

The University Curriculum Committee, 2013-14 Report to the Drake University Faculty Senate

Committee Members: Todd Hodgkinson (Chair) (Education), Michael Andreski (Pharmacy), Bill Boal (Business), Maria Bohorquez (Chemistry), Lee Joliffe (Journalism), Marcia Keyser (Cowles Library), Karen Leroux (History), Joanna Mosser (Political Science), Daniele Shelton (Law), Arthur Sanders (Ex-officio member), Chrystal Stanley (CAAD representative),

Consulting Members: Kevin Saunders (Office of Institution Research & Assessment), Kevin Moenkhaus (Office of Student Records).

Introduction

In August of 2013, the Executive Committee of the Drake Faculty Senate charged the University Curriculum Committee (UCC) with reviewing the efficacy of its general education program, commonly referred to as the Drake Curriculum (appendix A). In addition to engaging in broad, theoretical discussions about the purposes of general education at a liberal arts institution, the UCC explored how the Drake Curriculum might be redefined in order to create a distinctive learning experience for all students. This report presents recommendations from the UCC to the Drake Faculty Senate along with the research and rationale upon which these recommendations were based.

Responding to the Charge

Initially, there was confusion by some UCC members (and some Drake faculty) over whether Executive Committee wanted the UCC to conduct in a comprehensive *review* of the Drake Curriculum or a comprehensive *reform* of the curriculum. Concerns regarding the impetus for curriculum reform soon followed, as did concerns over the limited timeframe for such an endeavor.

In response to these concerns, the Executive Committee emphasized that the UCC was *not* tasked with *reforming* the Drake Curriculum, but rather with *reviewing* its purposes and structure in an effort to determine its efficacy. It was further noted that ongoing curriculum review reflects best practice and that—whether or not the work of the UCC resulted in a reform of the Drake Curriculum—the time spent by the UCC in reviewing its efficacy would be time well spent.

After clarifying the expectations put forth by the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, the UCC created four goals to help us accomplish our charge:

1. To review the body of literature on liberal arts and general education.
2. To gather data and feedback from Drake students and faculty on their perceptions of and experiences with the Drake Curriculum.

3. To review the Drake Curriculum (its purposes and structure) and identify points of pride, as well as areas for improvement.
4. To explore alternative approaches to general/liberal art education that could help to inform our own model.

Given our limited timeframe, the UCC decided to break up into four sub-committees—one for each goal. What follows is a report of our findings.

Review of Literature

In reviewing the body of literature on liberal arts and general education, the UCC identified several trends:

- A recognition that higher education is attempting to educate more students at a much higher level of learning than ever before—and that, this new cohort of college students is larger, more diverse, and probably less well prepared for college level learning than were cohorts in earlier eras. (LEAP, 2012)
- A conscious move away from “traditional” conceptualizations of liberal education and the abandonment of “learning for its own sake” in favor of “learning for practical value in the real-world.” (Humphreys, 2009).
- A move away from discipline-based distribution models of general education (Gaff, 1991).
- A push for greater “coherence” in general education experiences (Boning, 2007).
- A demand for greater accountability in higher education (Penn, 2011).

Although most committee members did not look favorably upon the shift away from “learning for the inherent value of learning”—it was acknowledged that the demographics of our student body are changing, that students and parents are looking for more “practical value” in their education, that colleges and universities are being held to new standards of accountability, and that Drake University needs to be responsive to the changing landscape of higher education.

One study that caught the UCC’s attention was an analysis conducted by Bourke, et al. (2009) on how top liberal arts colleges and doctoral granting institutions structured their models of general education. Noting that the liberal arts have been a “great bastion of [higher] education for centuries,” (p. 221) but that “precisely which subjects have been considered so essential that all students should be exposed to them has changed” (p. 222), Bourke, et al. (2009) explained how the

liberal arts tradition has “morphed and transformed” into what we now know as the “general education requirements,” taking shape through either a core curriculum or distribution model.

