

# Enhancing Intentionality in the Requirement-free Curriculum

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**B**rown University has marched to the beat of its own drummer for decades, encouraging students to forge their own curricular paths and, in 1969, removing general education course requirements. While many colleges and universities have since expanded and solidified requirements for general education courses or a core curriculum, Brown’s “new” curriculum has remained essentially unchanged for forty years. But since early 2007, a special task force at Brown has been revisiting its iconic curriculum, asking tough questions about the goals of a liberal education and how students can best reap its benefits. A report released in September 2008 presents the framework for an updated Brown curriculum. The changes are not drastic—there are still no required courses—but aim to provide what Brown Dean of the College Katherine Bergeron calls “a map of liberal education.”

“The Brown curriculum is really about a commitment to dialogue between faculty and students on any number of issues,” Bergeron explains. “There’s responsibility on both sides.”

The task force’s final recommendations for action include:

- Develop and distribute a statement of liberal learning outlining what a liberal education should encompass at Brown
- Conduct a review of every concentration (major) that includes a departmental self-study detailing the rationale behind its courses and how they promote both liberal learning and the specific goals of the discipline
- Develop an electronic portfolio system to help document students’ development and educational goals; share portfolios with advisers to ensure students are making progress toward goals
- Enhance the continuity of the advising experience over students’ four years at Brown; add a Faculty Advising

Fellows program to complement regular advising

- Increase funding for new and innovative courses
- Develop online course evaluation software that would be available to all departments and would encourage more extensive student feedback

Brown released a draft of the task force’s report to the campus community in January 2008 and solicited feedback from faculty, students, and alumni. As a result, the final report recommendations are, in many cases, already underway at Brown, and a “Plan of Action” section of the report includes a specific timetable of concrete next steps—most of which are scheduled for the 2008 and 2009 academic years.

## TASK FORCE GOALS

Brown hasn’t always espoused the less-is-more approach to curriculum guidelines. In the first half of the twentieth century, a general education program for first-year students was established, and changes in the late 1940s made this curriculum more rigid, including sixteen required subjects and comprehensive examinations for seniors. (Office of the Dean of the College 2008) The requirements were relaxed to a degree in the 1950s and even more in the 1960s, when a “permissive curriculum” offered a great deal of flexibility in course choices. Brown’s “new curriculum” was introduced in 1969. Eventually called simply “the Brown curriculum,” it focused on students’ educational journey rather than their destination:

Its most distinguishing feature as a curriculum has always had more to do with context than content, with the basic conditions for leaning than the subjects learned. Like undergraduates at other American universities, Brown students are expected to gain perspective on a range of disciplines and to concentrate in one; to perfect their critical faculties and to hone their judgment. The difference



lies in the freedom they have to shape this experience for themselves. (Office of the Dean of the College 2008) Since 1969, only minor changes have been made to the Brown curriculum. The number of concentrations—Brown’s term for what many other schools call “majors”—has grown to nearly one hundred, and the number of courses required for graduation increased from twenty-eight to thirty. But in 2007, the convergence of several factors prompted a new, closer look at the efficacy of the curriculum. The first factor was the curriculum’s upcoming fortieth anniversary, coupled with the fact that the only prior formal review of the plan had been conducted in 1989. In addition, Brown President Ruth Simmons’ Plan for Academic Enrichment, a 2007 report, recommended a stronger focus on undergraduate education. Finally, with Brown’s ten-year reaccreditation review slated for 2009, administrators decided to emphasize undergraduate teaching and learning during the accreditation review, and to use the curriculum review process to help them prepare.

The Task Force on Undergraduate Education, which included administrators, faculty members, and Brown students, convened for the first time in April 2007 and met nearly thirty times between April and December. The task force’s object was to develop a clear statement of the goals of a liberal education at Brown, and answer the question, “How do we define Brown’s educational mission today, and what is required to ensure its continued success?” This goals statement, once completed, would make unambiguous the learning outcomes students should be incorporating into their academic plans, and present intentional pathways to reach those goals.

The most significant difference between Brown and other institutions is not the lack of required courses, but

the articulated expectation that students make intentional educational choices. The curriculum calls for students “not merely to sample a range of courses but to make connections between them, to use perspective gained from one discipline as a window onto the next.” Intentionality has long been at the core of Brown’s curricular philosophy, Bergeron explains, but now the focus has shifted to ensuring that students understand and can make use of it.

