here in a disorganized way.

How much does it matter to you that New College has an open curriculum?

- Our students are more independent, stronger, more self-confident when they graduate compared to when they arrive.
- Our students are able to frame questions for papers and figure out what they want to know.
- We push students to find the spark that drives them and then we watch them take off.
- Our students have responsibility for their choices, autonomy, at an earlier point in college than students at other colleges.
- We get bright students who would rest on their laurels at other places and we push them to do more and better work.

Does our curriculum function primarily (a) to allow students to avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid or (b) to enable them to explore areas of interest in more depth than they could in a more defined curriculum?

There was a strong consensus that few students actively avoid courses; most comments centered on exploration of areas of interest.

Do we provide sufficiently strong advising to enable students to develop a liberal education in the absence of a core curriculum or extensive distribution requirements?

- We need to help students earlier in their career, providing hand-holding and structure
- Students need to be pushed to ask themselves what they want to learn here, they need goals beyond a “satisfactory” on the current contract.
- Faculty here are not formally trained to be advisors, especially to help students realize they don't belong here.
- It is difficult for new faculty to figure out which deadlines are hard and which deadlines are soft, and this affects their ability to advise students.
- When faculty are assigned advisees who are not in any of their classes, it is hard to maintain contact with them.

- It's difficult to keep track of Liberal Arts Curriculum requirements for each student.
- Faculty need to advise students to have balanced contracts – taking four classes each of which requires extensive reading and a long research paper is nuts. There should be a mix of reading/writing classes and language, discussion and lab classes.
- Biology students don't want to take calculus and physics, but need to be advised (pushed) to take these classes if they want to go to graduate school.
- Advising should nurture students and help them follow their heart and passion to discover what excites them – this leads to subjects to study.

Sarah Lawrence

Faculty Focus Group

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of (our school's) curriculum? For faculty? For students?

To me, the advantage of the open curriculum to faculty is this, and it's extraordinary: the autonomy to offer courses in your areas of interest, and to develop new ones as your interests change. This absolutely is the pearl of great price for a faculty whose teaching load is so intensive that time for their own research is limited. Obviously, students also benefit by the faculty's curricular autonomy, since they are taught by teachers who can remain engaged and delighted by what they teach. The other advantage to students is that it fosters their autonomy, since they ultimately choose every course they take, and must give thought to both the desirability of any single course and the larger shape of their four-year program.

I see the disadvantage of the open curriculum to faculty as rather an abstract one than a personal one: it can allow the college's curriculum as a whole (or even the curriculum of any given discipline) to take a haphazard form, unshaped by any rhyme or reason. And this shapelessness can get amplified for students, since one of the most important things you come to college to learn is "what does it mean, what can it mean, to be well-educated?" But note that this is by no means a necessary disadvantage; nothing stops faculty from discussing, at a number of levels, and then implementing some shaping ideas—nothing except other faculty, of course. And care ought to be taken to have those discussions in ways that permit them to be meaningful. There is perhaps one other minor disadvantage to students of an open curriculum. When I was an undergraduate I learned a lot about what English literature (my major) comprised—historical periods, major authors, genres, etc.—just by reading the course catalogue. The requirements of the major of course extended and deepened that understanding, and I'm personally grateful for my experience. Something similar can be done at SLC, but it takes a disciplined student and a cunning use of conference work; and even in relatively large areas of the curriculum, such as psychology or literature, it may be impossible to study certain subjects. However, this is partly an artifact of the open curriculum, partly of the small size of the college.

Literature Faculty

I appreciate the ways that students and faculty contextualize material (both through conference work, and within the course work itself) quite broadly. Students in an Anthropology course and a graduate student in Dance use the same text for research, for example. In a time when "experts" are coming under suspicion as myopic and missing the forest for the trees, it's especially important to train students and allow ourselves to think with a wider focus.

It's a problem that the visual arts have no component courses – students who wish to blur the edges of creative disciplines aren't able to do that with visual arts in the ways they can with Dance, Music and Theater. It's a challenge with the 3 course system for pre-meds to take either component courses or languages.

Dance Faculty

Faculty can develop course to their interests and not be stale. Students choices can be challenging to faculty but in turn make teaching more interesting. After all, how boring is it to teach the same course year in year out. Resource/library wise, this curriculum is much harder to support.

Library Staff Member

Advantages:

Flexibility of offerings: especially latitude to organize courses according to themes, e.g. constellations of intellectual interests and historical development, instead of according to ready-made disciplinary or curricular requirements.