According to the authors, 80% of liberal arts colleges currently employ a distribution model of general education; however, not all of these models included the same types of course requirements. For example, some distribution models included more traditional liberal arts requirements (e.g., coursework in the humanities and sciences, etc.), while others incorporated a range of coursework focusing on traditional liberal arts, as well as on courses designed to promote skills like written and oral communication.

The UCC recognized this shift away from the liberal arts—towards a more practical approach to general education rooted in pervasive skills (e.g., critical thinking, writing, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, etc.) and noted that, in many respects, the Drake Curriculum reflects this “hybridized” approach to general education.

It was also noted in the literature that, for too many undergraduates, this distributive model of curriculum amounts to “required electives,” largely because many students fail to see how they fit into a coherent whole, (Irvine Group, 1990). As a result, many institutions have worked to implement “across-the-curriculum” themes to provide coherence to their general education curriculum.

In the name of coherence (Boning, 2007), other institutions have moved towards a core approach to general education, where students take a purposely-sequenced core of courses during their four years of study.

The UCC found both of these trends intriguing, mostly because they worked to give purpose to general education, and because they allowed for a greater focus on student developmental needs.

An additional point of discussion that resulted from our review of literature focused on a recent initiative meant to combine liberal education with the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills (Humphreys, 2009; Albertine, 2012).

Endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) and launched in 2005, the LEAP initiative “challenges the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others” (AACU, 2013).

According to Humphreys (2009):

The LEAP vision updates, as well as demonstrably builds on, the enduring aims of liberal education: broad knowledge, strong intellectual skills, and a grounded sense of ethical and civic responsibility. But LEAP also moves beyond the traditional limits of liberal or liberal arts education—moving

most notably away from the self-imposed non vocational identity and rejecting the more recent association with learning for its own sake, rather than learning for its practical value in real-world contexts” (p. 16)

The LEAP initiative also promotes ongoing assessment of four essential learning outcomes (Appendix B) and the integration of “High Impact Practices” (Ishler, 2003, p. 1), including but not limited to: first-years seminars, collaborative and experiential learning, internships, capstone projects, writing intensive coursework, and project-based learning.

Although the UCC appreciated the vision of the LEAP initiative, some committee members questioned whether or not a model of general education could accomplish all of its “essential outcomes.” Other committee members expressed a concern about the LEAP initiative’s focus on “professional skills”, arguing that college was an exploratory time for students to discover their passions and test ideas—not solely to prepare for a career. Still other members praised the LEAP outcomes and suggested that, in many respects the current incarnation of the Drake Curriculum reflected a conscious effort at achieving them.

Student and Faculty Perspectives

To help inform our recommendations, the UCC made a concerted effort to engage students and faculty in sharing their perspectives on and experiences with the Drake Curriculum. It should be noted that members of the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment helped to conduct focus group interviews with Drake upperclassman (Appendix C) and that an open forum was held to gather input from faculty about the Drake Curriculum. Faculty were also encouraged to post their comments about the Drake Curriculum Review on the Faculty Senate webpage—and several faculty members made a concerted effort to reach out to UCC members to share their ideas. What follows is a detailed description of the points of pride and expressed concerns identified by students and faculty.

Many faculty and students liked how the Drake Curriculum allowed for a great degree of flexibility. Students, especially, liked how many of the Area of Inquiry (AOI) requirements counted for requisites in their major field of study. Students also liked the fact that they could choose from a menu of options—and how the AOI courses expanded their horizons by forcing them to take coursework outside of their major. Others saw a benefit in taking courses with a mix of majors and non-majors.

Several students praised the experience they had in their First-year Seminar course; others claimed that the Senior Capstone experience was their favorite part of the Drake Curriculum.

Students and faculty also liked how the Drake Curriculum allowed for a liberal arts education but also emphasized “21st Century learning skills”, such as: information literacy, communication, and engaged citizenship.

