Reconfiguring the Curriculum

Much work on refashioning the undergraduate curriculum remains for the next academic year, but the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) concluded its spring meetings by adopting several significant changes. Students will have more time to choose their concentrations, and new options for minor fields of study, encouraging them to investigate diverse disciplines; professors will supervise writing and speaking more directly; and new humanities courses and wholesale changes in the life sciences aim to provide better academic experiences. Together, those measures may help a new committee on general education work in one, alongside their concentrations, and new options for minor fields of study, encouraging them to investigate diverse disciplines; professors will supervise writing and speaking more directly; and new humanities courses and wholesale changes in the life sciences aim to provide better academic experiences. Together, those measures may help a new committee on general education.

To allay concerns in the sciences and engineering that undergraduates might inadvertently foreclose options by failing to pursue needed courses in sequence, students will now have to have “a documented advising conversation with a representative from one or more prospective concentrations” before the end of their first year. The departments may not limit fall courses in the sophomore year to students who indicated an interest in the concentration the prior term.

• Concentrations. At its April 18 meeting, the faculty voted that, beginning with the class matriculating in September, students be required “to declare a field of concentration before the end of classes in the third term of enrollment.” Harvard has required freshman-year concentration choice, earlier than at other colleges and universities. Given students’ need to begin fulfilling other mandates (expository writing, foreign language, the Core curriculum or its general-education successor, and the standard 12 or more term-length concentration courses), many found it hard to explore course offerings and discover a new passion.

• Writing and speaking. FAS voted on May 16 to replace a Core subcommittee focused on expository writing with a stand-alone faculty committee to review the teaching of writing and speaking throughout the College curriculum.

As these changes progressed, faculty members advanced other changes in course content and pedagogy that will, over time, determine directly what kinds of general education and concentration experiences students have.

• Humanities. Following the successful launch of the new introductory life-sciences course, with team-teaching and fresh approaches to classwork and laboratories (see page 56 and “Enlivening Science,” July-August 2005, page 62), deans for the humanities Maria Tatar briefed the faculty on May 2 about innovative “portal” courses in that division, “expansive in scope and integrative” of subject matter. Several will appear as “general education courses: humanities” in the Courses of Instruction 2006-2007. For example, Stephen J. Greenblatt and Louis Menand will present an “introductory humanities colloquium” covering “major works of literature and ideas” from Homer through Joyce, probing “the kinds of issues addressed in humanistic studies.” In a later conversation, Tatar said her colleagues were responding to “real hunger out there among undergraduates for broad-based, integrative courses” investigating large topics in life, literature, and philosophy—in contrast to “boutique model,” specialized classes for concentrators. The new courses, varying in size and pedagogy, are “an experiment, a sort of humanities laboratory” that she hopes will “ignite interest” from students, as they have already among faculty members.
Life sciences. Reflecting changes in basic knowledge and the opportunity to devise smaller concentrations more appealing to students, the faculty on April 18 approved a wholesale revision of undergraduate studies in biology. In presenting the plan, professor of anthropology Daniel E. Lieberman noted pointedly that undergraduates found current concentrations “too large, too broad, and too confusing.” In response, the new “life sciences cluster” replaces the biology and biochemical sciences concentrations with chemical and physical biology; human evolutionary biology; molecular and cellular biology; organismic and evolutionary biology; and neurobiology. These five fields are complemented by the existing biological anthropology, social and cognitive neuroscience (in psychology), and chemistry tracks—all building upon the new Life Sciences 1a and 1b introductory sequence, and each better able to provide focused advising and pertinent laboratory experiences (descriptions appear at www.lifescience.fas.harvard.edu).

The interdisciplinary revamping of an entire field such as life sciences suggests how rethinking introductory, general-education, and higher-level courses can bring faculty members together to refresh education throughout undergraduates’ Harvard years. That goal has been elusive so far, because little agreement exists on a general-education successor to the Core curriculum. In faculty meetings, professors aired concerns that a distribution requirement would qualify too many departmental courses as “general-education equivalents; that the emerging integrative courses were not clearly in the offering; and that important goals (familiarity with a foreign language, quantitative analysis, ethical principles, and public service) were being orphaned.

Interim president Derek Bok’s analysis of undergraduate education in Our Underachieving Colleges, published last December, explicitly dissects models of general education, and acknowledges the “long and inconclusive debate” on the subject nationwide. In one of his last official comments as dean, at the last regular FAS meeting of the year, William C. Kirby informed the faculty that Bok had asked him to convene a summer working group to ready recommendations on general education for the fall agenda.

Search Sources

Fulfilling its pledge to create formal channels through which to hear faculty and student ideas and views, the Corporation-Overseer committee searching for a permanent successor to President Lawrence H. Summers announced on May 12 the membership of two advisory groups (see “Precedent-Setting Presidential Search,” May-June, page 66).

The faculty group is chaired by Pforzheimer University Professor Sidney Verba. Other members, and their affiliations, are: Lisa Berkman (Harvard School of Public Health); Richard Fallon (Harvard Law School); Stephen Greenblatt (Faculty of Arts and Sciences [FAS]); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (FAS); Amy Hollywood (Harvard Divinity School); Eric Jacobsen (FAS); Alex Krieger (Harvard Graduate School of Design); Ramesh Narayan (FAS); William Sahlman (Harvard Business School); Judith Singer (Harvard Graduate School of Education); Robert Stavins (Kennedy School of Government); and Christopher T. Walsh (Harvard Medical School).

