

The Case of the DOA Curriculum

It was a warm Spring. Provost Billy Kennedy sat in his office and gazed blankly at the pastoral view of students throwing Frisbees amid the flowers and fully-leafed trees. He wondered whether he had made the right decision in leaving his private college for this larger regional public university two years ago.

Billy left his deanship because the challenges had seemed so interesting. His new school, Regina State University, had been facing a variety of problems and was looking for a strong leader who could bring some entrepreneurial, private-school energy to the sleepy campus. The institution had been experiencing a downturn in enrollment and had received a critical review from its regional accrediting body, due, in part, to the fact that the school had not revised its general education requirements in 20 years. Billy had quoted the review comments so often in faculty meetings he could recite them by memory:

“...that, in the interim report, the university give emphasis to its continual progress in ensuring the appropriate quality of undergraduate general education by cultivating a culture supportive of assessing student learning.”

What Billy had learned about the institution since arriving was quite different from what he'd been led to expect. The 100-year-old school was one of the first liberal arts institutions in the state, but in the last ten years it had not fared well in the competition for resources with the system's other regional campuses or the larger flagship campus. Partly as a response, the school had sought to expand its identity by dividing into four colleges: Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS), Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NS&M), Education, and Business and Technology. The faculty had initially loved the idea, but conflict over resources had quickly ensued. Over time, the institution had begun to feel adrift, and that had not helped the enrollment picture, although there was some good growth in Business and Technology and in Education.

In his campus interview, Billy had pledged to address these problems. First and foremost, he'd said, would be to show the accrediting organization good progress on reforming the general education program in a cost-effective manner. Many on the faculty, he was told, felt this was just what the institution needed. Certainly the Board of Trustees felt it was so.

Soon after Billy arrived, he appointed an *ad hoc* committee to propose a revision to the program. To ensure timely action, he asked his vice provost Ted Dansen to chair the committee. Ted had been at Regina State for twenty-two years and was a well-respected senior member of the community. In addition, Billy asked six faculty from the Colleges of H&SS and NS&M to join the committee. Since these two colleges did all of the teaching in the current gen. ed. program, it stood to reason that they had the expertise to design a modern core curriculum. The committee met twice weekly through the summer, and Ted had reported that progress was excellent.

In the Fall, the committee scheduled a session of the Faculty Assembly to present its proposal. The centerpiece of the new proposal was an increased flexibility in course selection, allowing students to pursue their interests without having to commit too early to one program or another. Research was cited by the committee showing that this was what Millennial students wanted. However, to ensure that students were not simply dilettantes, the program included a depth requirement.

Core Curriculum, 37 credits

Mathematics, 6 credits

Introductory Writing, 6 credits

Natural Sciences, 7 credits, including a lab course

Humanities and Social Sciences, 18 credits, including:

- At least three courses in the humanities.
- No more than two courses in expressive arts.

- At least two courses in the same field, one of which must be at the 200 level or above or have the other as a prerequisite.

The reactions at the Faculty Assembly meeting were initially muted but ended on a somewhat negative note. This was to be expected, thought Billy. But after the meeting, the discussion turned into a canonical storm. In a flurry of activity and argument on the faculty e-mail list, concerns were raised about the program's scope, number of courses, competing emphases, and lack of distribution structure. Faculty in Business and Technology and in Education felt that some of the courses in their field should be counted toward the requirements. For example, why couldn't business statistics fulfill one of the two math courses? How would elementary education students accommodate the depth requirement? There were some positive remarks as well, but Billy saw the campus dividing into two camps: the traditionalists, who opposed everything about the program, and the modernists, who were a bit more flexible.

Not knowing what to do next, the committee suggested continuing its work with some new membership. Billy had trouble finding volunteers but eventually put together a larger committee. Over the Fall and Spring semesters, the committee met regularly and held meetings with different faculty groups on campus. Ted said this was very helpful, and people seemed to be calming down. A revised set of requirements for Humanities and Social Sciences was drafted that held students to a somewhat different standard (*changes in italics*):

Core Curriculum, 37 credits

Mathematics, 6 credits

Introductory Writing, 6 credits

Natural Sciences, 7 credits, including a lab course

Liberal Studies Distribution, 18 credits, including:

- *Six courses from at least three of the following six groups:*
 - *Cultural Analysis; Historical Analysis; Literature and the Arts; Knowledge, Cognition, and Moral Reasoning; Social and Behavioral Analysis; Foreign Languages.*
- *At least two courses must be from Cultural Analysis, Historical Analysis, and Literature and the Arts.*
- *At least two of the six courses must be at the 200 level or above.*

In April, the Faculty Assembly was reconvened, and the new proposal was presented. This time, the response was more positive. But one of the more outspoken faculty members who had not participated in the earlier discussions stood up and made a strong case for an ethics requirement. Many heads nodded in assent. Another person argued that unless class sizes were reduced, the program would not be addressing any real problems. Unsure of what to do next, the committee promised to go back and revisit the proposal yet again. The committee's enthusiasm was nonexistent. The proposal wasn't finding its legs. It seemed to be dying. And Billy knew the school could not afford smaller class sizes.

So Billy was having trouble enjoying the view from his window.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the major issues of concern and the motivating factors, stated and unstated, for each of the stakeholder groups at Regina State?
2. How would you view the general education review process to date (e.g. successes, mistakes)?
3. What should happen next? How should the campus be motivated to continue? What responsibilities should be assumed by each group?

Lessons from the Case Study
AAC&U Conference
2/18/05

1. Motivate the process: Focus the discussion on student learning, not on factors such as accreditation, enrollment, cost effectiveness, meeting students' wishes, or keeping one's job.
2. Set landmarks and establish deadlines: Negotiate with the committee on a timetable beforehand. Identify major starting and ending points for each phase.
3. Make the process faculty-driven and administration-supported: The committee should be faculty chaired and promulgated; administration helps frame the purpose, acts as mediator and partner when needed, helps search for compromise, champions the work and the workers, commits resources.
4. Engage all parts of the campus: Use multiple communication channels to reach faculty and other sectors of the school.
5. Ratchet the process forward: Once a landmark has been achieved, do not allow the process to slip backward. Disallow considerations once a landmark has been passed.
6. Build in an assessment component: Everything is an experiment; people are more willing to accept something new as experimentation rather than as a cast-in-concrete change.
7. Recognize and negotiate the underlying concerns: Conflict may be inevitable, but it cannot be successfully resolved without recognizing the subterranean pressures on faculty, staff, students, and administration.