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## Summary of the 2002-2003 Work of the Educational Development Committee

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#### 4.9.03 Presentation to Faculty

### **Summary of 02-03 Work of the Educational Development Committee**

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## **1. Description of the work leading to the curricular changes we are currently considering**

### **1.1 Recent history of curricular work at Rhodes.**

Over the past seven years, numerous attempts have been made to examine, rethink, and revise the Rhodes curriculum. The Educational Development Committee, established in 1999 was founded, in part, to respond to the perceived and acknowledged need to move the curriculum forward. We have worked with documents produced by various committees, task forces, and workgroups starting with the strategic self-study undertaken in 1997-98 for the SACS accreditation review. These documents are gathered in a folder on the College Information Volume. To access, go to 'Faculty Items', then to 'Ed Development Committee', and then to 'History of Reform Efforts'.

In addition, we have examined faculty in responses to the EDC proposal presented to the faculty at its May 2002 meeting. These include notes from faculty fora held during spring 2002, faculty meeting notes, and memos from faculty members and from student representatives about parts of the proposal. The document "What Needs Fixing" in the edc folder summarizes our discussions of these responses.

### **1.2 Input from faculty during the '02 – '03 academic year**

**a.** The faculty affirmed 72-2 in a straw vote at its May 02 meeting that the Rhodes curriculum should require at least one course that focuses on diversity issues. A subcommittee of EDC has engaged faculty in 5 small group discussions of ways we might define and implement such a requirement. Work continues on this.

**b.** We have heard very little disagreement from faculty about a need to give greater attention to the development of writing skills, and to spread this attention over the curriculum, rather than confining it to a single course in the English department. A subcommittee of EDC has surveyed departments to determine how and how much writing is currently included in Rhodes coursework. This committee continues to work with representatives of the writing center, the search staff, and the first-year-experience committee to consider how our curriculum should encourage the development of writing skills.

**c.** Minutes from the 11 meetings held by the EDC this year include rather detailed descriptions of our discussions, including input we have received and considered from faculty and students.

### **1.3 Scholarly research on curriculum design, and educational outcomes.**

**a.** A great deal of scholarly work about higher education and student development has informed our discussion. This literature includes empirical studies that evaluate student 'outcomes' under different kinds of curricular structures, and theoretical work on the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of curriculum design. A list of selected references follows this report.

**b.** Briefly the results of these studies present compelling arguments and evidence that:

- students retain what they learn and are transformed by their education to the extent that they are engaged in the learning. This engagement happens when students use what they are learning to answer questions or to solve problems that are important to them.
- encounters with diversity (defined in many ways) are critical to intellectual development in the cognitive years.
- writing is important, not only because it is a skill expected of educated individuals, but because of the role it plays in student learning.
- interdisciplinary work invigorates a curriculum for both faculty and students
- nation-wide, the amount of time students spend on out-of-class academic work is considerably less than the time faculty expect, even though evidence shows out-of-class effort to be critical to learning outcomes.

## **2. Educational Goals we Attempt to Serve in a New Curriculum**

In the design of a new curriculum, we have tried to be mindful and respectful both of the longstanding traditions of the college and of the work done during the past three years on ten task forces that have explored newer visions and initiatives. We affirm the recently articulated vision statement:

Rhodes College aspires to graduate students with a life-long passion for learning, a compassion for others, and the ability to translate academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world.

We are working toward a proposal which will attempt to move the curriculum into alignment with this vision, and with the President's initiatives articulated in the document, "Rhodes' Focus on Academic Citizenship". Specifically, we are guided by the following goals:

- We want to encourage and to highlight engaged learning. We are impressed with a body of research and with the experience of our own faculty showing that education is transformative when students are active in creating knowledge, not just absorbing it, and when they are practicing and applying what they learn in a variety of settings. We are seeking a curriculum design that will break down the distinction between 'extra-curricular' and 'course' work by students. We want a curriculum in which students' engagement on campus and in the community contributes to and is coordinated with, rather than competes with their 'course-related' educational activities.
- We want to encourage the development of a campus community that is vital and intellectually stimulating. We believe that greater involvement in the arts, in student government, student publications, campus lecture series, panels, and debates will increase our sense that students and faculty are mutually engaged in intellectual endeavors, and that we all have responsibilities to contribute to our mutual enrichment.
- We want to encourage a movement outward from the boundaries of our campus into the city of Memphis and beyond the city into the region, to other parts of the nation, and to other parts of the world. We want to be assured that Rhodes

graduates are prepared to be citizens, and we believe that they should begin civic engagement while they are here. We see this as highlighting an aspect of our campus life that is already vital. Rhodes has long been a leader in student community service and we have recently taken leadership in integrating such work with academic endeavors.

