Rethinking College

The current review of Harvard’s undergraduate curriculum has become the widest imaginable inquiry into teaching and learning at the College. Indeed, so many ideas were aired during two discussions late in the fall semester that the chief issue now may be assembling a coherent program. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) is expected to receive further reports and perhaps recommendations this spring. It would debate enabling legislation in the next academic year.

To move the process along, Harvard College dean Benedict H. Gross in early January designated Jeffrey Wolcowitz as the senior administrator responsible full time for managing the curriculum review. As an associate dean, he had been responsible for undergraduate-education matters ranging from expository writing and the Core program to freshman seminars and the instructional budget.

At its meeting on December 16, the faculty reviewed an interim report on the curriculum initiative released by FAS dean William C. Kirby and Gross (available under the “What’s New” tab at www.fas.harvard.edu/curriculum-review/).

Kirby sounded four broad themes:
- internationalization, and the preparation of “citizens of the world”;
- improved scientific education, including student research experiences;
- the creation of small “communities of learning” between students and faculty members, and
- greater undergraduate access to the professional schools, whose professors are increasingly trained in arts and sciences disciplines.

Moving toward putting some flesh on those bones, Gross then introduced a co-chair from each of the curriculum review’s working groups. The purposes of their briefing and of the interim report, he emphasized, were informational.

Speaking for the task force on students’ overall academic experience, Lisa L. Martin broached the notion of better integrating extracurricular and academic activities—not by conferring credit on extracurriculars, but by creating more arts courses and by weaving performance and community service into courses when pertinent. Martin, who is Dillon professor of international affairs (and a director of this magazine), also spoke of making a significant international experience an expected part of College life (although not of making degrees contingent on a semester abroad, a summer job placement, language immersion, or research overseas). That holds major implications for financial aid. For freshman, she said, the working group seeks more flexibility in fulfilling language and writing requirements, guaranteed access to small classes, and much-improved academic advising (less than one-quarter of first-year advisers are faculty members)—all to encourage intellectual exploration.

Jones professor of American studies Lizabeth Cohen reported for the pedagogy group, which is interested in students’ writing experiences during all four College years (not just in the required freshman course), and in the sciences. Much effort is being devoted to ways to identify instructional and learning “best practices,” to institute regular evaluation, and to disseminate the results to professors and students alike. Greater emphasis is likely on engaging students in research from their first year, and on using information technology better. In step with the University review of the academic calendar (see “Calendrical Coup?” November-December 2003, page 62), the committee is considering a “4-1-4” schedule with a January intersession designed for...
“intense experiences” in laboratories, language, study abroad, or artistic performance (and for seniors, time to write theses or look for a job).

Turning to content, Emery professor of chemistry Eric N. Jacobsen reported on options for general education. That working group has examined four models:
- free choice (students design their own course of study, as at Brown);
- a common core (typically of recognized great works, as at Columbia);
- “open” distribution requirements, (as at Yale, where students choose courses from departmental offerings); and
- “closed” distribution (Harvard’s current Core curriculum).

Thus far, said Jacobsen, only the first possibility has been ruled out. The general education group is still undecided about whether to prescribe a single model for all students, or to offer a mixture of models for the heterogeneous classes Harvard now enrolls.

Similar issues surround the structure of concentrations, according to professor of Romance languages and literatures Diana Sorensen, who noted that the subject had not figured in the 1970s curriculum review that yielded the Core. While acknowledging the need for progressive knowledge in a field, she said, the working group worried about preprofessionalism and about foreclosing students’ freedom to explore other subjects. One discussion priority is Harvard’s “unusually early” concentration choice: at the end of the freshman year, before such exploration has been given much rein.

Most of these principles proved unobjectionable, but a few attracted amplification or notable comment. Dilorenzo professor of international affairs Jorge I. Domínguez moved beyond the proposed new calendar to advocate more radical changes in classes (perhaps intensive half-term courses and other options) and physical restructuring of lecture halls and seminar rooms to promote more free-wheeling, interactive discussions.

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences dean Peter T. Ellison, professor of anthropology, made the case for “thematic” concentrations existing alongside traditional departmental offerings. He mentioned fields such as global health, poverty, or the role of ethnicity in modern life. The
Ellison’s suggestion touched on larger themes underlying the curriculum review, as FAS pursues two simultaneous efforts in academic and physical planning. The former will identify the fields ripe for faculty hiring within and across departmental lines. The latter will envision facilities to accommodate both the larger professoriate and whatever new or reconfigured spaces the undergraduate learners will require in the College curriculum of the future (see “Arts and Sciences’ Ambitious Plans,” page 62). Woven together, the strands of academic, physical, and curricular planning will form the basis for future FAS fundraising.