Rigor of course development: not simply pigeon-holed and therefore forced to think creatively and rigorously about what constellation of themes and interests it makes sense to combine in a course. Contribution to an institutional intellectual culture that takes ideas and learning very seriously: not just going through the motions of fulfilling requirements; each course is chosen by students on its merits with the expectation of learning something new and important.

Disadvantages:

Lack of progression (can be compensated for internal to the course up to a point) Lack of a common intellectual culture or biography, i.e. teachers don't know what to expect students have read, and students can orient each other according to the standard stages of moving through a discipline.

Political Science Faculty

The advantages of studying and teaching at a college such as ours is that for both students and teachers there is the opportunity to pursue one's intellectual interests in depth at all levels. °Students are invested in the curriculum from the beginning because they choose their courses and so they come to class eager to engage in the work. They do not have to wait until they are seniors to do the work they "really" want to do. °In the same way, junior teachers are not compelled to teach "introductory" courses but create courses based on their interests. °Tutorials provide the most intense opportunity for faculty and students to share their passion for a particular subject. °While the faculty members provide guidance, stimulation and a sounding board, a student's research may, if somewhat tangential to the teacher's, present opportunities for enrichment for the latter. °

The disadvantage is that without proper guidance a student's program might be incoherent. °But most students know why they are choosing a college with an open curriculum and are eager to navigate it in their own way.

Dance Faculty

In general terms, when SLC courses are designed and delivered as originally intended, they all have the advantage of combining a broad approach with a depth of focus via the conference system. Intellectually rich broad approaches are in fact harder and harder to come by in universities, because of increasing specialization, and as for depth of focus, as an SLC faculty member says, it matters less

what you study than it matters that you learn to attend to something carefully, and our courses are supposed to allow every student the chance to attend carefully to serious things. When considering the curriculum in terms of what it is possible to study, we should remember that this is not so obvious, when one is simply looking at a list of course titles and course descriptions, because the conference system's riches will always be invisible when the curriculum viewed via the catalog. For example, one faculty member sometimes teaches Portuguese in conference, another Chinese, a third has on one occasion taught Georgian. I once taught the Icelandic Edda in conference, until an SLC faculty member, who was much more competent to do so, relieved me of the duty—and a knowledge of Icelandic sagas is not what one normally expects of Hispanicists. None of these possibilities will be visible in the catalog. Such riches are also perishable—they depend on recruiting and retaining a faculty capable of willingly and competently teaching many different things (this need is decreasingly likely to be readily met, given the tendency of modern graduate education). The disadvantage of this curriculum for the student is that when it is not delivered by people who are energetic and broadly educated, topics not covered by a small faculty will be unobtainable, and many things some of us can teach will not be taught to particular students limited by a 3 course load. This system, where much coverage is achieved via the conference system, is potentially very hard on faculty, who add to a relatively large number of contact hours a startlingly large number of preparations. For the teacher, the curriculum is satisfying if learning and teaching a broad number of things happens to be stimulating, and for some teachers it is indeed exhilarating. For the student, the advantage is learning one on one, from full time regular faculty, or in very small groups taught by those same people, which is increasingly rare in American universities; the disadvantage consists in the student not knowing how competent her instruction outside of recent professional specialization is likely to be. If the ad hocs (i.e. search committees) and Advisory (hiring committee) do their job, the student can rest easy about that. Small disciplinary groups will either have to be composed of people who have very different professional approaches to their field, or who feel responsible for transmitting approaches to their subjects to which they do not necessarily subscribe; if they do not do that, a small disciplinary group will not offer a suitably broad curriculum within given disciplines. Again, if the ad hocs and Advisory do their job, the student can rest easy about that, as well. In this respect, I think we indeed have something to worry about. In certain disciplines, I suspect we do not have enough heretics, or a sufficiently broad representation of views, or enough people who conscientiously attempt to give a fair account of approaches other than their own. This can happen anywhere, and it does, but it can happen more easily with a very small faculty. So the size of the faculty, coupled to commitments to the politicization of teaching, can have a perverse synergy with respect to our curriculum. But done right, our education remains remarkably effective.

Literature Faculty

Advantages and disadvantages of the curriculum

For students:

Advantages include opportunities to do genuinely original work in conference and to carry such projects from one course into another—perhaps in another discipline. For example, a senior once entered my southwest seminar with a few short stories produced in a writing course and parlayed them into a novel about California's Owens Valley.

