

The Simpson Experience of the Future
Faculty Workshop 2008
082108

The Purpose of the Workshop

The Learning Programs Working Group (LPWG) asks the faculty of Simpson College to once again participate in the discussion of potential revisions to our general education program and help create the Simpson Experience of the future. The LPWG has spent the last six months wrestling with the challenges of creating a new general education program that will provide Simpson students with a liberal education that is both broad and deep. The conversation began with a discussion of what we want our graduates to know and what we want them to be able to do. Last year, all faculty were invited to discuss a variety of options for general education. Many of the ideas that surfaced last spring in the components of the draft curriculum may be described in this document. The LPWG believes the curriculum ideas it offers for discussion at the faculty workshop will challenge Simpson students to improve their skills in seven critical areas and to take certain courses which will ensure that all students wrestle with six important aspects of culture and human experience. These courses are not meant to represent the diversity of the academy, but are based on important issues and experiences that LPWG sees as foundational for Simpson College graduates.

It is important to note that by participating in the discussion, the faculty are not giving their approval to the model or the specific skills and courses. Faculty are being asked to participate in a refining process that the LPWG believes will be helpful as it moves forward in creating a specific future proposal for revising the general education program. The final proposal will be sent to the faculty for discussion in the early spring of 2009.

Background and Definitions

The bulk of the LPWG discussion this summer focused on what content and skills might comprise the formal general education curriculum at Simpson College. The LPWG discussed a number of different types of general education programs offered by colleges and universities with the full faculty last spring. These include:

Exposure Model

The primary intention of the exposure model is to expose students to a wide variety of subject disciplines that are reflected in the academy. Typically, students are free to select among departments, divisions, or other units of the college. The courses that meet the requirement are typically not designed specifically for general education, and are often the beginning level course in a discipline or a general survey course in a discipline.

Ways of Knowing Model

The ways of knowing model is based on the premise that different disciplines see the world in different ways. A social scientist views the world in a certain way. An artist sees the world in another way. The ways of knowing model requires students to see the world through the eyes of different disciplines. This model is similar to the exposure model in that it introduces students to a variety of disciplines, but it is often more intentional. Rather than a student being allowed to take any course in the arts to fulfill the arts requirement, for example, the student needs to take a course that meets a specific criteria.

Big Questions/Enduring Questions Model

The big questions model focuses the general education experience on one or more “big questions.” An example of a big question would be, “What makes us human?” Students are asked to explore the designated big question from a variety of perspectives. How does science answer this question? How does social science or philosophy answer this question, etc. Generally, the students take courses in a variety of disciplines that have been created to help provide perspective on the question.

Integrated or Concentration Model

The integrated model for general education uses a unifying theme to organize the courses required of students. It is typically a theme that spans several disciplines. It might be something like, “The City in History” or “Law and Society.” Courses that fulfill the concentration are noted in the college catalog. Students can often take the courses in any order, although there might be an introductory course to provide an overview for the topic.

Problem-Based Model

Problem-based learning simultaneously develops both problem-solving strategies and disciplinary knowledge bases and skills by placing students in the active role of problem solvers confronted with an ill-structured problem that mirrors real world problems. A problem-based general education curriculum could simply require students to take a variety of courses in different disciplines taught using a problem-based pedagogy.

Skills-Based Model

This model focuses completely on a set of skills that the student must accomplish during their college experience. These could include writing, public speaking, critical thinking and any other number of skills identified as being important to a college graduate.

The LPWG’s working draft curriculum to be discussed at the workshop is a hybrid of these models and represents a unique and exciting approach to liberal education. The working draft curriculum is composed of five distinct components. The faculty workshop will focus on two (D and E) of the five components.

Component A: First-Year Experience

The LPWG believes that the Simpson Experience should continue to include an introductory course that provides content and serves as an introduction to the college experience. Our current LAS program in some measure addresses these concerns for traditional students entering as first-year students. In discussing the strengths and challenges of the current LAS program, the LPWG recognized that having the first-year experience course tied to a regularly offered course in the curriculum limits the number of non-content institutional goals that can be accomplished within the course. Although it does not make a recommendation for changes to the LAS program at this time, the LPWG did spend a considerable time discussing other options for a first-year experience course. The option that received the most attention can be described as an “autonomous” LAS that is “passion-based.”

