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 detailed advising and pertinent laboratory experiences (descriptions appear at www.lifesciences.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.

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 “fraid—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