

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION

Learning Programs Working Group Report to the Faculty January, 2007

Introduction

The Learning Programs Working Group (LPWG) is composed of faculty elected by divisions, and faculty and staff appointed by the academic dean. The purpose of the group was to review academic practices and policies at Simpson College in light of the report of the Summer Working Group. This document serves as the preliminary report of the LPWG. Its purpose is to bring to faculty proposals to be discussed and refined before possible forwarding to EPCC.

Background

The LPWG used the report of the Summer Working Group as the basis for its discussions. The ideas outlined in this document represent those the LPWG believes need campus-wide discussion. Individual members gathered information from a variety of sources and telephone conferences were held with the registrars at Coe College and Wartburg College. Information from Luther College was gathered during a campus visit by John Bolen, and the registrar at Roanoke College responded to a series of questions.

Principles

The working group affirmed the following principles created by the Summer Working Group:

Principle #1: Simpson students need to be more engaged in and responsible for their learning than is currently the case. One way to engage students is experiential learning, and the use of experiential teaching methods (service-learning, research, internships, etc.) is growing rapidly.

Principle #2: The academic calendar, course credit system, and daily schedule should support the academic objectives and overall mission of Simpson College.

Principle #3: The academic structure at Simpson College should be informed by the practices at other high-quality institutions of its type.

Principle #4: Any changes in academic structure need to support the quality and rigor of the traditional undergraduate and adult learning programs.

Proposals and Ideas

LPWG Proposal #1: The number of courses required for graduation should be 32 for the Bachelor of Arts and 36 for the Bachelor of Music, plus two required May Terms.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #1

After discussion, it was agreed that the total number of courses required for graduation should be based on full-time students at the college completing a regular load of four courses per semester for eight semesters, for a total of no more than 32 courses for the B. A. degree and 36 for the B. M. degree. The LPWG agreed with the summer group when it reported,

“The Working Group found that Simpson College is an outlier among excellent institutions in terms of the total number of courses required for graduation. A majority of the “top 100” liberal arts colleges require fewer courses to graduate than does Simpson. Our 128-credit requirement translates into roughly 42+ courses required for graduation. Many excellent liberal arts colleges require around 32-36 courses to graduate. This is accomplished by either using the four credits per course or one course/one unit model. Even among institutions that assign three credits per course, Simpson’s 128-credit requirement is on the higher end of the scale. The “standard” at institutions like Simpson College is typically closer to 120 credits to graduate.”

In addition, the LPWG agreed with the Summer Working Group that reducing the number of courses required for graduation would help students “focus their energies on fewer subjects and give them more time for engaged learning, including out-of-classroom work, service learning and experiential education.” It would also enable faculty to “strengthen or increase the rigor of existing courses.” In addition, reducing the number of courses students take each semester would have other benefits for the faculty and the college. The group agreed that it “would allow for a reduced average teaching load for faculty providing more time for class preparation, student advising and mentoring, faculty development, scholarship, and creative work.” It noted that Luther College has recently used this strategy for this very same purpose. A reduced average teaching load would help the college to continue to recruit highly qualified faculty. In addition, reducing the total courses required of students each semester would free up classroom space and possibly allow for longer class periods.

LPWG Proposal #2: The number of hours a course meets per week should continue to be determined by the academic department and the course instructor. Credit for each course should be expressed in units, one course = one unit.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #2

The LPWG reviewed much of the data seen by the Summer Working Group and agreed that many high quality institutions have credit assigned based not on seat-time but rather on the academic expectations for the course. In reviewing the credit system here at Simpson, the group realized that our current structure already allows flexibility between seat time and credit. This happens with internships, study abroad and courses taught in the evening and weekend program.