Before FAS agrees on integrated plans, however, faculty members must resolve curricular complexities even knottier than those outlined on December 16. At a forum for several dozen faculty colleagues held on Sunday, November 23, in Barker Center, the curriculum review leaders arranged three panel presentations on “What We Teach,” “Culture, the Economy, and the Curriculum,” and “The Students We Teach.” The aim, explained host Peter K. Bol, Carswell professor of East Asian languages and civilizations (and a director of this magazine), was to put the review in a new context: not in comparison to prior exercises at Harvard after World War II (General Education) and the 1970s (the Core curriculum), nor to the efforts of other universities, but in relation to changing world conditions that bear on higher education.

A detailed summary of the day’s proceedings—a freewheeling seminar of what-ifs and want lists—can be accessed at www.harvardmagazine.com/on-line/-010434.html; highlights are provided here. Professor of history James T. Kloppenberg documented both the “democratization of higher education” and the enormous increase in the number of fields of study in recent decades (area disciplines like Asian studies, and studies of formerly neglected populations such as women, African Americans, various ethnic groups, and post-colonial subjects). Since the 1970s, he noted, student inter-
Since the 1970s, student interest in the humanities has declined, as job-related fields have become much more popular.

The Medical School’s Marc W. Kirschner, Walter professor of cell biology and founding chair of the new department of systems biology, detected no such self-doubt or skepticism within the burgeoning life sciences. Rather, he worried about adequate scientific education for students concentrating in other fields, and about training undergraduate biologists broadly enough. He lamented high-school and college courses of study focused only on recent achievements in molecular and cellular biology and genetics. Missing, he said, are two ingredients. First are the related sciences (chemistry, physics, mathematics, and computer science) required to do biological research today, and the broader studies (in anatomy and physiology, for example) needed to pull together the emerging systemic view of living organisms. Second is a sense of the most challenging problems still awaiting research and discovery—the very reason for doing science.

Between these poles, Johnstone Family professor of psychology Steven Pinker drew upon his work in understanding language to make a vivid point about interdisciplinary scholarship. In the future, he imagined, moral philosophy would depend on psychological tools and an understanding of evolutionary biology, poetry studies on linguistics, and analysis of global warming on atmospheric science and economics alike. That convergence,

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**University People**

**Madam Marshal**

President Lawrence H. Summers has appointed Jacqueline A. O’Neill the University Marshal, effective February 1, filling a post left vacant since August 2002, when Richard M. Hunt retired after two decades of service. O’Neill, who was staff director for President Neil L. Rudenstine, has most recently served as communications director for the Allston Initiative. She has also organized such major events as the convocation honoring Nelson Mandela in 1998 and Harvard’s past two presidential inaugurations. As marshal, she coordinates visits to campus by world leaders, acts as Harvard’s chief protocol officer, and coordinates the annual Commencement exercises. The Commencement Office, in Wadsworth House, which had reported to the Harvard Alumni Association since Hunt’s retirement, will once again report to the marshal. The International Office, responsible for foreign students and visiting scholars, has become part of the Office of the General Counsel. O’Neill’s new duties are a half-time responsibility and she will continue to work on external relations for Allston development.

**Social Sciences Star**

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has conferred its Talcott Parsons Prize, awarded for outstanding contributions to the social sciences, on Geyser University Professor William Julius Wilson. Ford professor of social science emeritus Daniel Bell was so honored in 1992.

**Business Brass**

The Business School’s new chief financial officer and executive director of external relations, both internal promotions, are Richard P. Melnick and Christine Fairchild, respectively. They take over from Donella M. Rapier, previously associate dean, whose former job was reorganized when she became Harvard’s vice president for alumni affairs and development in October.

**Personnel Person**

Harvard’s top personnel officer, Polly Price, who has been associate vice president for human resources since 1996, will retire on September 1. During her tenure, Price oversaw new agreements with the University’s unions; implemented extensive automated hiring and personnel-management systems; expanded education for workers at all skill levels; created new policies for fair, uniform treatment of part-time workers; and directed compliance with the “Katz committee” recommendations on new compensation and benefits programs for the lowest-paid service employees.
The faculty need to help students succeed while trusting them to do the right thing.

he said, posed challenges for curriculum design, professorial appointments, and even the sovereignty of departments. Later, Pinker also challenged faculty members to think about what could be subtracted from their duties, and from student requirements, so that new curriculum suggestions could be accommodated.