The student group is chaired by Matthew Murray (Kennedy School/Law School). The other members are Whitney Baxter (Harvard College [HC]); Katherine Beck (HC); Sarah Carter (Graduate School of Arts and Sciences [GSAS]); Liza Ching (Kennedy School); Kerith Conron (School of Public Health); Emilie Dressaire (GSAS); Gillian Fell (Medical School); Christopher Fonzone (Law School); Mark McInroy (Divinity School); Owen Patrick (Business School); Vivek Ramaswamy (HC); Hanna Rodriguez-Farrar (Graduate School of Education); and Christopher White (Design School).

Comments may be sent in confidence to psearch@harvard.edu or by mail to Harvard University Presidential Search Committee, Loeb House, 17 Quincy Street, Cambridge 02138, or to any member of the advisory groups.

The Challenge of Plagiarism

Harvard college has only one course required of every student: “Expository Writing.” Better known simply as “Expos,” the class urges freshmen to “concentrate directly on the craft of composing and revising their ideas.” Among the skills to be learned in Expos is one that Kaavya Viswanathan ’08 might have found useful when writing her novel, How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life—avoiding plagiarism.

Plagiarism, the slim Expos booklet Writing with Sources explains, “is an act of lying, cheating, and stealing.” Harsh words, but senior preceptor Gordon Harvey, the man who wrote them, who is also assistant director of the Expos program, has a somewhat more understanding attitude. “It’s about pressure,” he says: pressure to produce, achieve, and compete. Tight deadlines combined with copying and pasting notes from on-line sources “can create genuine accidents. You run out of time and it’s hard to go back [for proper citations].”

He distinguishes, though, between a genuine mistake and “fraud—passing off something as yours, the work for which was done by somebody else.” Harvey reports that, during his three years on the College’s disciplinary body, the Administrative Board, student after student claimed photographic memory, but cases typically involved “passages of such complexity that it was rarely plausible.” The questionable passages in Opal Mehta reflect Megan McCafferty’s novel Sloppy Firsts so closely that they “could only have happened with extensive notes, or if [Viswanathan] had the book open in front of her,” Harvey declares. “What we would look for on the Ad Board is evidence that things had been changed to hide [copying].”

Harvey, however, is less concerned with catching every misattributed quotation than with the chilling effects that strict enforcement can have. Each year, he notes, terrified freshmen turn in “massively footnoted” essays the week after lectures on plagiarism. “It can be paralyzing” to have so many rules, he says. “You don’t want to
recently, my mom was putting books onto a new bookshelf when a red one fell to the floor.

“What is this?” she asked, in a slightly offended voice.

“That’s mine,” I said, taking it from her. Though Lady of the Lotus Born isn’t exactly X-rated, it does contain a few racy scenes between Guru Rinpoche, Tibet’s great eighth-century Buddhist teacher, and his consort, Yeshe Tsogyal. I felt a little guilty as I remembered that for Tibetan Buddhists, it’s bad karma to mistreat a book, especially a dharma book—one that contains Buddhist teachings. You don’t run a highlighter over your favorite passages or write notes in the margins. If a book is dropped, its owner sometimes touches the cover to her forehead in a kind of blessing. I hesitated for a second, and then did the same.

His solution lies in having instructors build better assignments that give students a unique space to write, in which experts have not yet exhausted all the possibilities and other students have not written essays available wholesale on the Internet. Such direct cheating, Harvey warns, is rarely worth it, because “if it’s on-line for them, it’s on-line for us. It’s somewhat befuddling that [such cheating] goes on as much as it does.” Some universities, Princeton among them, use automated services to check essays for originality. Harvard has not implemented such a system University-wide, although the government department’s sophomore tutorial and several other large classes require electronic submission as an anti-cheating measure. “There’s something tacky and against the spirit of the University about that,” Harvey believes. “I would vote for the honor code, and getting faculty to think about assignments” that will get students engaged in “wrestling with the material.”

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Fleeting Fame

Kaavya Viswanathan’s 15 minutes of fame proved unusually nasty and brutish as well as short. Publicity profiles anticipating the late-March publication of her debut “chick-lit” novel, How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life, made much of the sophomore’s reported $500,000 contract for two books, plus a movie deal. But once the Crimson reported on April 23 that her prose was remarkably similar to that in two popular novels by Megan McCafferty, the narrative quickly altered.

Viswanathan acknowledged the borrowings, but said they were “unintentional and unconscious.” Publisher Little, Brown initially stood by her, promising a revised edition of her book. Then her explanation was undercut by reports of more overlapping passages, from novels by Meg Cabot, Salman Rushdie, and Sophie Kinsella. Ensuing reports highlighted the connections that led Viswanathan from her college-counseling consultant to a literary agent to a book packager (the teen-focused Alloy Entertainment), which shared the Opal copyright.

In light of those developments, Little, Brown withdrew the novel and ended the contract. Viswanathan, by then stereotyped and pilloried as the striving heroine in her own autobiographical fiction (Opal was on a quest to get into Harvard), withdrew from the public eye.

The College’s Administrative Board never discloses the identity of students involved in its disciplinary proceedings, so whether it heeded calls to examine the alleged plagiarism vis-à-vis Viswanathan’s student standing is unknown. Perhaps the searing comic takes on the episode were punishing enough. In the man-on-the-street feature of the “Onion” website, a fictitious respondent lamented the “many things a Harvard education can’t teach you, like how to use a thesaurus to cover up your plagiarism.” The New York Times ran “How Gatsby Got Wild,” an op-ed by novelist John Kenney, on how to publish The Great Gatsby and other novels as “new” work under your own name. And humorist Andy Borowitz ‘80 concluded his April 26 on-line Borowitz Report: “[W]hen asked how it felt to publish her first novel then be charged with plagiarism, author Kaavya Viswanathan said, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’”

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Zen, and Other Journeys

by Elizabeth S. Widdicombe ’06

THE UNDERGRADUATE

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