However, not all perceptions of and experiences with the Drake Curriculum were favorable. In fact, several students and faculty expressed dissatisfaction with their AOI experience.

Some students believed that the system of AOI requirements was too complex and that it lacked “cohesiveness.” Students and faculty also wondered about the purpose of some AOI requirements. For example, one student wondered why they needed to take two history requirements. Another failed to see why they needed to take an artistic experience at all. Yet another student questioned why her experiences studying abroad could not count for the “Global and Cultural Understanding” AOI.

In our conversations with faculty, many called into question the need for a category in Critical Thinking. In the words of one faculty member, “Critical thinking is a skill that should be integrated into all courses at Drake...not designated to a single category.”

Another frequent criticism of the Drake Curriculum was its lack of rigor. When compared with coursework in their major, several students claimed that their AOI courses were “not very challenging.” Others admitted to taking specific courses, because they were “easy.”

On more than one occasion, students admitted to not being interested in their AOI courses, and some students confessed that they were “just getting the credits out of the way.” Students also expressed frustration with the AOI requirements, and how they “took away” from courses that they “actually cared about.”

Several students commented on how courses intended for majors were extremely difficult for non-majors who might not have the appropriate background knowledge or interest in the topic. They also noted that faculty teaching these courses had mixed expectations for students.

Some students and faculty expressed concerns about the availability AOI coursework, especially in certain categories: Values and Ethics, Artistic Experience, Engaged Citizen, and Information Literacy; however, many students claimed that they did not have great difficulty getting into AOI courses.

Other students found that the published list of AOI offerings on the Drake Curriculum website differed greatly from the designations found in BlueView during registration.

Some faculty expressed concerns about the fact that a single AOI course can “count” for two different sets of AOI requirements; however, others faculty liked this dynamic of the Drake Curriculum, because it allowed students to complete the requirements sooner and take more classes in their major.

Other faculty believed that the Drake Curriculum had strayed from its original purposes, citing the fact that many students transferred in credit or substituted credit from coursework in their majors.

Drake Student Survey (DSS), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the Wabash College Report

In our review of the Drake Curriculum, the UCC also considered data provided to us by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA).

Since 1991, the OIRA has administered the Drake Student Survey (DSS) as a way to assessing student satisfaction and the perceived effectiveness of specific components of the Drake curriculum. In spring of 2011, the DSS was administered to undergraduate and Pharmacy students via the Internet. On this survey, Drake students were asked to report their perception of whether their skills had become “better or worse in each of the general education (AOI) areas since enrolling at the institution” (Appendix D).

The results this analysis show that 83% of Drake students believe their ability to “acquire, analyze, & interpret information” improved by taking AOI coursework, that 77% of students felt their ability to “raise questions about ethical issues in their field of study” was enhanced, and 75-76% of students felt that their ability to “evaluate and construct reasoned arguments” improved after taking AOI coursework.

Unfortunately, only 55% of students reported that their ability to “understand historical developments of periods and regions” increased after taking AOI coursework, and 35% of students reported that their ability to “interpret art” improved.

It is important to note that there was considerable variation on items across schools and colleges in this report. For example, 75% of students in the School of Journalism felt their ability to “participate in the democratic process” was “better or much better,” but only 42% of the students in the College of Pharmacy felt the same. Similarly, 75% of students in the College of Business and 70% of students in the College of Pharmacy felt their ability to “execute appropriate mathematical operations for a given question” had improved since taking AOI coursework, but only 39% of students in the School of Education and 36% of students in the School of Journalism believed this was the case.

This large variation across colleges suggests that students could be mastering the learning outcomes connected with the Drake Area of Inquiry requirements (AOI) in their major field of study. If this is the case, the committee wondered if the Drake Curriculum was achieving its intentions.