The biggest disadvantage for students—those in the liberal arts anyway—is that, absent departments and majors and sequenced courses, it can be difficult to connect with other students who share one's intellectual passions.

For faculty:

Advantages include the opportunities to explore new areas or deepen thinking about longtime interests or teach courses that articulate closely with one's research and writing.

Disadvantages include lack of student preparation for some advanced seminars and the difficulties of designing a course suitable for everyone from first years to seniors.

The advantages and disadvantages of SLC's curriculum are similar, and similar for students and faculty. The openness of the curriculum allows students and faculty significant latitude in terms of courses taken and courses taught. Even more than the content of the curriculum, that students take only three courses, that courses can be year-long, and that they include a conference component, all shape the distinctiveness of the curriculum. From the perspective of this teacher that means that every course can be more substantial, and that there is more room for experimentation in terms of method as well as content.

Literature Faculty

A crucial point that doesn't quite fit this question but ought to be considered: Precisely because the faculty is free to teach what we think best, we really need to think about what is best—i.e., most needed by the students. We have more freedom than professors at most other schools, and by that same token we carry more responsibility.

History Faculty

How much does it matter to you that (our school) has an open curriculum?

The autonomy to teach what I want is crucially important to me; I'd be very unhappy with all the contact hours I have if I weren't teaching material that's important to me. Not to say I'm not happy to take into consideration the needs of the rest of the curriculum and have the appropriate discussions with my colleagues. It isn't crucially important to me as a principle that students be free to take absolutely anything they want. But I would want to proceed with extreme caution in any discussion of instituting requirements. I would rather err on the side of openness; once you begin considering requirements, it's hard to avoid the faddish and the finicking.

Literature Faculty

Very much. I think in this time it's especially important for students to understand how skills in one discipline apply and/or morph into those of another.

Dance Faculty

It is one of the factors that separate us from our peers.

Library Director

Matters hugely. Breaths intellectual life into the faculty and college as a whole because we remain generalists, alive to new possibilities for thinking our subject matters, autonomous with regards to our offerings, etc.

Political Science Faculty

It matters a great deal to me that this is an open curriculum because the students are invested in what they do and it makes it very easy to teach them. They meet you more than half way. °

Dance Faculty

An open curriculum: If this means no requirements beyond broad distributional ones, and little of a tiered hierarchy of courses, it matters a great deal to me. I was educated here, and my education is one of the few things I am proud of.

Literature Faculty

Most of the classes I teach would not fit comfortably within a more tidily organized discipline based curriculum. Consequently, I am in favor of an open curriculum.

Literature Faculty

How much does the open curriculum matter to me? Really, I'd say it's the best thing about teaching here. The work can be exhausting—more so every year, it seems (I blame email)—but it's intellectually engaging because we can teach about what we care about. Most of us would be miserable if we had to teach the same things year in and year out. Also, there's the issue of craft pride. We work hard at being good teachers, and we're proud of what we accomplish. We'd detest being ordered to teach this or that.

History Faculty

Does our curriculum function primarily to allow students to avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid, or to enable students to explore areas of interest to them in more depth than they could in a more defined curriculum?

I think by and large our students use the open curriculum responsibly. Only a few of my donees have heaved a sigh of relief at not having to take something (and it's not always math and science they're avoiding). But why shouldn't students "avoid taking courses in areas they wish to avoid"? Is the assumption that if you don't like it, it must be good for you? Of course, students aren't always able to know in advance what they will like or what might profit them. On the other hand, coercion doesn't always educate the palate; sometimes (I speak from youthful experience) it just leaves a nasty taste in your mouth.

Literature Faculty

I think for most the latter is true. There will always be some who abuse the system.

Dance Faculty

I do not believe that this is the case. I think students work harder and are more motivated if they find a subject they love and want to spend time working on. Students can find ways to goof off and enroll in "rocks for jocks" classes anywhere. This is not why they come to SLC.

Library Staff Member

This question is written by someone who doesn't teach at an open curriculum institution, i.e. it reflects the mindset that requirements force students to take courses they would rather avoid. The open curriculum institution doesn't face this problem, so the first half of the binary isn't an issue; at least not once the students are here.

Political Science Faculty

I do not think that very many students choose this kind of curriculum to avoid particular disciplines, but rather because they have a clear sense of what it is they want to study. There may be some who are “avoiding,” certainly not many.