### MAKING LIBERAL EDUCATION INTENTIONAL

The decision to clarify, rather than significantly change, Brown’s curriculum was an important one in framing the task force’s mission. In its forty years of

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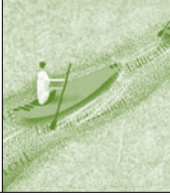
existence, the Brown curriculum has held up well to internal scrutiny. The 1989 curricular review, conducted by Brown professor and then-dean of the college Sheila Blumstein, found that most Brown students completed at least two courses in the humanities, in the sciences, and in the social sciences by the time of their graduation—even without being required to do so. (Blumstein 1990) More recent research from Brown’s Office of Institutional Renewal indicated that, of students in the class of 2007 who completed at least twenty-two courses at Brown, 82 percent took at least two science courses, 98 percent took at least two humanities courses, and 92 percent took at least two social science courses. (Office of the Dean of the College 2008)

Whether students are making

conscious connections in their coursework is harder to measure. Coursework completed within the concentration areas is highly structured, and administrators were unsure that students understand the relationship between their liberal learning and their specialized learning. So an important goal of the curriculum review was to examine the role concentrations play in the Brown curriculum. “We hope to gain better integration of the goals of concentration program with those of liberal education, by asking concentrations to speak to how and in what ways they help meet or enrich the goals of a liberal education—perhaps through enhancing writing and oral skills, doing community service as appropriate, enriching international opportunities and

emphasizing the global world we live in,” says Blumstein, also a task force member. “In the past, concentrations have been highly compartmentalized.”

The statement of liberal learning at the center of the task force’s report was developed in spring and summer 2008 and distributed to incoming Brown students in August. The statement, *Liberal Learning at Brown*, includes specific goals students can use to make the most of their education, including “Work on your speaking and writing,” “Evaluate human behaviors,” “Collaborate fully,” and “Apply what you have learned.” Each goal is followed by easily understood suggestions for concrete action, like “Seek out courses, both in and out of your concentration, that will help you improve your ability to communicate in English as well as in



another language.” The statement helps students—especially those with a few semesters already under their belts—to see what academic areas they have been drawn to and what they have avoided. It also provides an obvious starting point for students and advisers to use in planning the second, third, and fourth years of study. “For us, this is much better than the passivity of distribution requirements,” Bergeron says. “It provides a starting place for active conversation.”

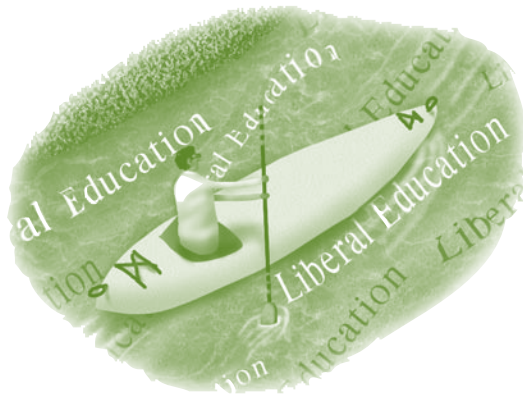
### ADVISING AND ASSESSMENT

Those active conversations are an important part of the task force’s recommendations, five of which focus on advising. They include the development of the new Faculty Advising Fellows program, already underway at Brown, in which six experienced faculty members live on campus and open up their homes to students several times each month for study breaks, lectures, and social gatherings, as well as make themselves available for informal advising. Ten nonresidential faculty advisers are also involved in the program, each affiliated with one of the six houses. The goal, administrators say, is to increase advising contacts and make conversations about educational choices commonplace. Students who might feel overwhelmed by the choices offered at Brown will be able to readily find advice from many different perspectives.

The task force also recommended Brown increase the continuity of students’ formal advising experience across their educational career. Under a new plan, students will retain the same adviser for the first two years, until they declare their concentration, and then will work with a concentration-area adviser for the final two years, says Blumstein. “Students will continue to receive advising for four years, but it will be more integrated

and contact will be more frequent,” she explains. “And through the faculty fellows program, we’ll provide ways for students to meet faculty outside the office and across a number of disciplines.” In addition, Blumstein says, e-portfolios documenting students’ growth will eventually be used to jump-start advising conversations and allow advisers to get “a deeper sense of the student—rather than simply having meetings.”

Brown student and curriculum task force member Jason Becker frames the



task force’s advising recommendations this way: “A smorgasbord goes from an exciting experience to a very unpleasant one if a diner is not judicious and wise in his or her choices,” he says. “The open curriculum can become overwhelming and uncomfortable in much the same way if a student is not prepared with the tools to make strong, informed choices.”

### NEXT STEPS

The e-portfolios, a project that is still in the planning stages at Brown, will include a selection of student writing samples spanning the first year through the senior thesis or capstone project. These reflections on learning goals and experiences will illustrate students’ progress through their programs, as well as provide a tool for administrators to analyze how Brown students approach

their requirement-free education. The goal for implementation of e-portfolios is fall 2009.

The main priority at Brown for the 2008–09 academic year, Bergeron says, is to continue refining the new programs already in place, and to focus on starting concentration-area reviews—nine are slated to be finished before June 2009. Brown community feedback on the task force’s final report has been mostly positive, she says, largely because the task force publicized its recommendations in the January 2008 draft, conducted open forums for students and faculty, and worked hard to incorporate the feedback into the final report. “The environment at Brown really encourages open dialogue, especially on this subject,” Bergeron says.

Jason Becker, the Brown student and task force member, says the benefits of the Brown curriculum go beyond allowing students more choice. “There’s a pervasive culture that supports personal responsibility, and competition among students is lowered dramatically because it’s rare that two students have similar schedules or motivations,” he says. “I am a far more active participant in defining what it means to be educated than I ever would have been at another school.” ■

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