Of course, these results may also reflect the limited amount of time that students spend mastering the learning outcomes tied to each AOI. For example, students in

Education are only required to take one math course in their program of study (The AOI Quantitative Literacy requirement). Students in Pharmacy, on the other hand, take several courses in mathematics, in addition to completing the Quantitative Literacy requirement. Given this possibility, the UCC wondered about the value in requiring a single AOI.

In addition to reviewing the results of the Drake Student Survey (DSS), UCC also considered results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Appendix D).

Administered bi-annually, this survey attempts to provide institutions with data on students' engagement in effective learning practices. The results of the NSSE for 2013 show that, compared to students at peer institutions, Drake seniors report lower levels of “understanding people of other backgrounds”. First year students also scored lower than students from peer institutions on “writing clearly and effectively” and on “developing or clarifying a personal code of values or ethics.”

Both first-year students and Drake seniors responded lower on: “Combining ideas from different courses when completing assignments”, “Including diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments,” “Examining the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue,” “Trying to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective”, and “Learning something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept.”

The UCC noted how these findings mirrored those of the Drake Curriculum and Assessment Committee's (DCAC), in their assessment of the “Critical Thinking” and “Global and Cultural Understanding” AOI learning outcomes. Analyzing student work samples, DCAC found that Drake students struggle in the areas of “understanding others' perspectives, identifying their own assumptions, and making arguments” (Appendix D).

Given that the Drake Curriculum is intentionally designed to increase student achievement in each of the above-mentioned areas, the UCC found the results of the NSSE survey disconcerting. The committee was also troubled that “academic challenge” appeared to be a problem for Drake seniors—although this result was not surprising, based on the results of the OIRA student focus groups. What was more surprising—and equally alarming—was the fact that first-year Drake students claimed to rarely be exposed to “reflective and integrative learning experiences.”

The UCC also took into consideration the findings of a working group hired to conduct an external review of Drake's assessment practices. In their report to Drake University, members from the Wabash College Center for Inquiry concluded that Drake's general program was “virtually impossible to assess” (Appendix D). The rationale given for this conclusion was that the Drake Curriculum targeted 40 learning outcomes (spread out over 10 categories). This finding struck a chord with members of the UCC, and it was decided that—if a reform of the Drake Curriculum

were to occur—an emphasis should be placed on either streamlining the number of identified learning outcomes or considering a less structured approach to assessment.

Analysis of the Drake Curriculum

In our analysis of the Drake Curriculum, the UCC identified several points of pride, as well as several concerns.

Points of Pride:

- Allows for a great amount of choice.
- Gives students the freedom to explore personal interests, while exposing them to a liberal arts education.
- Emphasizes 21st Century skills (critical thinking, written communication, information literacy, etc.)
- Allows for students to count major coursework towards general education requirements.

Expressed Concerns:

- Lacks rigor and relevancy.
- Has deviated from its original intentions (e.g., transfer coursework counting AOI credit, major coursework counting for two AOI requirements).
- Too complex (Conceptual framework)
- Too many course offerings in some AOI categories (History, Global and Cultural Understanding); too few in others (Artistic Experience, Values and Ethics, and Information Literacy.)
- Too ambitious (Hybridized model attempts to provide both a liberal arts and “ways of thinking” experience.)
- Lacks cohesiveness.
- Perpetuates a “checklist mentality.”
- Is difficult to assess (10 separate AOI categories with 39 outcomes).
- Has failed to achieve its desired learning outcomes.

Alternative Models for General Education

In addition to reviewing the literature on liberal arts and general education—and considering data points on student and faculty experiences with and perceptions of the Drake Curriculum—the UCC also explored several alternative models or approaches to general education (Appendix E). Our purpose in doing so was not to search for a replacement to the Drake Curriculum, but to provide the committee with context for its analysis.

In addition to exploring several “promising models” identified by the AACU, the committee also looked at models from “peer institutions.” Considerable attention was given to the academic structure of each institution, its mission, the demographics of its student body, its geographic location, and its student-faculty ratio, in an effort to “match” these institutions with the context of Drake.