The LPWG recommends that the college continue this practice and allow faculty members and departments even greater leeway to determine the actual number of class hours each course will meet. The group agreed with the summer working group that it would “give faculty members more flexibility to select the number of class hours based on the pedagogy that is best for student engagement and learning.” The group found this to be the case at other high quality institutions. The one course = one unit system is in place at a variety of colleges including Coe College, St. Olaf College, Rhodes College, Gustavus Adolphus College, and Roanoke College. (See Addendum A)

The LPWG considered moving to four credits per course as Luther College has recently done, but believes the simplicity of the unit system allows students to more readily understand the relationship between courses taken and graduation. The LPWG recognizes that in some disciplines (music, physical education, for example) partial courses would still be needed. Partial courses would be assigned .25, .50, or .75 credit by the department and EPCC.

It is important to note that at colleges that have a unit system, student credit for a course and faculty load for the course are not necessarily the same. At such institutions, it is not unusual to recognize that faculty in the sciences and certain other disciplines have lecture and multiple lab components for a single course. Additional lab hours may be recognized in determining faculty load, but not in student credit load. The determination of equitable distribution of faculty teaching load is made by the affected departments and the academic dean.

LPWG Proposal #3: The curriculum should continue to follow the “1/3-1/3-1/3” model now in place for the Bachelor’s of Arts degree and “1/3-2/3” model for the Bachelor’s of Music degree.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #3

The LPWG believes that as a general rule for the Bachelor’s of Arts degree, about one-third of the courses required for graduation should be in general education. About one-third should be in a major and one-third should be considered electives. This has been the tradition pattern at high quality liberal arts colleges and offers the student an opportunity for breadth and depth as well as some freedom for exploration. Although this is not a change from current practice, the LPWG believes that the proposed reduction in the courses required for graduation might suggest to some a movement away from this accepted standard. This is not the case.

It was agreed that some majors would need to be exempt from the rule and that a process must be put into place to review such requests. It was also agreed that about one-third of the courses for the Bachelor’s of Music degree should be in general education, with the remaining two-thirds in music courses.

LPWG Proposal #4: When possible, align Spring Break with local public schools.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #4

The data in Iowa shows that university and town breaks are synchronized (i.e. Ames, Iowa City, Cedar Falls and Waterloo). Simpson faculty and staff have children in a variety of school districts. At the current time Indianola, Des Moines, Carlisle, Martensdale-St. Mary, Norwalk and Waukee schools all have the same break, routinely the week after Simpson's break. Some school districts now have no spring break; other districts are often a week later than the college in their area.

Spring breaks at our athletic conference schools range from the first week in March (Dubuque, Wartburg) to the last week in March (Cornell); Coe, Luther and Simpson fall in the middle. The most popular week is March 17-24 (Central, BV, Loras and Morningside plus Iowa, Iowa State and UNI), a week after Simpson and the same as Indianola Schools. Looking outside of the state, other colleges (St. Olaf and Oberlin) have the same break weeks as their community schools.

It was agreed that when it is practical the college calendar should be synchronized with the local school districts. This would be of significant benefit to faculty and staff with children. At the same time, it was recognized that calendar decisions for the college need to be based primarily on the academic program needs of the institution.

LPWG Proposal #5: The academic calendar should include a May Term, the number of May Terms required for graduation be reduced to two, and that a break from classes be inserted between the end of spring semester and May Term.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #5

The LPWG agreed with the summer group that having a May Term allowed the flexibility for teaching pedagogy that is not available in the regular semesters. These opportunities are well known and include study abroad, internships, job shadowing, student research, and time for extended creative arts activity.

At the same time, the LPWG recognized that some disciplines may not be well-suited to take advantage of the unique opportunities presented by such an intensive term. In addition, it is clear that some faculty do not wish to teach in such a one-month intensive term. For this reason, the LPWG recommends May Term should be optional for faculty. Courses offered in the May Term will be those determined by the department to be best suited to take advantage of the opportunities the term presents.

