An Unconstrained Curriculum

The college curriculum of the future has begun to come into focus, as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) this autumn started to discuss reports from the three-year review of the current course of study. Compared to undergraduate requirements today—general education through seven “Core curriculum” courses, a concentration, expository writing, and foreign language—the watchword of the new model appears to be almost radical freedom of student choice, at least by Harvard standards. The focal points for discussion were recommendations by the Committee on General Education, released November 2, and by FAS’s standing Educational Policy Committee (EPC), circulated in draft form two weeks earlier (most reports appear at www.fas.harvard.edu/curriculum-review/).

The findings of the general-education group, cochaired by FAS dean William C. Kirby and Harvard College dean Benedict H. Gross, are basic to any definition of liberal arts. They bear most heavily on the gests a more market- or timing-oriented approach to investing. El-Erian intends to keep personally close to the markets by managing money himself: he described himself as a “player-coach,” and noted his expertise in emerging markets and other fixed-income assets. (He also intends to teach at Harvard Business School.)

As for the higher-profile aspects of his new responsibilities, El-Erian said the compensation “approach is the right one,” with an “incentive-based component that should encourage not just short-term performance but long-term performance.” As to the specifics of the pay package, he said, “There is no God-given way of doing it,” so some elements might be revised.

Nor did he seem fazed by the public aspects of his new position. Citing his role at PIMCO—the preeminent bond investor, and the largest emerging-markets money manager—El-Erian said, “I’ve been under the microscope.” Of his coming responsibilities representing Harvard, he said, “I can live with it.”

Marc Shell

Marc Shell is Babbitt professor of comparative literature, a professor of English, a MacArthur Prize Fellow, and these days, as he puts it, “a more or less inaudible stutterer, or stammerer.” That he was “slow of speech” was conspicuous in his youth, when he failed the fourth grade in his hometown of Montreal. His school principal explained to him that stuttering was a “sure sign” of being mentally deficient. He had also had polio, which some local doctors thought lowered the IQ. Today, when he lectures to an anglophone audience in Montreal and finds himself about to stumble over an English word—“money,” say—he substitutes argent, perfectly legal in that bilingual place and a stutterer’s coping device called interlinguistic synonymy. He’s learned other such tactics and tells of them and of much else about this enigmatic disorder in his fascinating new book, Stutter (Harvard University Press). Shell works in several general areas. One is aesthetics and economics, where he has done a two-part study of “the internalization of monetary form in literature and philosophy,” starting with Heraclitus. Another is Renaissance studies, where he has written of sixteenth-century European politics and the works of Elizabeth I. A third is language and nationhood. His Harvard website notes, “Professor Shell... says that these three areas are closely interrelated.” Shell is also co-director of the Longfellow Institute for the comparative study of the non-English languages and literatures of what is now the United States. He is married, with two grown children. These days his son, reports Shell, “is the only person I know who counts himself free to tease me about my speech.”

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Core's “approaches to knowledge” courses introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After entertaining ideas ranging from a sequence of required, broadly integrative courses to new points of focus on international studies and the sciences (see “Addition by Subtraction,” July-August 2004, page 55, and “Educating Undergraduates,” September-October 2004, page 61), the committee opted for simplicity above all—what Kirby characterized as choice, incentive, and opportunity, not requirements. If adopted, the new curriculum would feature:

- Distribution. Students would have to take three one-semester courses in each of arts and humanities, study of societies, and science and technology. Because their individual concentrations would fall in one of the areas, the requirement would in effect be fulfilled by six one-semester departmental offerings, or optional, year-long “Courses in General Education,” intended to be “synoptic and integrative in approach, and topically both wide-ranging and of considerable depth.” (Once several such courses are created, the report suggested, the faculty “may wish to consider some form of requirement from among this group.”)

- Writing and speaking. A first-year one-semester course in writing would still be required. Other courses would offer students “structured opportunities for honing their skills in oral expression as well as written.”

- Foreign language. Proficiency in a language other than English would still be mandated, but would no longer need to be fulfilled in the first year.

- International experience. All students would be “expected” to pursue “a significant international experience”—an expectation well on the way to being fulfilled (see sidebar opposite).

The committee guidelines reflect differences of opinion and uncertainties about how to make the recommendations work. Three important issues concern matters of content and of processes to assure that students emerge from Harvard broadly educated.