In our analysis of alternative models of liberal arts and general educations, the UCC identified several trends and/or themes:

- A trend away from disciplinary-centered, distributive models of general education.
- A focus on integrative coursework that invites cross-disciplinary reflection and action upon a common theme or problem.
- Linked/clustered courses that invited students to explore a common theme from a multi-disciplinary perspective.
- Sequenced curricula designed to span a student’s four-year experience.
- A focus on academic skills development (e.g., writing, speaking) across the curriculum.
- An emphasis on fostering students’ ability to think and act across disciplinary boundaries.
- An emphasis on outcomes-based assessment targeting identified learning outcomes.

The UCC also noticed a wide array of implementation models—ranging from “modified” distributed models (i.e. the Drake Curriculum), to common core models, to decentralized approaches to general education.

In the end, the committee kept returning to two models that could help to inform Drake’s own approach to general education. These were: a “major-minors” approach to general education and an “integrative core” approach. Both of these models are described in detail below.

Major-Minors Model

One example of the “major-minors” approach to general education is the PEAK (Professional, Ethical, Articulate, and Knowledgeable) program at the College of Idaho (Appendix E). The College of Idaho is a private, liberal arts college with an enrollment of 1,122 students. Its mission as a liberal arts institution and its academic structure is comparable to Drake University—and in many respects the institution could be considered a peer institution (Although the UCC noted that the demographics of its student body were not comparable).

In 2011, the College of Idaho chose to abandon its discipline-specific distribution model of curriculum in favor of a major-minors approach to general education. The impetus given for this change was a conscious decision to do away with “the aimless, cafeteria-style model of general education in which undergraduate students simply checked-off requirements for completion” (PEAK, 2013, p. 1).

The new model adopted by the College of Idaho required students to complete three minors in an area outside of their established major field of study. To promote experimentation and to ensure that students were choosing minors that broadened their horizons, the College organized its majors and minors offerings into four categories: 1) Humanities & Fine Arts, 2) Social Science & History, 3) Natural Sciences & mathematics, 4) Professional Studies and Enhancements. Students were then limited to selecting minors from outside of their major “category” of study.

To ensure that students acquired the practical knowledge and skills they needed to be successful in the 21st century, the College of Idaho mandated that faculty integrate four general learning outcomes into all coursework: Critical Thinking, Analytic Reasoning, Problem Solving, Written Communication.

What attracted the UCC to this model of general education was the fact that it combined a liberal arts education with professional studies in a unique way. It was noted by several committee members that the Drake Curriculum did the same—but in a less cohesive manner.

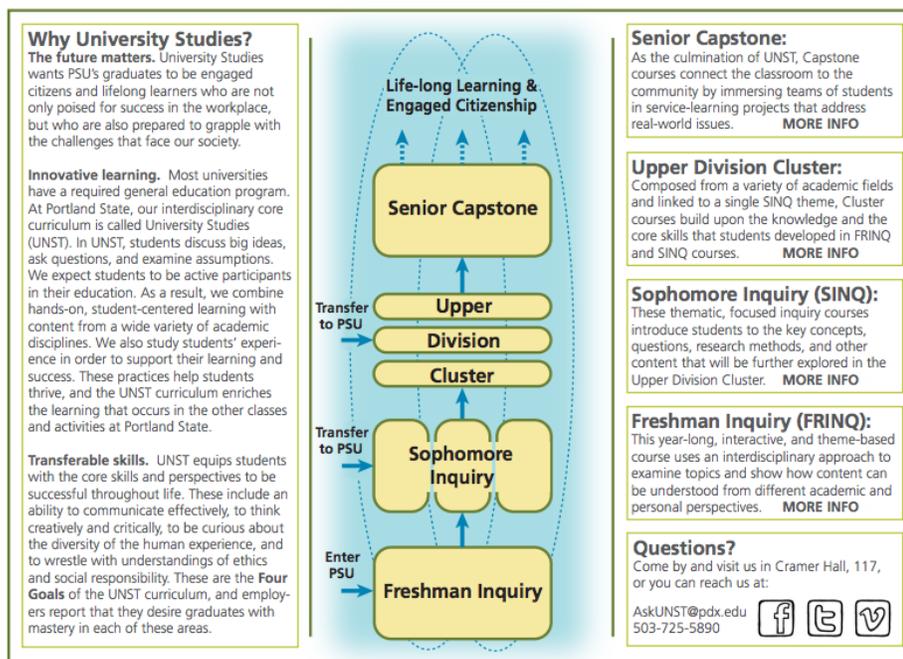
The College of Idaho’s model also appealed to the UCC, because it allowed students to explore multiple areas of interest but also guaranteed a liberal and professional education—and because it allowed students to explore an “area of inquiry” more in-depth.