- We recognize that the Search/Life sequence of courses has a long and important history at Rhodes, and is a significant part of our institutional identity. We recognize also that those courses have undergone regular change, as they have responded to new scholarship and to needs of a changing student body and a changing world. We want to keep a central role for these courses and we want to articulate clearly the educational goals that will be addressed there.
- We want a curriculum that is innovative and exciting as well as grounded in tradition. We do not want to do a little more ‘tweaking’ to a curriculum that is over 30 years old; we want to start afresh. At the same time, we want to honor tradition and to preserve those things we do well. For example:
- We want to feature and credit much of the work we currently do as “extra-curricular.” We are convinced that some of our most important work, the work that has the greatest impact on our students and makes the greatest contributions to our community and to our disciplines, is work that must currently be ‘squeezed in.’ We are seeking ways to credit such work for students and for faculty.
- We want a curriculum that inspires students to consider what they are trying to achieve with their college education, and that gives them greater responsibility for selecting courses. As they select courses to fulfill requirements, we would like for them to get increasingly sophisticated in their thinking about what kind of education they need in order to be responsible citizens and to live their lives well.
- We want a curriculum that allows greater flexibility in meeting requirements, so that both students and faculty will be less hemmed in with required courses.
- We want a curriculum that encourages the development of more interdisciplinary and experimental courses.
- We want a curriculum that responds more intentionally to the increasing diversity of our campus and of the communities that our students will serve after they graduate.

### **3. Four aspects of curricular change currently under consideration by the committee**

#### **3.1 Highlighting Ability/Content/Engagement in our curriculum.**

Students should come to see their work as an integration of, ‘knowing how’ (ability), ‘knowing that’ (content), and ‘applying both kinds of knowledge’ (engagement). We will work towards a curriculum that increasingly coordinates these components of an educational endeavor. Figure 1 presents a schematic we are working with.

Our goals for student abilities to be developed, content to be learned, and engagements to be practiced should be clearly articulated. Among the abilities, would be basic academic skills (e.g., critical thinking, expository writing, reasoned argument and conversation). Among the contents will be three intersecting domains to be described below.

Engagements would include science laboratories, service learning, and a variety of student-initiated independent projects, etc.

We are considering a curriculum in which courses are designated as duos, trios, or solos:

- trio courses would include all three rings of the ACE figure: ability, content, and engagement. Example courses that would fall into this are service learning courses and science courses with required labs. Trios might involve collaboration between faculty members to create a 'trio cluster.' Some of these might be designed so that one component of the trio (usually the engagement component) would be optional.
- Duo courses would focus student attention on two of the three rings, often content and ability. We would ask faculty to be intentional and clear in designing courses so that students know what skills (e.g., writing, speaking, critical analysis, etc.) will be a focus of the course.
- Solo courses would focus on one of the curriculum rings, usually either ability or engagement. We rarely attempt to teach skill without content, but there may be some such courses (examples may be the instruction in a musical instrument, the public speaking course). Students would be encouraged to propose solo components that they would co-ordinate with a duo. Usually these would be engagement/experiences that would exercise the skills and/or increase exposure to the content of a course, either in work on campus (e.g., student publications, theatre productions) or in the larger community (local arts, community service, education, government, health care).

We are working toward a curriculum design that will guarantee that students do work in all three rings in each content domain (described below).

### **3.2 Domains of Study to be included in general degree requirements.**

Figure 2 illustrates a division of content domains that is under consideration. At the center of this figure would be the study of processes and traditions used to make our experience of the world meaningful. At each intersection of any two rings is a space for interdisciplinary courses, which might be credited for students in either of their intersecting domains.

