

Final Recommendation of the Liberal Learning Task Force

TO: Steering Committee

FROM: Liberal Learning Task Force

RE: Final Recommendation on Our Charge

DATE: December 7, 2018

Background:

TCNJ's Liberal Learning Program was established in 2004, as a part of the reformulation of the entire undergraduate curriculum that was completed in 2004. In 2015, the Liberal Learning Program Council (LLPC) issued a report on its extensive self-study, conducted from September, 2014 – October, 2015. In December, 2015, two external reviewers conducted a site visit, and they submitted their review in January, 2016. LLPC identified from the self-study and the external review five major recommendations regarding Liberal Learning.

Following this, LLPC agreed to attempt to address the first two recommendations by developing baccalaureate level learning goals for the Liberal Learning Program. Over the past three academic years, LLPC has worked on drafts of these goals and has attempted to engage the faculty in a conversation regarding both the wisdom of this approach and the details of the suggested goals. However, these conversations have not led to consensus on a path forward.

Finally, during the 2017-2018 academic year, the Faculty Senate has held extensive discussions concerning the direction of the College. In its memo to incoming President Kathryn Foster entitled "The Current State of The College of New Jersey," the Senate expresses a desire to "chart new directions in course and curriculum design" and describes the Liberal Learning program as an area "ripe for innovation." The Senate goes on to request consideration of how Liberal Learning and coursework in the major are integrated to "provide a seamless and relevant learning experience" for students.

Charge:

In its memo of May 16, 2018, Steering charged the Liberal Learning Task Force to "discern faculty opinion regarding the scope and nature of the revision of the Liberal Learning Program and to define parameters for this revision, to engage the faculty in conversation regarding the role of Liberal Learning vis-à-vis the major, and to lead the faculty at large in defining the goals and composition of a revitalized Liberal Learning Program."

Process:

The Liberal Learning Task Force conducted two open forums (on November 27 and December 6), facilitated a discussion at a meeting of the Faculty Senate (on November 7), encouraged

Departments to have discussions of their own at faculty meetings (on October 10 and November 14), and facilitated discussions at multiple School and Department faculty meetings (including the Schools of the Arts & Communications, Business, Education, and Nursing & Exercise Science and the Departments of History and Philosophy). The discussions at each of these meetings focused on two questions:

1. In your view, is our current undergraduate curriculum – Liberal Learning + major(s) + electives/minor(s) – adequately preparing our students as educated citizens and as professionals throughout their careers?
2. How extensively should the Liberal Learning Program be revised? One can imagine a continuum that ranges from making only small tweaks, such as revising only the learning outcomes for the program, to making significant changes to the content and/or the structure of the program, to the replacement of the current program with a completely new general education program. What location along this continuum would best serve our students? What aspects of the current program should be revised?

In addition, the task force led a discussion at an Academic Leaders meeting (on November 7) that focused on two questions:

1. Once we know from the survey how much interest/commitment there is for revising Liberal Learning, how should we proceed in terms of getting down to specifics?
2. How can academic leaders across campus help us to proceed in the revision process?

Finally, the task force surveyed all faculty, asking the following questions:

1. How adequately does our current undergraduate curriculum – Liberal Learning + major(s) + electives/minor(s) – prepare our students as educated citizens and as professionals throughout their careers?
2. Which of the following do you feel would be the best approach for implementing the recommendations from the Liberal Learning program review?
 - a. We should REVISE THE CURRENT LEARNING OUTCOMES of the Liberal Learning Program in the manner recommended by the Program review, but make NO OTHER CHANGES to the program.
 - b. We should make REFINEMENTS to the Liberal Learning Program in response to the weaknesses identified in the program’s self-study and external review (revising the learning outcomes, improving advising, and instituting robust assessment), but we should leave the program largely intact.
 - c. We should make REVISIONS to the CONTENT AND/OR STRUCTURE of the Liberal Learning Program.

- d. We should DEVELOP A COMPLETELY NEW PROGRAM for general education at The College of New Jersey and replace the current Liberal Learning Program entirely.
3. Should anything be added to our current Liberal Learning curriculum (e.g., sustainability and/or socioeconomic class as civic responsibilities)?
4. One of the findings of the Liberal Learning self-study was that about half of students do not view Liberal Learning as essential to their TCNJ education and feel that Liberal Learning gets in the way of their major or minor. What strategies do you suggest we adopt to ensure that students do not perceive Liberal Learning as inessential and/or secondary to their major?
5. In general, a more flexible curriculum is usually less coherent; a more coherent curriculum is usually less flexible. As we consider revising the Liberal Learning curriculum, how should we prioritize flexibility and coherence?

The survey had a 52% response rate (although respondents were not representative across School or rank).

Final Recommendation:

Based on the survey, forums, and other discussions, the Liberal Learning Task Force believes there is interest in having further discussions about Liberal Learning. While 59% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the current undergraduate curriculum adequately prepares our students, only 5% of respondents felt that the only change to the Liberal Learning Program should be revision of its outcomes. This result suggests that faculty are generally happier with the current Liberal Learning curriculum than unhappy with it, but faculty see important needs for refinement/revision to the program.

As a result,

1. The task force recommends that we be charged with continuing our work. While the task force recognizes there may be reasons to postpone action on Liberal Learning at this time (e.g., current discussions of the possibility of revising our admissions process to no longer require that all incoming first-year students declare a major), the task force believes that continuing the discussion of Liberal Learning is worthwhile and can proceed synergistically with these other, ongoing campus discussions. We encourage Steering to consider how discussions of a change in the timing of the declaration of major will move forward and to write our charge accordingly, so that we are able to work effectively with appropriate bodies.

- a. The charge should include the creation of a range of models for Liberal Learning to reflect both different structures and different learning outcomes/goals. These models should be presented to the faculty to help refine and focus the conversations about Liberal Learning and its potential revision.¹
- b. As per our current charge, our renewed charge should include the solicitation of testimony from students and from staff currently involved with academic advising to get an updated sense of their experience and expectations with respect to the Liberal Learning program and curriculum.

The task force recognizes the Liberal Learning Council should implement, in conjunction with the Center for Institutional Effectiveness, two of the specific recommendations of the Liberal Learning self-study and external review – to improve Liberal Learning advising and to implement a direct assessment of Liberal Learning.

Because resources are likely to be an issue in any revision of the Liberal Learning program, the task force asks Steering to clarify in our charge what resource expectations we should use in developing models for the revision.

¹ Our recommendation addresses two of the original recommendations from the Liberal Learning self-study and external review (i.e., revising the curricular structure of Liberal Learning and pursuing true integration between Liberal Learning, the majors, and co-curriculum).