In our discussion of this the major-minors approach to general education, the UCC recognized that the number of semester hours required for a minor would need to be considered, if Drake were to adopt a similar model. The UCC also agreed that the concept of what a “minor is” would be re-envisioned if such a model were adopted. For example, in a professional school such as the School of Education, a minor in education might focus more on social foundations of schooling and the place of school in society than on professional preparation.

Integrated Core Curriculum (Emphasizing Pervasive Skills and Ways of Thinking)

As evidenced by its name, students involved with this approach to general education take a prescribed set of “core” of courses over four years. This coursework is typically interdisciplinary in nature (although it does not have to be), organized around themes to encourage “connection-making,” and purposefully sequenced to target the developmental needs of students. Courses are also designed to teach students a specific set of core knowledge and skills (e.g., problem solving, information literacy, systems thinking, etc.)

One example of an Integrated Core approach to general education can be found at Portland State University (Appendix E). As illustrated in the figure below, Freshman begin with a year-long “inquiry” in which they explore topics from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Students continue this type of inquiry in their sophomore and junior years and conclude their general education experience by completing a Senior capstone project in their community.



Source: Portland State University. Retrieved from <https://www.pdx.edu/unst/home> on February 25th, 2014.

Another example of this approach to general education is at Fairleigh Dickenson University (Appendix E). In addition to taking several distributed courses in the liberal arts, students are required to complete a set of purposely-designed, seminar-based courses organized around four themes (Perspectives on the Individual, The American Experience, Cross-Cultural Perspectives, and Global Issues).

An obvious benefit to this approach to general education is its intentional structure. Given that all students are required to complete the five core courses, it guarantees that students experience a cohesive general education curriculum.

Another benefit to this model is that it allows faculty to be more purposeful in their curriculum design. Faculty teaching in such a model could better target the developmental needs of students and work purposely to scaffold their instruction.

It should be noted that, although the UCC found this model of general education attractive for its cohesiveness and emphasis on the developmental needs of students, the UCC also recognized that the implementation of an integrative core curriculum approach would require an inordinate number of resources (both human and financial). The committee also questioned the extent to which such a model “fits” within our mission to provide a liberal arts education for all students.

Attributes of a Distinct Drake Curriculum

In its charge, the Faculty Senate asked the UCC to develop a list of attributes (including both skills and knowledge) that were both critical for a distinctive general education curriculum and aligned with Drake University’s mission and 2013-17 strategic plan. If a reform of the Drake Curriculum is to occur, we believe that a “truly distinctive” general education curriculum would:

- Realize the mission of the university to integrate liberal arts education with professional preparation for all students.
- Emphasize the acquisition of 21st Century learning skills and dispositions (e.g., systems thinking, communication skills, information literacy, personal and social responsibility, etc.) and incorporate best practices in teaching and learning (integrative and applied learning, ongoing reflection, etc.)
- Have a simple conceptual framework that could be explained in a clear, compelling way.
- Encourage students to experiment broadly outside their major and develop interests to be pursued in their years beyond college, while giving some coherence to that experimentation.
- Be considerate of the developmental needs of students.
- Discourage the “checklist/requirement” mentality, often associated with distribution models of general education.
- Be taught by existing faculty in the disciplines, interdisciplinary programs, and professional schools, without a large investment in faculty development or in additional hiring.