It is our intention that the domains described would not be defined rigidly by departmental or divisional administrative boundaries. Faculty members in some departments might legitimately propose a course for any of the three rings.

### **3.3 Articulating the role of the Search/Life courses in the curriculum.**

We believe that it is important for students entering the college to have some common academic experiences, and we believe that the Search course constitutes an important part of the college's history and identity. We appreciate, also, how much this course has changed over its history, and how flexibly it has responded to changing scholarship, changes in educational goals of the colleges, and changes in the population of students we teach.

We are in conversation with representatives from the search and life course sequences about the following issues:

- Our goals for student abilities to be developed, content to be learned, and engagements to be practiced should be clearly articulated.
  - Among the abilities, would be some basic academic skills (e.g., critical thinking, expository writing, reasoned argument and conversation).
  - Among the content goals would be an introduction to the philosophical grounding of the understanding of self and other. This would serve as the starting point for an attentiveness to and appreciation for cultural diversity and to the diversity of perspectives that guide our efforts to make our experiences meaningful.
  - It would be a goal to work with the office of the Dean of Students to consider ways that we might coordinate our early efforts to involve students in campus life with the work they are doing in Search/Life. That is, we want students to think about the questions raised in these classes about values and meaning to be applied to the decisions they make about their involvements in the campus community.
- The material covered in search raises questions about how people have worked to render their experiences meaningful. We will want the course to expose students to ways people have addressed these questions and sought answers to question about the natural world, about human society and interactions, and about works of the creative imagination. In other words, Search/Life should serve as the starting point for students' exploration in the three curricular domains.
- In short, Search/Life will set the stage for the general degree requirements, helping students see what abilities, contents and engagements they will need in order to become passionate learners, compassionate individuals, and community leaders.

### **3.4 Crediting Student Work.**

We are seeking a scheme that will engage us all in an exciting effort to coordinate the development of skills and knowledge with engagement and practice. This is predicated on the idea that we will create something different from our current 'courses'. We are not seeking to increase or to decrease the amount of work that faculty or students do nor the number of 'things' to which our students are exposed. We are seeking a different level of engagement.

We are considering a credit system based on our expectation for student hours to be devoted to the course, rather than on faculty hours spent in the classroom. For example:

- students should plan to work, on average, 40 or 45 hours a week. We should encourage them to be intentional about dividing these hours between time in class or in labs, time in the library, time in group work or individual study out of class, and time in off- or on-campus engagements that are explicitly integrated with their academic work. (Hours outside those credited hours, we would expect students to spend on social and other extra-curricular activities that are not tied to their coursework.)

- Faculty would consider, in the design of their courses, how many hours they expect the typical student to commit. Faculty would, with time, get better at estimating appropriate time commitments to expect for various assignments. Nevertheless, some students would, of course, need to spend more or less time than the ‘typical’ student in order to produce work of the quality they desire.
- trio courses, which would include all three rings of the ACE curriculum presented in figure 1, would usually carry 15 credit units but the 15 hours a week that the student would typically give to the course might be divided in a variety of ways.
- Duo courses, which would focus student attention on two of the three rings, (usually content and ability) would typically carry ten credits. There would be variation in how students would be expected to divide their 10 hours/week, depending on the goals of the course.
- Solo courses, which would focus on a single ring (usually either ability or engagement) would usually carry five credits. Faculty could however, propose solo courses with substantially more credit hours. For example, we might develop an intensive conversation course in a second language which would take considerably more than 5 hours a week. Most student-proposed ‘add-ons’ (coordinating some engagement activity with course content) would carry 5 credit hours, although some advanced student work might carry considerably more (e.g., some student research projects).

Students in this system could enroll in 40 or 45 hours of study each semester. A student taking 40 hours might be involved in 4 duos, in two trios and a duo, in one trio, two duos and a solo, etc.

This proposal has the merit of focusing our attention on what the STUDENTS do in the pursuit of their education. It would encourage us to re-think what we do in light of our expectations for student activity outside the classroom.

If we were to use this kind of system for crediting student work, the question of how many courses a student should take to earn a Rhodes degree would be transformed into a question of how a student should divide eight semesters of 40-hour work weeks.

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