

## **CSBS Senate Statement on Proposed Revisions to the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum**

The CSBS Senate has viewed the development of proposed revisions to the LAC with great interest. Senators have attended the informational sessions, consulted with members of their own departments, and discussed the proposed changes with members of the LAC-RSC. After further discussion and consultation, the CSBS Senate would like to provide formal feedback on this issue.

First, the CSBS Senate appreciates the efforts of the LAC-RSC in addressing an important but challenging issue. Members of this committee were encouraged to take a fresh look at the LAC, and in response they developed innovative and creative proposals. The CSBS Senate also appreciates the initiative taken to hold campus-wide informational sessions and also to meet individually with each of the college senates. The dedication of the LAC-RSC in addressing its mission and actively communicating with stakeholders is admirable.

However, the CSBS Senate has several concerns about the proposed changes. First, there does not seem to have been a thorough evaluation or consideration of the current LAC. Based on discussions with faculty, there is overwhelming support for the current LAC program and structure, and there are concerns that the strengths and weaknesses of the current model have not been properly assessed. There has been little information on what problems we are trying to fix, and how the new proposals are an improvement over the current program. We believe it would be more effective to modify the existing program to address any identified problems.

The need to consider the current program is underscored by several concerns related to the proposed changes. There are concerns that the introduction of broad interdisciplinary survey classes, like those suggested in the proposals, will lead to a watering down of the curriculum to a level more appropriate for a high school than a university. One of the unique qualities of a university education is that students can benefit from faculty members' expertise in specific areas, taking courses that are rigorous, content-based, and drawn from the professors' knowledge and experience. The CSBS Senate is concerned that the university's core curriculum, under the current proposals, would consist of a series of generic survey classes, with faculty teaching largely as generalists, out of their individual areas of expertise.

The CSBS Senate is also concerned about the resources needed to implement the proposed changes. Faculty are continually told about our dire financial circumstances, with warnings of larger class sizes, fewer class offerings, and even reductions in the number of faculty. This seems inconsistent with proposals to offer new courses, required of all students, especially in small sections. From a faculty resource perspective, departments are already having problems covering classes required for their majors. This situation would be made worse by diverting these faculty resources away from core disciplinary classes to cover new, broad, generic LAC classes.

It is worth noting that when the "non-Western" category was implemented, there was a concerted effort to hire faculty to teach in this category. In the current environment, there is not the critical mass of faculty with the necessary interdisciplinary training to teach the proposed new LAC courses. Instead, the university will need to rely largely on current faculty. In this setting, it is our concern either that the proposed new courses would be watered down to cover the least common denominator, or that faculty would instead teach the courses through their own disciplinary perspectives. This has implications for the teaching and content of these courses. If the proposed new courses are to be taught with a narrowly pre-determined curriculum, for instance to facilitate assessment, faculty would be deprived of the academic freedom and creativity to develop their own courses and would simply repeat content handed down to them. Conversely, if faculty are given the freedom to teach these courses from their own perspectives, then the content and nature of classes with the same course title will vary dramatically, and counteract the presumed point of having all students take the same generic survey class.

There are also concerns that the proposed changes, with an assortment of courses unique to UNI, would adversely affect our ability to attract both transfer students and incoming freshmen with Advanced Placement credit.

Consequently, the CSBS Senate recommends that the current model be retained. The current model can be evaluated and improvements considered, but the need for its replacement with an unproven model with several serious flaws has not been demonstrated.

We support discussion of changes in the LAC in the following areas:

There is general interest in the concept of a Cornerstone course. If it is developed, it is essential that the course incorporate fundamental academic skills necessary for college success, such as college writing and research, communication skills, and methods of argumentation and debate. There are still serious concerns about the resources available to offer a sufficient number of sections taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty.

On a related note, the CSBS Senate supports further discussion of student writing skills, including the consideration of a proficiency examination administered at the beginning of the junior year, with remediation procedures implemented as necessary.

The LAC-RSC also rightly identified the need to address critical thinking skills. However, critical thinking should be done in all courses.

The focus should be on assessing and improving writing and critical thinking skills within the context of the current LAC. This can be done through strategies such as faculty development opportunities, reduced class sizes, and an evaluation of the incentives and disincentives provided to instructors as they relate to academic rigor and the integration of critical thinking skills.

In an increasingly globalized society, the CSBS Senate recognizes the importance of international education and supports efforts to promote proficiency in foreign language and participation in study abroad programs. The CSBS Senate supports investigating ways to promote such efforts through the Liberal Arts Core.

The CSBS Senate supports the concept of wellness education. However, it recognizes concerns expressed through the LAC survey and related discussions about how wellness is implemented in the UNI curriculum, and it supports efforts to consider revisions to the wellness requirement in the Liberal Arts Core.

The CSBS Senate views the current Capstone model, with more choices provided to students, as preferred over the previous model. The consideration of future modifications is supported, including the evaluation of departmental capstone experiences, e.g., senior seminars, as options to satisfy the Capstone requirement.

The CSBS Senate thanks the members of the LAC-RSC for their dedication to their assigned task, for their innovation in addressing this task, and for their willingness to solicit candid feedback from a variety of stakeholders. We look forward to future conversations on possible revisions to the Liberal Arts Core.

Unanimously approved by the CSBS Senate  
April 25, 2011