Working Definition and Terms: An autonomous LAS course that is passion-based would be a course that would focus on an interest of the instructor, a big question, an important theme, etc. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor would agree to meet the criteria for non-content goals identified by the faculty to be a part of all LAS courses. These goals might be one or more of the embedded skills described elsewhere in this document and cover such things as significant writing component, information literacy, communication skills, and any number of skills which might be embedded within the course.

As mentioned earlier, LPWG is not making a recommendation about the structure of the LAS program at this time. It is suggesting that an LAS-type first-year experience program is likely to be included in its final report. In addition, LPWG will likely suggest that such a course be required of all students, including transfer students and those participating in the evening and weekend programs.

Component B: Common Structured Experiences

The LPWG spent time during the summer discussing non-classroom ways academic learning objectives may be achieved in a revised general education program. This is anticipated by the college's recent strategic planning process. The LPWG believes that additional discussion is necessary before it recommends such a program for Simpson College.

Working Definition: Common Structured Experiences would be a variety of structured activities throughout the student's experience at the college. These could be courses linked by a common theme that could be used to fulfill requirements in Part E. Examples might include Non-Western/Western/U.S. Culture courses using great books, and a LAS course linked with a Senior Colloquium; common readings (ex: faculty teaching US Citizenship courses might all read a work by Martin Luther King); or attendance at convocations, discussions, films, plays and other events that have been identified as those intended to help integrate the Simpson Experience for all students. The purpose would be to make it clear to students that experiences outside of the classroom can help them achieve the learning goals established by the institution. Not all learning takes place in the classroom. Attendance at certain events might be required for all second-year students or all third-year students, for example, to help strengthen Simpson College as a community of scholars.

Component C: Fourth-Year Experience

The LPWG believes that the Simpson Experience should continue to include a capstone course in the senior year. Although it is not ready to make a specific recommendation in this regard, the LPWG believes several options should be explored. The course might look like our current autonomous Senior Colloquium and be based on an interest of the faculty member, or it might be a capstone required in the major.

The goal is to ensure that work on the identified learning objectives that began in the LAS course and continues through the independent experiences in years two and three, comes together in a purposeful and reflective way at the end of the college experience. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor agrees to meet the criteria of goals established by the faculty, in addition to whatever content goals are established for the course.

Component D: Embedded Skills

Working Definition: The LPWG believes that graduates of Simpson College should seek improvement on a set of skills during their college experience. It believes that many skills are best mastered when used in support of other learning over time. For this reason, it recommends that the following skills be embedded within courses. The exact number of courses to be required in each skill has not been determined. In proposing a course, the instructor would agree to

address the learning objectives for the skill established by the faculty. Here is a list of skills that might be embedded within courses:

- Critical Thinking
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Oral Communication
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Ethical and Moral Reasoning
- Writing
- Information Literacy

It is important to note that the number of courses in each skill area and the specific definitions and learning objectives for the embedded skills have not been fixed. It may be that one or more of the areas might be combined into a single area. The names also remain under discussion. At the workshop the LPWG is seeking help from the full faculty as it refines the areas and their definitions.

Component E: Understanding Culture and the Human Experience

Working Definition: Each of the foundations courses would have specific learning objectives. The students would take a course that at least in part has been designed to achieve the criteria developed by faculty for the individual objective. The courses themselves may be developed solely to achieve the learning objective, or they may be courses that are part of an academic major. They may come from any academic department. In proposing and teaching the course, the instructor agrees to meet the criteria for the learning objective.

- Global Awareness/Non-Western
- Global Awareness/Western
- U.S. Culture-Citizenship
- U.S. Culture-Minority Perspective/The Other
- Scientific Reasoning/Scientific Method
- Creative Process/Performance

It is important to note that the number of courses in each area and the specific definitions and learning objectives for the areas have not been fixed. It may be that one or more of the areas might be combined into a single area. The names also remain under discussion. At the workshop the LPWG is seeking help from the full faculty as it refines the areas and their definitions.

Final Comments

The LPWG seeks a conversation with their faculty colleagues that focuses on the larger issues of a potentially new general education curriculum. Does the idea of embedding skills make sense? Can we use a criteria-based general education format as proposed in the hybrid model it presents, rather than an exposure or ways of knowing model? If we were to implement such a general education program, how might we ensure that the definitions and rationale are clear? These are types of questions the LPWG will ask of faculty during the workshop. Questions of implementation will be addressed at a later date. The LPWG feels confident that there are enough examples of institutions doing similar things with their general education programs to believe that what it presents can be accomplished. It looks forward to the discussion.