- Preserve and build on existing FYS and Senior Capstone experiences.
- Maintain or reduce to the current number of credits required to complete the general education curriculum.
- Decentralize the teaching and assessment of pervasive thinking skills to the colleges and schools.

Recommendations

After reviewing the current body of literature on liberal arts and general education—and after enlisting feedback from Drake students/faculty and analyzing data on student achievement—the UCC has come to the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: *Vote to approve a revision of the Drake Curriculum.*

Option # 1: Improve the efficacy of the existing Drake Curriculum by:

- Exploring ways to inform students about the larger purposes of the Drake Curriculum.
- Determining if students are unable to enroll in specific Area of Inquiry requirements and, if so, why this might be.
- Working to increase the number of AOI offerings, where needed.
- Working to improve the quality of AOI course offerings, focusing on High Impact Learning practices (integrative and collaborative learning).
- Reducing the number of AOI categories.
- Re-considering the number of AOI requirements a course can fulfill.
- Reducing the number of learning outcomes associated with general program.
- Decentralizing more curricular authority and responsibility to the departments and programs.

Option # 2: Embrace an alternative model of general education.

In our analysis of the Drake Curriculum, the UCC found that some students failed to the purpose and value of general education at Drake. Others perceived the Area of Inquiry (AOI) requirements as “extraneous” and “burdensome.” The UCC also noted

that, for many students and faculty, the Drake Curriculum “lacked cohesion.” For these reasons, as well as others stated in this report, the UCC recommends that the Drake Faculty Senate consider adopting an alternative model of general education.

As we outlined in our report, two alternative approaches to general education appealed to the UCC. The first was a “major-minors” approach to general education. The second was an “integrated core” approach.

The UCC believes that transitioning to a major-minors approach to general education would be easier and require a fewer resources (both human and financial) than an integrative “core” approach to general education; however, we also believe that both of these models would provide a more cohesive general education experience for students—and build on the positive experiences that Drake students and faculty have had in the current Drake Curriculum (e.g., FYS, Senior Capstone).

Recommendation #2: *Vote to establish a working group to revise the Drake Curriculum.*

If the Faculty Senate votes to approve a comprehensive revision of the Drake Curriculum—or to pursue the development of an alternative model of general education—it is the recommendation of the committee that a “working group” be established to carry out this reform. It is the opinion of the UCC that this working group not be an existing committee (e.g., UCC, DCAC, etc.) The UCC also recommends that this working group include a wide range of constituents, including but not limited to: members of the UCC, the Drake Curriculum and Assessment Committee (DCAC), representatives from the six colleges and schools at Drake University, and representatives from various administrative offices

Summary

The University Curriculum Committee has offered a set of recommendations for a revision to the Drake Curriculum that draws from current research, is responsive to the context and aspirations of our students, and is guided by a clear purpose that underlies its goals and strategies. We are convinced that our recommendations address several institutional issues, including: the challenges associated with preparing students for the workplace at a liberal arts institution, parent and student concerns about the value of higher education, student satisfaction and retention, and student achievement.

Comprehensive curriculum reform is a multi-stage, long-term process—beginning with a decision to adopt a reform and continuing with its design, implementation, and assessment (Academic Leadership Learning Collaborative, 2010). With this in mind, it should be noted that our recommendations were consciously and deliberately developed to reflect the mission of our institution and the needs of our student body. We believe that a revision of the Drake Curriculum will not only lead

to significant enhancements in our students' learning but also increase the university's reputation as a quality institution for higher learning.

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