“[D]espite the obvious importance of these skills and areas of knowledge,” the report noted, a majority of the committee declined to require courses in moral and ethical reasoning, one of the pillars of the Core curriculum, or in quantitative analysis, a new field introduced in 1999 following the last FAS review of the Core. The committee members did “strongly recommend” that students take such courses—and that faculty offer them. (Some faculty members who spoke at a November 22 FAS meeting also expressed concern over letting go the Core’s foreign-cultures requirement, and its exposure to history, at a time when students are being encouraged to study abroad.)

Such recommendations to students suggest the crucial practical problems in assembling a suitable curriculum. “With

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**For Sciences and Art**

*The Faculty of Arts and Sciences* is in the throes of a major, multipurpose building boom, as shown in these autumn images. To the left, a crane-top view looks down into the subterranean construction for the Laboratory for Interface Science and Engineering. (A panoramic view at an earlier stage appeared in September-October 2005, pages 54-55.) Below, extensive site work proceeds on the 460,000-square-foot Northwest Building, a multidisciplinary laboratory facility north of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Right, all but the façade of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals building has been razed. Within the tight confines of the Holyoke Street site, contractors are preparing to erect the New College Theatre.
appropriate guidance and advice,” the report noted, distribution “affords the opportunity” to suit general education to individual students’ interests. The students say they want that freedom and will use it well (see Student Essays: On the Purpose and Structure of a Harvard Education at the website). But academic advising has long been considered a very weak link in the chain. A separate committee has advanced ideas for wholesale changes in advising, contingent on faculty participation, lest the archetypal physics concentrator, as the Crimson put it, fill out his schedule with “three narrowly focused courses each in government and music.”

Those faculty members must also commit themselves to creating courses suitable for general education. The committee observed that the Core created a “governance structure” through which professors joined to recruit, review, and assess courses—“an ambitious and largely successful process of peer review for general education,” and no mean feat for a faculty with strong incentives to attend to their own scholarship and their graduate students. A new standing committee would “assure that sufficient courses be offered that are particularly appropriate for general education.”

To make room for students to explore, the EPC proposed several constraints on concentrations—and immediately backed off a bit when faculty colleagues resisted limits on their teaching of disciplines. Professor of economics David I. Laibson presented all the recommendations at faculty meetings on October 25 and November 8. The most significant mandates are deferring students’ concentration choice to the middle of sophomore year, from the end of freshman year; limiting concentration course requirements to 12 (from as many as 14, or even more); and creating “secondary fields,” a system of minors comprising four to six courses as determined by departments, in lieu of joint concentrations (which require dual-subject theses).

By the second day of discussion, after objections particularly from science professors, the 12-course rule had been softened to guidance: departments are to try to winnow down requirements and prerequisites so students can explore the

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### Elsewhere

**Since 2001,** College students’ international experiences during their Harvard years—formal study abroad, research, work or public service, internships—have evolved from the “unusual” to the “almost routine.” So reported Gutman professor of Latin American affairs John H. Coatsworth to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) on October 25. He spoke as chair of the Committee on Education Abroad, in support of the curriculum-review “expectation” that each undergraduate should pursue a “significant international experience.”

Given the opportunity, under liberalized rules for study abroad introduced four years ago—and frequent jawboning by FAS dean William C. Kirby and President Lawrence H. Summers—students have obviously responded. Data presented by Jane Edwards, director of the Office of International Programs (www.fas.harvard.edu/~oip), revealed that the number of students studying abroad for credit has nearly tripled, driven by surging enrollment in summer programs, which now attract more participants than term-time studies (see chart). Europe remained the destination of choice (about 60 percent of study-abroad students), with notable growth in Asia and Latin America. By field, nearly half of the travelers were in social sciences, and just 11 percent in the sciences.

After adding to study-abroad students those pursuing research, internships, work on Let’s Go guides, and various kinds of service, the number of “sponsored” experiences abroad for 2004-2005 totaled 933. That is more than halfway toward FAS’s goal of getting the equivalent of an entire College class out into the world each year. To achieve this in the next five years, Edwards foresaw new programs in venues ranging from Botswana and Cameroon to Argentina, India, Belgium, and Brazil, and covering interests in science, human rights, public health, and sustainable development.