In the ensuing discussion, faculty members debated the degree of trust students ought to enjoy, versus their concern that a too-liberal curriculum would encourage intellectual dilettantism. Most seemed to favor more freedom of choice in determining courses of study.

During the second panel, President Lawrence H. Summers cast vocationalism in a new light, stressing the power of quantitative, empirical analytical techniques in making problems in health sciences, public policy, and many other realms susceptible to understanding. (He later called the phenomenon “the application of scientism in a much broader space than it has been traditionally applied.”) Naturally, with that growth in the ability to know things useful to know came growth in related fields of study and learning—a phenomenon different from, and more valuable than, mere careerism.

Boardman professor of fine arts Irene J. Winter noted that her own studies increasingly rely on anthropology, physical sciences, and rich empirical and theoretical tools. Resurrecting a fine-arts survey course based on the perceived great works of Europe would never do, she thought; basic understanding of where art was made and what it meant has simply progressed too far in the past few decades. (Summers, who raised the notion of such surveys in his Commencement address last June, noted that he did not mean in any sense to “privilege” one group of people or one area or one approach over another; but he did note that students sought some help in “filling the void” of basic knowledge “with some confidence” in several realms of learning.)

Professor of earth and planetary sciences Daniel P. Schrag, who studies climate change and oceanography, reintroduced the notion of preparing students, in an era of globalization, for leadership in any career pursuit; business, government, academic research, whatever. Given the impossibility of equipping students with all the facts they will need to cope, the goal ought to be to “teach them to fish”—education in analytical techniques and ways of using data so they could reach conclusions in complex situations.

To effect that, he suggested, it might be best to interest the learners in issues of current social concern, such as climate change or genetic engineering. Rather than teach statistics, pose an engaging problem and lead the students to learn the tools they require to analyze it rigorously and soundly—the kinds of real problems posed in environmental science and public policy, where math, chemistry, biology, and statistics all come into play. Throughout, he said, the curriculum review must validate and make vivid for all to see the methods of scientific, social scientific, and humanities research, none of which is a frill nor based on false or political premises.

Much else was said—for example, about the value of new media (film, for instance) and of time-proven old ones (books).

Peter Bol, attempting the impossible task of summarizing the day in five minutes, limned the faculty’s challenge to itself in devising a twenty-first century College curriculum. Bol, who co-chairs the general-education task force with Eric Jacobson, had been struck by the morning discussion about how disciplines and specialization promote progress in knowledge and risk such side-effects as narrowness and fragmentation. Those adverse effects in turn promote the current urge toward interdisciplinary research and course work. As part of his studies in Chinese history of a millennium ago, he had plumbed fields such as geography, and had come to see the concept of “discipline” as unstable and even problematic—even if all modes of analysis could produce useful knowledge. And, he said, he had the sense that within the College there was science, and then everything else—almost two separate colleges.

Bol also noted the importance of offering projects that give students a reason to want to master a competency or discipline by engaging in study—not only in any one undergraduate year, but throughout their college experience. The challenge, he said, was to expand learners’ curiosity so they would engage in self-transformation. Why was it, for example, that 400 students crowded into Sanders to take Bass professor of government Michael Sandel’s “Justice”? Because they want to think about good and bad and moral judgments—to be in creative tension with the world in which they live, as they think about reasons for, say, waging war on Iraq. In China, he reminded his colleagues, such decisions were left to the elite leaders. Not here. In this sense, Bol concluded, maybe what the students want is what they need—and the faculty need to help them succeed while trusting them to do the right thing.

Agassiz Agreement

HARVARD’s plans to complete its “North Campus” in Cambridge took an important step forward when the University reached an agreement with an Agassiz neighborhood group about the scope of development there during the next 25 years. In a “memorandum of understanding,” Harvard committed to building no more than 1.6 million square feet of new construction (including up to 500,000 square feet of replacement space for demolished buildings) in an area between the edge of the campus along Oxford and Hammond Streets to the east and Everett Street and Massachusetts Avenue to the west. The total square footage ceiling (which includes a provision for 10 percent more space to meet, for example, special building code requirements like those mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act) represents about half the maximum allowed under current Cambridge zoning.

Neighbors agreed that they could support Harvard’s building projects if “ad-