

Boundary Conditions and Obdurate “Realities” Affecting All Prospective Curriculum Models

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As bold and hopeful as it is, the USP External Review Committee final report is grounded in an important insight or understanding that will influence and constrain any working curriculum models that get proposed in the summer implementation planning and fall and spring implementation phases of the General Education Reform and Assessment initiative. That recognition is that whatever gets proposed must take into account institutional interests built into the University Studies Program and certain organizational and planning realities inhabiting this University. As I have reflected upon the tenor and substance of the College and other constituency forums and looked over my shoulder at the imposing structure of USP, I have not only trimmed my expectations about what this initiative can accomplish, but also tried to stare in the face some of those boundary conditions and obdurate realities will must be taken into account in the design of any new or revised general education curriculum.

Since I believe that this summer’s work on implementation planning can best contribute to the hard and dedicated work of implementation in the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2006-07 academic year by alerting us all by balancing aspiration and reality, I would like to outline a tentative list of those conditions and realities that are likely to delimit our freedom of action. I recognize that this list will not be exhaustive and will no doubt be supplemented by others that will emerge from future discussions and become manifest as we and others walk the road from model-building to implementation. Here is my first stab:

--Accreditation Issues and Imperatives: In the Nursing and Health Sciences Forums, we heard concern expressed that any new general education curriculum be designed with course requirements that are part of the accreditation process of one college or another. Assuming we invited the full complement of associate deans or college committee chairs involved in curriculum matters to the summer workshop, we will have a critical mass of knowledgeable faculty administrators who can disclose specific courses that will need to be folded into any general education curriculum model generated by various parties involved in this exercise. Different college and professional program curricula will likely present different courses that accrediting organizations regard as essential to their students even though these courses are not taught in those Colleges or professional programs.

--Growth Assumptions of the Top 20 Business Plan: For better or worse, the University Top 20 Business Plan is a imposing fact of life that is now being touted in Frankfort, being implemented by the University Committee on Academic Planning and Priorities (UCAPP), and integrated into the University budgeting. A central component is the implicit idea that “bigger is better” and the explicit targeted goal of ramping up undergraduate enrollment by admitting 6500-7000 students into the freshman class each year by 2020. While the plan also calls for frontloading faculty before each step-level

jump in first-year undergraduate enrollment and improving the faculty-student ratio as a measure of Undergraduate Education quality, the floodtide of new students is likely to add further stress and strain on the teaching of undergraduate education and challenge faculty members, departments, and colleges to come up with creative ways to accommodate this influx while striving to improve the quality of teaching.

--Daunting Pedagogical Challenges and Realities: What the preceding suggests is that faculty will need to think anew about the delivery of quality undergraduate education in their discipline or program in a context marked by larger class enrollments. The propensity to opt for larger lecture classes with accompanying recitation or discussion or lab sections will be seen as compelling to many departments and programs that hitherto have been able to deal with more easily manageable class enrollments and more varied pedagogical approaches to providing disciplinary education. Surely, greater need for faculty teaching development (i.e., short-course and summer workshops on new educational software and hardware, etc.), academic support, and teaching technology will be crucial to the successful transition to these new classroom realities. There may also be a need to rethink the virtues and shortcomings of the mix of departmental and program hiring of PTIs, lecturers, special title series and regular title series faculty, as well as revisit the issue of TA allocation.

--Phased Implementation of Any New Curriculum Structure and Curriculum Objective Framework: Undertaking the shift from one general education program to another necessitates developing a schedule that involves recognition of the need for a gradual, phased implementation strategy rather than a radical light-switch one. As I think about the process of moving toward a new general education curriculum, I become more conscious of the value of both a longer implementation policy and a gradual introduction of the requirements comprising that new curriculum. Higher education faculty members as a species are conservative in their attitude toward curricular change. Not everything can be put in place in one fell swoop nor can we reasonably hope that all of which we aspire to put in place in any new or revised curriculum can be implemented on a set date. My watchword for this initiative is “evolution in permanence,” in the sense that even after a basic curriculum structure is put in place it will take time and effort to bring along faculty and departments to achieve deep integration of the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes of the curriculum program into courses and pedagogical and advising practice. The program and student assessment piece of any general education reform will entail annual faculty and departmental development opportunities to better realize the potential of the new curriculum and infuse its overriding mission into the courses comprising the overall program.

--The Mission as Anchor and Touchstone: The USP External Review Committee has made it clear in its report that considers the task of meeting the challenges and demands of life in the 21st century the central mission of its revised curriculum objectives and learning outcomes framework. Any curriculum models entertained over the summer and shaping work in the formal implementation phase must seek to find ways to enrich the new courses designed for the new curriculum or any migrating from USP so that they weave into their teaching and substance themes and perspectives dovetailing with new

curriculum's overriding mission. If, as I hope, a decision is made to identify any new general education program with the term, Twenty-first Century Studies (TCS), a dedicated and self-conscious effort in the curriculum planning stage to bring significant integration to the program through its various elements is essential. While I hesitate to call TCS the program's brand, I believe that we must work to assure that the mission and curriculum objectives are clearly associated in the minds of students, instructors, advisors, and administrators with the central meaning of TCS. Twenty-first Century Studies then becomes a symbolic condensation of the program's mission, objectives, and outcomes.

--Remediation as a Kentucky Educational Fact of Life: In several forums, we heard faculty emphasize that curriculum planning at the Commonwealth's flagship institution must be guided by recognition of the state and progress of the state primary and secondary public education system. Curriculum planning at UK in isolation from awareness of the quality and status of public education at primary and second schools in Kentucky can doom that enterprise to folly or failure. Likewise, even after a new general education program is institutionalized, it will be incumbent upon those administering UK's general education-- and more broadly undergraduate--program to seek to coordinate with curriculum planning at the primary and second levels of public education in Kentucky. For the foreseeable future, this obdurate reality means that any curriculum model proposed must incorporate the need for remediating in different areas a significant percentage of students in one fashion or another. More inventive ways of doing so than cluttering the curriculum with formal courses may be found in the best practices of other colleges and universities that have faced up to this task in other states. But it is evident that UK cannot get out of the business of offering such means—including formal coursework that drains resources and slows progress toward graduation.

--General Education Compatibility with other Kentucky Public Institutions and the Necessity of Transfer Agreements: The Council for Postsecondary Education's (CPE's) dual role of advocate for and regulator of postsecondary education in the Commonwealth has been variously analyzed and oftentimes greatly bemoaned. Over the past few years, it has championed transfer agreements to ease the move of Kentucky citizens in particular from community colleges to four-year state educational institutions like UK. Curriculum revision of this University's general education program must bear in mind that CPE will look long and hard at any new program and press vigorously for transfer agreements that allow smooth transition and easy acceptance of general education credits from Kentucky community colleges to UK. This University and its staff have approached the task of negotiating transfer agreements in a spirit of cooperation and goodwill. Similarly, those involved in shaping any new general education curriculum must also recognize that CPE will seek a cooperative attitude in approach such transfer agreements under such a new curricular regime.