An important partner in these efforts is the summer school, whose dean, Robert A. Lue, outlined growth in Harvard faculty-led programs from seven in 2004 to 10 last year; College enrollment rose from 41 to 106. The large new effort in Beijing, which enrolled more than 30 Harvard students, is accelerating the school’s ambitions: six new offerings are planned for next summer, ranging from biological fieldwork in the Dominican Republic to an East Asian studies course in Korea.

Coatsworth reminded the faculty that international experiences provided students with exposure to the unfamiliar in the best liberal-arts tradition, a sense of global citizenship, and increased capacity to live and work in more diverse surroundings. To sustain and deepen student interest, he called for further incentives: financial aid and acknowledgment of “significant” experiences, carefully defined, on transcripts. And he urged extensive faculty engagement to enhance the quality of students’ programs by identifying the best opportunities, helping to create new ones (like those in the summer school), and linking their own teaching to students’ experiences abroad. On the latter point, Coatsworth offered his fellow professors their own incentive: grants from an “international innovation fund” to develop courses extending beyond the boundaries of the United States.
curriculum, fit in study abroad if desired, and even pursue those “secondary fields.” The joint concentrations would be grandfathered. And although the committee encouraged group projects and other non-traditional forms of “capstone experiences,” the EPC’s previous skepticism about senior theses was moderated. Laibson and other members also explicitly recognized the role of much better advising in making deferred concentration choice and other presumed benefits of curricular freedom work. Resolving those details will precede legislation, presumably by this spring.

"The Genius of the Balafon"

In west africa, Neba Solo, born Souleymane Traoré in 1969, is often called “the genius of the balafon,” says Ingrid T. Monson. So skilled a player, composer of songs, singer, and innovator is he that in 2002 his homeland, Mali, named him a chevalier de l’ordre national. “He’s a bit like the Charlie Parker and the Charles Mingus of the balafon combined—the Charlie Parker because he is so virtuosic and the Mingus because he is an incredible compos er as well,” says Monson, the Quincy Jones professor of African-American music. (A sometime performer on the trumpet herself, she has recorded five albums with the Klezmer Conservatory Band, of which she was a founding member.) At her instigation, the Committee on African Studies and the Department of Music brought Solo and his group of musicians and dancers to Harvard for a week this fall, culminating in a rollicking concert in Sanders Theatre on November 10.

Earlier, speaking in French with Monson translating, Solo explained about balafons to 35 students, music professors, and the merely curious at a lecture-demonstration in Loker Commons that was sponsored by the Office for the Arts’ Learning from Performers series. A balafon is a wooden xylophone with an opened-top calabash resonator below each slat. These gourd resonators each have a second, small hole through which air exits; each hole is covered by a tightly stretched membrane—perhaps of spider-cocoon fibers or cigarette paper, although Solo uses plastic—which adds an abrasive buzzing sound when the slat is struck hard. Solo played and sang and one of his group danced. He then took questions and invited listeners to come forward and have a go at the slats themselves.

The balafon has many musical cousins around the world—the concert xylophone, the glockenspiel, the vibes played by such jazzmen as Lionel Hampton and Gary Burton, Latin America’s marimba, Indonesia’s gamelan orchestra—instruments both percussive and melodic.

When Solo was 18, he heard Alpha Blondy’s reggae recording Jerusalem, admired the bass line, and conceived a desire to tamper with his traditional 17-slat balafon by adding three bass slats and altering the tuning. His balafonist father was not at all sure about the propriety of this, but gave permission for the experiment on condition that if he did not like the result, Solo would desist from innovation. The son wrought his changes and, moreover, built a balafon that he played exactly backwards, soloing with his left hand on the lower notes and playing the accompaniment with his right hand, “adding,” says Monson, “some very complicated and interesting bass lines to the texture of the music.”

His father approved. At his lecture-demonstration, Solo deconstructed, first playing a line of music with his right hand, then adding a different line with his left hand, then bursting into song with a third line. “Not many balafonists sing while they play,” says Monson, “but he wanted to do something different.” (To hear Neba Solo perform, go to www.harvardmagazine.com.)

He does not sing about his beating heart, incidentally. The traditional role of the musician in Mali, says Monson, is not only to entertain, but to present messages and promote dialogue on contemporary social issues. Solo’s compositions comment on vaccination, AIDS, female excision, protecting the environment, political corruption, and the role of custom in modern life. Traditionally the balafon is played at all sorts of social events: festivals, dances, fu-