Dance Faculty

It functions in both ways. Exploration in greater depth is a function of the conference system—the 3 course load cannot do that without a vital conference component. We do allow some students to avoid many subjects, but that seems to be a trend in American higher education.

Literature Faculty

Whether the structure of the curriculum allows students to avoid courses they do not want to take, or to explore the subjects they favor in more depth, surely depends on the individual student. People seeking to minimize the effort that goes into their education can do that in any system. It is perhaps harder to work in depth on a particular subject, within the overall structure of undergraduate education in the United States. That is probably easier here than at most colleges.

Literature Faculty

Hmmmm. I’d say that the brainier students use it the latter way, and the not so brainy—or not so serious—students especially like that they can avoid what they wish to avoid. If things work as they should, students who come to SLC not so brainy or not so serious change over the course of their time here. In fact, I’ve seen that happen quite a bit.

History Faculty

Do we provide sufficiently strong advising to develop a liberal education in the absence of a core curriculum or distribution requirements?

Ideally, the donning system does provide sufficiently strong advising. But I worry about its erosion in two ways. First, I don’t feel I have enough time during registration to do the kind of work I’d like to with my donees because too much of it is spent on registration interviews, which are reaching an all-time low of inutility. But I digress. Second, a small but growing proportion of dons seems to me inadequately prepared to do the kind of advising our open curriculum needs. They’re part-time, not connected to the core of the curriculum or to colleagues outside their discipline (particularly if they’re in theater or writing, pardon my frankness); sometimes they’re not on campus when they should be during registration; and they don’t understand the intellectual task of helping a student plan a four-year program. Both of these erosions are directly related to the increased size of the student body.

Literature Faculty

This has been more difficult as the college has expanded. One of the key ways that curricular donning worked was that faculty knew one another, knew how a particular teacher’s work might enrich or contrast with a student’s program. I do think that Barbara’s guidelines for FYS teachers bear repeating over and over, even for dons of older students.

Dance Faculty

I think the donning system is so important to the success of our curricular approach. This is the one area in which I feel much more attention needs to be paid.

Library Director

When the donning/advising system works well, yes or at least mainly (because there's only so far you can go in guiding a student into a balanced course of study). When it doesn't, no.

Political Science Faculty

I think that the donning system is set up to advise students appropriately but it is not understood and/or practiced as fully as it might have been when the college was smaller. After the first year there is little contact between dons and donees except at registration which is a particularly stressful time. There is not enough time then to properly discuss a student's program. °Contact between don and donee should be on-going throughout the four years. °

Dance Faculty

We do have an ethos—or we did—where the don encouraged students to take intellectual and curricular risks. That may still be a living part of our culture, but looking at the dons of students in my lecture courses, the same names tend to recur, and I worry that we are breaking down into sub-Colleges, where people feed one another their students, and perhaps discourage them from going off their imagined patch. We also have, or had, an ethos in which the performing and studio arts were taken seriously as suitable portions of a liberal arts education. I am not sure about the health of this ethos. But our ideals, and our former practices, did (often) effectively address this aim. We were perhaps less successful in the sciences than in other areas. Now, when those ideals and practices may be fading a bit, we are nonetheless getting more students who are less fearful about the sciences. This may be a result of a very effective Admissions staff, as well as of an investment in the sciences (more and younger faculty). Factionalization, politicization and a certain lack of intellectual diversity do not make this potential problem any easier.

Literature Faculty

The advising we provide depends in the end on the person doing the advising, given the individuality of the donning structure. Perhaps because I am not an American, and therefore never received one, I am never sure what is meant by a “liberal education”?

Literature Faculty

There is a difference between “liberal education” in the usual sense of that term and the “education in the singular” that we not only endorse (as do many schools) but also actually practice (a rarity). Our system calls for individual curricular planning based on students' interests, goals, and needs, not some external, universal standard. To me, this is a good thing. That said, however, I do think the quality of donning varies widely insofar as educational planning is concerned. One possible remedy would be to alter the registration schedule to leave ample time for donning conferences—e.g., a full day without any course interviews. Also, we could institute some sort of tradition in which students have to write a justification for their educational plan for the coming term and file it along with their registration papers.

History Faculty

Smith College

Faculty Discussion

March 6, 2006

Participants

Sixteen faculty members (representing all three divisions and all ranks) participated in this dinner discussion which was led by Maureen Mahoney and Debbie Cottrell. An assistant took notes. Ten full professors, one associate professor, four assistant professors, and one senior lecturer participated. Six of the faculty members came from the Humanities, five from Social Sciences, and five from natural sciences.

