November 14, has prompted lively exchanges about the purposes of undergraduate education and the means to achieve them. The task-force members began their work by “spelling out a clear rationale” for general education, their cochair Alison Simmons, professor of philosophy, told the meeting. That rationale, she said, is grounded in the conviction that a liberal-arts education matters to students because it makes them more reflective about their beliefs and choices, more self-conscious and critical, more creative in solving problems, and more perceptive of the larger world. (Departmental courses taken for concentrations and as electives, the October report says, are the essence of “liberal learning—that is, of free inquiry undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility. This kind of knowledge is not only one of the enrichments of existence; it is one of the achievements of civilization.”)

Apart from this opportunity to learn about and reflect upon “the human and natural worlds we inhabit,” however, “college is also a preparation for the rest of life,” in both subject matter and “skills and habits of mind.” The authors emphasize that they are not suggesting a utilitarian, pre-professional education. But with more than half of graduating seniors heading for professional school, they intend general education to be “the place where students are brought to understand how everything that we teach in the liberal arts and sciences relates to their lives and to the world that they will confront. General education is the public face of liberal education.”

In this context, the task-force members wrote to colleagues, the Core curriculum should be replaced, because shifting disciplinary boundaries and the reality that only a small minority of College graduates pursue academic careers have undercut its rationale. “Distribution requirements,” they found, fail to distinguish...