

**Presidential Initiative # 3**  
**Reviewing and Rethinking the Curriculum**  
**Executive Summary**

While the current curriculum has served us well and is not perceived as being in crisis, the faculty agree with the president that a regular, coherent reconsideration of the curriculum should be undertaken. Because radical change does not seem called for, the task force has sought ways in which the curriculum could be reconfigured by incorporating existing courses and departments. The Committee hopes to present proposals for a revision of general degree requirements to the faculty within the current academic year (2001-2002).

Responding to a survey from our task force, Rhodes faculty expressed three overarching areas of concern:

the amount and kind of general distribution requirements and the unwieldy divisional model presently in place

- Overall, there seems to be little connection between the college's stated general education goals and the rationale for degree requirements.
- There is a perceived imbalance in the curriculum, with four courses of a student's program dedicated to Search or Life
- The area distribution model for the curriculum may have surpassed its usefulness, as indicated by the proliferation of "topics" courses that tend to blur traditional disciplinary boundaries.
- "Experimentation in a non-penalty environment" is difficult for students, given the emphasis on core and major requirement, anxiety over grades, and faculty reluctance to expand pass/fail options. So many required courses severely limit the options for electives. Courses that contribute to the understanding of diversity, study abroad opportunities, and experimental and service-learning courses, while all desirable, cannot currently be required of – or in many cases, taken by – students who are already overloaded.

the current course load for students

- Our course load "norm" of 14 hours per semester in order to fulfill the 112 hours required for graduation in four years is not "natural," given our assignment of an average of three credit hours per course without labs or extra work. This disparity results in confusion and anxiety on the part of students and advisors, and militates against students taking courses that they want rather than those that will "fit.")

students' general lack of writing, communication, and quantitative skills

- English 151 often does not sufficiently address our students' need for better writing skills. The issue of communication, while related to the study of foreign languages, is not entirely addressed by this requirement. Finally, there currently is no mathematics or quantitative requirement.

To further its study of this question, the task force carried out an examination of the curricula of top-tier liberal arts schools. We found the following general trends among the colleges that were investigated:

- Rhodes has more general degree requirements (17) than any of the institutions that were examined. These 17 courses represent 40% of the course required for graduation at Rhodes. In comparison, we note the following:
  - Amherst (ranked #1) has no general degree requirements other than a first-year seminar and a major.
  - Swarthmore (#2) requires one year of a foreign language and an academic major.
  - Wellesley (#4) requires three "course units" in each of three divisional areas.
  - Grinnell requires a first-year tutorial and an academic major.
  - Pomona (#10) requires "no specific course or department," for graduation, with the exception of a first-year course called "Critical Inquiry"
- Among the top colleges we examined, Amherst, Swarthmore, Haverford, Wellesley, Davidson, Pomona, Reed, Bucknell, Colgate, Union, and Occidental all had course-based, rather than credit-based, programs requiring 30-36 courses for graduation. Other top colleges that were credit-based (Carleton, Centre, Grinnell, Macalester, Oberlin, and Sewanee) had courses that were four to six credit-hours each, without regard to number of classroom hours of contact.
- An increasing number of colleges in our peer group and amongst those we seek to emulate have organized their curricula and general degree requirements around skills and abilities deemed essential for students in the liberal arts, rather than around traditional divisional or departmental distribution requirements. We found two of these particularly attractive for possible application at Rhodes.
  - Skill-based general education requirements, modeled upon the PAC ("Perception, Analysis, and Communication" program of Pomona College. Pomona's faculty developed this innovative program, based upon skills in ten different areas, in 1994. The core curriculum is intended to recognize flexibility in student interests and in the general liberal arts curriculum, while at the same time providing certain common intellectual experiences and the development of skills appropriate to a liberal arts college.
  - General education requirements based on "areas of inquiry and ability," based on models from Albion College and the University of Puget Sound. This model focuses on nine areas of study rather than on skills.

Another consideration in the reshaping of the curriculum could involve the designation of certain courses as "qualitative options" such as writing-intensive, quantitative, diversity, service-learning, research, environment, global citizenship, etc. There are already a number of

existing courses within our areas of distribution requirements that would qualify for these designations and might also be counted as four-credit-hour courses, along the lines of existing lab science courses, foreign language courses, and senior seminars. That would provide some flexibility within the curriculum.

Our current process of curricular review is well underway, but has far to go. We are determined to carry out this process in a careful and thoughtful manner, and make these recommendations for the immediate future, keeping in mind that long-range planning is also necessary:

**Recommendations:**

- The Committee should gather from existing documentation – including the Rhodes Plan For Excellence (1991-1998), the Task Force on the Curriculum (1998), and the catalogue – language that states clearly and precisely what we mean by a liberal arts education, what we want our students to know as generalists and specialists, and how to foster a culture of intellectual pursuit.
- When such language is developed, it should be used to ensure that our educational goals are clearly and distinctly related to our general educational requirements.
- A model for general degree requirements should be developed that incorporates the elements of existing curricular models that Rhodes faculty have openly discussed and evaluated, and found attractive and applicable.
- The faculty should continue to explore the possibilities of augmented or enhanced courses (the “qualitative options” mentioned above) and their incorporation into a renewed curriculum.
- In any reconfiguration of the curriculum, the faculty should pay special consideration to the needs of the sciences (lab courses; courses with labs).
- The role of majors and minors should be re-examined in regard to degree requirements.
- Ways should be found to facilitate the incorporation of interdisciplinary courses and programs within the degree requirements.
- The faculty should examine the usefulness of a 50-minute “hour” as the basis for a contact hour.

**Please read the following article, “A Battle Plan for Professors to Recapture the Curriculum,” in preparation for consideration of the following discussion questions:**

- What makes a curriculum competitive with other quality liberal arts colleges? What might detract from its competitiveness? What might enhance its attractiveness?
- What do you know about other liberal arts colleges’ curricula that might benefit the Rhodes curriculum?
- In your experience with Rhodes, what are the strongest elements in the College’s curriculum?
- If asked to design a liberal arts college curriculum, how would you go about it?