Overall Summary

This discussion demonstrated the ambivalence among Smith faculty about the open curriculum, though there was agreement that the advantages are greater for faculty than students. Currently, Smith students seem more open than faculty to a move to a core curriculum or at least some requirements. There was consensus that Smith needs to address quantitative learning in a more effective way. The Latin Honors system does not address the concerns raised by lack of requirements. Advising is not as effective as desired, though the extent to which this is more acute because of the open curriculum was not articulated. Even with a lack of passion for the open curriculum, few in this group anticipated agreement from the faculty on what should or could replace it. At the same time, the group indicated a sense that this discussion was productive and useful as a means of reflecting on the Smith curriculum and the current teaching environment.

Summary Points

- Few at the meeting were familiar with Smith's history regarding the open curriculum so some time was spent explaining the shift from the previous distribution requirements (stipulating that 16 of a student's 40 courses be applied to the required distribution areas), to an experimental open curriculum in the late 1960s (connected in part to concerns that high school Advanced Placement courses might cause better students to be bored by required courses), to a lack of consensus for what should replace that when the experiment ended (thus, the open curriculum remained by default).
- Today, the advantage of the open curriculum for faculty is that they do not have "prisoners" in their courses.
- There is some sense that students come to Smith because of the open curriculum, though also a sense that this could be explored and understood better.
- There is some sense that the open curriculum allows students to avoid courses (especially in math and science), though the Latin Honors program offsets that somewhat.
- The issue of choice is an advantage for students in the open curriculum, and this seems to serve our strongest students particularly well. In science, for example, it can allow a student to move right into a research project. For weaker students, it probably allows more avoidance and also reinforces a consumer-oriented, narrow, single-minded approach to their college experience. We want to believe we can offset that with good advising, though clearly many students are making choices connected to concerns about their GPAs. Faculty commented on the "paradox of choice" and the extent to which choice is not being used as we would want, but rather being used to close down fields.
- At least one person noted that it may be that the open curriculum serves students in the middle better than students on the extreme ends (of academic strength/weakness).

- Several comments were made suggesting criticisms of the open curriculum:
 - It was suggested that it could be useful to think about requirements for the first two years, with the last two years used for trying different divisions.
 - The lack of requirements suggests that we can't agree on what women of the 21st century need to know.
 - It would be easier to be enthusiastic about the open curriculum if more students were strong in basic skills.
 - The open curriculum may represent an inability to put something back together; no one was aware of any open curriculum schools that had reached consensus to return to a core curriculum.
 - The open curriculum appeals to faculty more than it helps students.
 - Multiple cores might be workable, with quantitative requirements included in all of them.
- Currently, students seem less resistant to some kind of quantitative requirement than our faculty are. One group of students has put forward a proposal to imbed quantitative requirements within majors. At the same time, SGA has stated they do not support a quantitative requirement or a core curriculum. One academic department has recently indicated to the Provost that quantitative skills are not relevant for their majors. Some students have also asked for a core curriculum.
- Students who do best by the open curriculum are curious, unafraid of risk, confident, and not concerned with structure.
- High school preparation today is an issue in the open curriculum, as it is difficult to address the wide array of needs students bring. This issue is connected to selectivity rate, which may explain why the open curriculum is more ingrained at Brown than Smith.
- There is some concern that when students take a course because of a requirement, departments may feel obligated to formulate their courses differently.
- Several faculty in this group did not know Smith had an open curriculum when they were hired; others knew and found (and continue to find) it very appealing.
- The Latin Honors system received mixed reviews. Some noted a desire from students to have a transcript notation when they complete the seven areas, if they don't receive Latin Honors. Others noted the Latin Honors program offers no cohesion.
- Advising is uneven. We may want to consider the first-year seminar instructor-as-advisor model further, as it allows a basis for forming a relationship. There is much to counter and overcome in advising (students in house, parents, advisor's reflection of own experience, etc.). There is also a sense that without the College as a whole providing advice about the curriculum, it is difficult to help students determine the best package of classes. This has led some departments to create tracks within their majors. In addition, there is a sense that students need to be educated about what it means to be a good advisee. Our satisfaction rate in advising has improved in the last ten years, to about 75%.
- Science students are more open to courses in other divisions than is true in reverse, even though there are many science courses for non-majors.
- Foreign language avoidance is an increasing concern, though there was not consensus in this group for a requirement.

