College Curriculum Change Completed

During the second weekend in May, just before the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) met on May 15 for its final discussion of a proposed new general-education component of the undergraduate curriculum, the New Yorker mailed its new weekly issue to subscribers. The lead Comment item, titled “The Graduates,” was a reflection on the meritocratic scramble to get into college, and students’ experience there, written by Louis Menand, Bass professor of English and American literature and language and a staff writer for the magazine. Of local interest, he co-chaired the task force that drafted the general-education proposal, then facing its sixth consecutive week of review by a faculty that usually meets monthly—a sign of the engagement in rethinking undergraduate study, and the difficulty of refashioning it.

During the debate, Menand and other task-force members kept silent, deferring to colleagues. But it is impossible not to sense some of what he and they intended in his New Yorker essay, when he wrote of college, “One thing that might be hoped for...is that, wherever along the way, every student had a moment of vertigo (without unpleasant side effects). In commencement speeches

Honored Instructors

Five Faculty of Arts and Sciences members have been named Harvard College Professors, an annual honor conferred for outstanding teaching: Luis Fernández-Cifuentes, Friend professor of Romance languages and literatures (and chair of the department); David Haig, Putnam professor of organismic and evolutionary biology; Jennifer L. Hochschild, Jayne professor of government and professor of African and African American studies; David R. Liu, professor of chemistry and chemical biology; and Peter V. Marsden, professor of sociology. Hochschild, professor of health policy and management; Robert Blendon, and associate professor of medicine Raghu Kalluri were also recognized for excellence in mentoring graduate students. Glenda Carpio, assistant professor of

A Baker’s Dozen Fellows

Thirteen faculty members were elected fellows of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences: Nancy C. Andrews, Minot professor of pediatrics; David Blackburn, Coolidge professor of history; David Cutler, Eckstein professor of applied economics; Leo Damrosch, Bernbaum professor of literature; Lars Hernquist, professor of astronomy; Thomas W. Lentz, Cabot director of the Harvard University Art Museums; N. Gregory Mankiw, Beren professor of economics; Venkatesh Narayanamurti, dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences; Richard J. O’Connell, professor of geophysics; E. Roger Owen, Meyer professor of Middle East history; Joshua R. Sanes, professor of molecular and cellular biology; James H. Sidanius, professor of psychology and of African and African American studies; and Junying Yuan, professor of cell biology. A foreign honorary membership was conferred on Rem Koolhaas, professor in practice of architecture and urban design.

Stellar Social Scientists

Thomas professor of government and sociology Theda Skocpol, who concluded her service as dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences on June 30, has been awarded the Skytte Prize in Political Science, the highest international prize in the field. She was cited for her work on the influence of the state on political life. Malkin professor of public policy Robert D. Putnam and Pforzheimer University Professor Sidney Verba have also won the prize, which includes a $72,000 cash award, in recent years. Separately, Hariri professor of international political economy Dani Rodrik, of the Kennedy School, has been awarded the first Albert O. Hirschman [LL.D. ’02] Prize by the Social Science Research Council, recognizing his work on development economics.

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and the like, people say that education is all about opportunity and expanding your horizons. But some part of it is about shrinking people, about teaching them that they are not the measure of everything…We want to give graduates confidence to face the world, but we also want to protect the world a little from their confidence. Humility is good.”

The faculty’s vote on May 15—168 in favor, 14 opposed, 11 abstentions—puts in place a new set of course requirements as the successor to the current Core curriculum (see “General Education, Finally Defined,” March-April 2007, page 68). The new curriculum aims to connect a student’s “liberal education” with “life beyond college,” prescribing a one-semester course in each of eight areas (see page 68).

The faculty intends this work to prepare students for “civic engagement”; to teach them to “understand themselves as products of—and participants in—traditions of art, ideas, and values”; to ready them to “respond critically and constructively to change”; and to develop their “understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do.” The ways in which each area of study are expected to achieve these goals are specified in the motion the faculty adopted; the full text, which also covers the rationale for the program and its administrative apparatus, appears at www.harvardmagazine.com/go/gen_ed.

Arriving at this point was not easy. The curriculum review as a whole has taken four years. In that time, students have been presented with new options for study abroad, secondary fields (minors), foreign-language citations, revamped introductory courses in the sciences and humanities, and lessened concentration requirements. They have been given more time to choose their major fields of study, accompanied by much-enhanced academic advising to help them make their decisions (see page 68).

But getting faculty members, who specialize in disciplines, to agree on a successor to the Core was the toughest challenge. During the last, intense meetings over general education, serious debates took place about the role of historical study, foreign languages, and other fields. (Many of these concerns were addressed
The ambitious scope of its charge is perhaps encompassed in the following faculty formulation of its hopes for the College experience, including its new general-education sequence—a line of argument Menand clearly sounded both on the task force and in his popular writing: “[T]he aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to re-orient themselves. A liberal education aims to accomplish these things by questioning assumptions, by inducing self-reflection, by teaching students to think critically and analytically, by exposing them to the sense of alienation produced by encounters with radically different historical moments and cultural formations and with phenomena that exceed their, and even our own, capacity fully to understand.”

Advising Adventures

In the course of overhauling the College curriculum, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) deferred undergraduates’ selection of a concentration—their major field of study—from the end of freshman year until the end of their third semester. The intent was to give students more freedom to explore their interests through freshman seminars and electives. At the same time, FAS members wanted to ensure that students could make more informed choices; they worried particularly about those pursuing science and engineering concentrations, which often require not only a sequence of courses, but also a larger number of courses than are mandated by other fields. The faculty therefore directed that a new academic-advising mechanism be created at the end of freshman year by the College’s new Advising Programs Office. We asked two first-year students, one relatively confident about his likely concentration and one less sure, to report on the initial “Advising Fortnight,” held from April 9 through April 22.

“You have to do one!” calls Rebekah Lorenz Getman from behind a pile of schedules and “Advising Fortnight” stress balls. The College’s Advising Programs Office has staffed a table on the way out of Annenberg dining hall, where handfuls of freshmen are leaving lunch. Getman, the APO’s program manager for concentration advising, sounds equally enthusiastic each time she explains the mandatory advising conversation to a new group of students.

“We hope it’s more than one” conversation, clarifies Inge-Lise Ameer, assistant dean of advising programs, but she knows that busy freshmen tend to prioritize tomorrow’s midterm over next year’s academic schedule. The APO made the fortnight mandatory so that this year’s freshmen (at least those too conscientious to lie on the on-line reporting tool) would not put off advising meetings until the days before next semester’s deadline for submitting plans of study.

Ameer and Getman have also learned...