The LPWG discussed other alternatives for the calendar including a January Term and a year with two 16-week semesters, each composed of two, eight-week sub-semesters. It was agreed that despite the advantages identified by the summer group with January Term (provides a continuity of learning throughout the year, opportunity to carry January learning into the spring semester, a significant break between semesters for those not teaching, etc.) a change to January Term would be too disruptive to the activity of the college at this time. Similarly, a shift to 16-week semesters with sub-semesters would mean that every course would need to be adjusted and that it was unlikely that enough 8-week courses could be devised to allow the system to work.

In addition, it was clear that a break must be inserted between the end of the spring semester and the start of May Term to allow faculty to prepare. The specific length of the break before May Term is yet to be determined.

LPWG-Proposal #6: Graduation should be moved to before May Term with a break between graduation and the start of May Term.

Background and Rationale for Proposal #6

Institutions which do not require all May Terms (Roanoke College and Coe College, for example) often have commencement at the end of spring semester and then take a break before May Term. This would represent a shift in practice at Simpson College. The LPWG discussed the option of requiring first-year students to take May Term. It also considered requiring seniors to take May Term. In the end, the LPWG felt that it would be best to allow departments to design courses for May Term that met their own needs would be better than focusing May Term on a particular subset of students. A substantial number of seniors wish to do internships in their last May Term and are not on campus. Having graduation before May Term allows seniors to go into the job market a bit earlier.

Having graduation before May Term may present challenges for our campus culture, but the committee feels these could be overcome. The LPWG believes that strategies for addressing potential concerns should be a part of the campus-wide conversation.

LPWG Proposal #7: TO BE DECIDED

Daily Schedule

The LPWG believes that a daily revised schedule may allow more flexibility in scheduling courses, better address the growing need for longer class sessions, and provide more options for service learning and other hands-on pedagogy. The LPWG has not come to agreement on a proposal for daily schedule and intends to continue its discussion. The LPWG recognizes that although there may be some advantage to making changes to the daily schedule simultaneously to the other changes proposed in this document, Proposals 1-6 do not depend on a change in the daily schedule.

Summary and Next Steps

The LPWG group believes its proposals address the structural problems in our current learning program and, if implemented, will result in an improved learning environment for our students and would allow a reduction in the average teaching assignment for faculty to six courses per year.

To gain additional information about the impact of its preliminary proposals, the LPWG intends to hold a series of open meetings during January. Faculty members will be invited to gather by division and in open town hall meetings. In addition, faculty are welcome to send their comments and concerns to the LPWG via the dean's office. At the conclusion of the information

gathering period, the LPWG will make the refinements it feels necessary and send the recommendations to the EPCC for action.

We look forward to the continued discussion.

Addendum A

In the spring of 2006, work-study students under the supervision of John Bolen used a list of the “top 100” liberal arts colleges in the United States institutions found on the U.S. News and World Report website for the purpose of seeking information about course credits and the number of classes required for graduation at high quality institutions. The following colleges and universities are among those thought to be on the unit system where one course equals one academic unit.

Wesleyan University (CT)
Bryn Mawr College
Bates College
Bucknell University
Lafayette College
College of the Holy Cross
Colorado College
Union College
DePauw University
Wabash
Pitzer College
Reed College
St. Olaf College
Wheaton College (MA)
Kalamazoo College
St. Lawrence University
Illinois Wesleyan University
Willamette University
College of Wooster
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Muhlenberg College
Birmingham Southern College
Gustavus Adolphus College
Knox College
Mills College
University of Puget Sound
Hanover College
Albion College
Ohio Wesleyan College
Transylvania University
Lake Forest College
Coe College

It should be noted that the information was collected from institutional websites and may have changed since its gathering. The LPWG does not vouch for the accuracy of the data and encourages those interested to check the information directly with the institutions listed. The LPWG used the list only for reference purposes as it discussed course credits and the number of

the courses required for graduation. It should also be noted that it is believed that all of the institutions listed above require fewer courses for graduation than does Simpson College. Most require in the range of 32-36 courses. In the list of courses given to the LPWG, roughly 60% require fewer courses for graduation than does Simpson College. The complete list of institutions is available from John Bolen.