- Have a writing requirement but no quantitative requirement is seen as problematic, sending an inappropriate message to young women. When we instituted the writing requirement, we expected student resistance but got very little. We also know that some students at Smith report losing math skills after they get here because they are not required to continue and build on what they learned in high school. Other Smith students who do take math choose to do so in summer school, at other institutions, so they can focus better.
- At some level, the open curriculum sends the message that the student is in charge of her education and that we are confident she is mature enough to make appropriate choices. Sometimes this works, and other times students make decisions that are not good or rational.
- Other areas that connect to the open curriculum were noted: honor code, high percentage (19%) of first-generation college students, and the current dissatisfaction rate among our students regarding opportunities to be involved in research with a faculty member (the latter having several contradictory components: 61% of students do have opportunity to do research with faculty, yet overall students are discouraged from doing Honors theses, and there are no required capstone courses).

Wesleyan University

Faculty Discussion Groups

On February 27 and March 1, we conducted two faculty discussion groups as a part of the Teagle Foundation Project on the “Values of the Open Curriculum.” A total of 19 faculty participated from across the divisions at Wesleyan. The participants were both junior and senior faculty, although a higher percentage of senior faculty participated. Our notes will comment if relevant differences came up across divisions or by seniority.

Overall, there was strong sentiment in support of the open aspects of Wesleyan’s curriculum. Among the senior faculty participants, there was also a general understanding of how Wesleyan’s faculty dropped all requirements outside of the major in the late 60’s, added general education “expectations” in the late 70’s, and is unlikely to come to a consensus that requirements should be added back.

Faculty. Faculty participants see great advantage to Wesleyan’s curriculum for their teaching. They find that students are far more motivated because they have picked a course. Some had experience at other institutions or with required courses in the major at Wesleyan and thus commented on the difficulties of teaching students who feel compelled to take their course.

There was some discussion that without requirements, students vary in their level of preparedness and background for a course which, in turn, is a challenge for the faculty. There was also discussion that having requirements would present an unwanted burden on service departments such as foreign languages and mathematics.

Faculty participants also enjoy the freedom that they have to select and design courses without the constraints that come with requirements. In today’s world of specialization into sub-disciplines, the faculty participants feel better prepared to teach courses of their own design. As a matter of fact, the junior faculty participants recalled that this was a factor that they were aware of when they were offered a position at Wesleyan. They were not directly aware of the open curriculum, but they were made aware of the freedom in their teaching assignments.

Students. When asked, the faculty participants are clear that they like the student culture at Wesleyan. They believe that the student body is a self-selected group of students who are, at least in part, attracted by the open curriculum. While very happy with the student body, the faculty participants are unhappy that students choose not to take science.

There was discussion about a “culture of satisfaction.” Students believe they should be able to pick and choose what they want to learn. The faculty participants believe that it is good for students to do things that they don’t want to do. It was suggested that it is the obligation of the faculty to “push” students to take subjects that they are avoiding.

Advising. Advising dominated the discussion on both nights. The faculty participants see it as a welcome challenge, although we acknowledged in our conversation that the faculty who volunteered to participate in these discussions do not represent all faculty. There was concern that some (or perhaps all) students are not mature enough to make good choices.

One part of the discussion focused on how to advise a student who does not have any idea of what to take. The key to working with students like this is to present options and not make decisions for them. As for the students who are certain about what they want to take, the suggestion was that the advisor has to “seduce” them into taking interest in other areas.

Working with advisees who don’t know what they want or those who are certain that they know requires time, so a low ratio of students to advisors is critical. The discussion also talked about the challenges of being a first-time advisor (at Wesleyan, this happens in the second year). Finally, it was noted that pre-major advising is a good way to understand Wesleyan’s students in a way that does not come out in the classroom.

Suggestions. Some ideas came up that merit consideration at Wesleyan and could be relevant to other schools.

Interestingly, in what was largely a positive discussion of the open curriculum, the question was posed about adding requirements. Writing was seen as critical and there was some interest in Brown’s approach on this. Information literacy was discussed as another possible requirement, but no one was sure of how to define it and all were sure that making it a requirement was next to impossible at Wesleyan.

Other ideas included mentoring first-time advisors, incorporating more about the liberal arts into new student orientation, instituting a peer advising system (something that is planned already for Fall ’06), and requiring students to write a self-reflective essay when they select their major at the end of their sophomore year.

