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Introduction and Overview

General Education stands at the center of the liberal arts mission of Harvard College. For more than a century, starting with the class of 1914, students at Harvard have been required to choose a concentration in which they achieve specialized knowledge in a focused area of inquiry.¹ The General Education program aims to answer the more fundamental question: What is the purpose of an education at all, regardless of the particular, specialized knowledge that one achieves? What, in other words, is a liberal arts education for?

The current version of General Education at Harvard answers this question explicitly: the program aims to prepare students for a life of civic and ethical engagement with a changing world. In this way the College thinks that General Education, in the words of the original program from 1946, should address “that part of a student’s whole education which looks first of all to his (*sic*) life as a responsible human being and citizen.”² This philosophy ties the current General Education program not only to its predecessor at Harvard, but to a more basic and ancient ideal. Education, on this account, prepares one for an *Ars Vivendi in Mundo* – an art of living wisely in the world.

But there are other philosophies that ground the importance of a liberal arts education as well. Two play an important role not only in the history of educational philosophies generally, but in the history of pedagogical practice at Harvard in particular. In place of tying a liberal arts education to the art of living, a second philosophy suggests that to be “admitted to the company of educated men and women,” one must know at least a little something about a range of disciplines. Indeed, under President Lowell at the beginning of the 20th century, the Harvard curriculum was organized explicitly around the dual principles of “Concentration and Distribution.” The goal of this structure was twofold, according to Lowell: a student was expected to know “a little of everything and something well.”³

A third alternative focuses instead on the importance of electives in a student’s curriculum. Driven by the Emersonian ideal that the practice of choosing, and taking responsibility for one’s choices, is critical in the process of self-actualization, President Eliot at the end of the 19th century organized the Harvard curriculum almost entirely around the student’s ability to choose the courses he would take.

¹ See Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1964), p. 446.

² *General Education in a Free Society* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1945), p. 51.

³ Morison, *op cit*.

In reviewing the current implementation of General Education at Harvard, we see a program that mixes these three philosophies in an unhelpful way. As a result, the identity of the program is unclear to students and faculty alike. Moreover without a clear identity, and without clearly defined boundaries, the program has grown to be large and unwieldy. This basic problem is not new at Harvard. Arguably at least, the uneasy interaction among the three core philosophies of the liberal arts has been a factor in the discontent that surrounded each previous iteration of General Education at the College.⁴

We propose a structure that does justice to the importance of each of the three motivating philosophies for a liberal arts education, while addressing the problems of identity and size. We also propose a system of administrative and financial support that will give the courses in the program the central position in the curriculum that they deserve, and allow them to be among the best courses on offer at the College. Our guiding principle has been to maintain as much of what currently works about the program as possible (which is a not inconsiderable amount), while proposing a structure that allows it to be the best version of what it aims to be.

1. History of General Education at Harvard

The explicit, motivating goal of the [Program in General Education](#) is to prepare students for a life of civic and ethical engagement with a changing world. The College sees in this goal a new interpretation of the classic ideal: *Ars Vivendi in Mundo*.

This philosophy has a distinguished history both at Harvard and more generally. At Harvard, the original General Education program, proposed in 1946, was organized around the idea that an education should help a student to understand the obligations and privileges of living in a free, democratic society. This proposal was meant to supplant the 19th century ideal for American colleges, which was to educate the good, Christian, gentleman. Our current program is a version of the original General Education ideal. It is reformulated, however, to reflect the wide-ranging backgrounds of our students. In particular, the current program explicitly separates itself from the particular political context that made sense in the middle of the last century, replacing it with a much more global paradigm. The general impulse behind the program, however, is ancient. It is found, for instance, in the Roman ideal for an education, under the Empire, which was explicitly to prepare one for the *ars vivendi*.⁵

The distributional philosophy of the liberal arts also has an ancient pedigree. A version of this philosophy, for example, is naturally seen in the traditional, medieval curriculum of the seven liberal arts. We don't agree with the medieval conception of *which* disciplines are essential, of course, even if some of our own disciplines are direct descendants of the

⁴ See, for instance, the memo from Dean Rosovsky to the Members of the Faculty from April 3, 1978, for an account of the way the Core Curriculum attempts to balance these aims.

⁵ See, for instance, Cicero *De Fin.* 1.42 et. al, and Seneca *Epistles* 88.2.

original Trivium and Quadrivium.⁶ But the idea that a well-educated student should have mastered, or at least had some exposure to, a range of disciplinary methods and content is a natural one. At Harvard, something like this distributional impulse seems to have motivated the Core Curriculum that lasted from 1978-2009. It was also, as mentioned earlier, a central part of President Lowell's "Concentration and Distribution" system for the early part of the twentieth century.

The third philosophy of the liberal arts can be thought of as an ideal based on the Emersonian notion of education as self-actualization. This ideal prioritizes the importance of a student's taking responsibility for his or her own education, especially through the elective selection of courses from across the catalog. Harvard was, of course, the first College to organize its curriculum around this ideal. Under President Eliot in the late 19th century, the Harvard curriculum was organized primarily around the elective system, which allowed students almost complete freedom to explore the courses offered at the College.⁷ But the philosophy can be traced back at least to Rousseau and the Romanticism he inspired, a movement that Emerson appropriated for the American context.

2. Remit of the Committee

The current Program in General Education is the third in a series of Harvard programs that reach back almost seventy years. The [Report of the Task Force on General Education](#), following a [comprehensive curricular review](#) in the early 2000s, proposed the current Program in 2007. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted to approve the report and to adopt the new program in May 2007. The [Final Legislation Establishing the Program in General Education](#) provides programmatic details and its motivating conception of liberal education. The Program was first available to students entering in the fall of 2009. The legislation called for the Dean of the Faculty to appoint a committee to review the Program within five years of its inception.

Dean Smith constituted the General Education Review Committee (GERC) in the spring of 2014. The Committee comprises senior faculty members from each of the three divisions of the FAS - Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences – as well as from the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. The Committee produced an [Interim Report](#) in February 2015 that described the current state of the Program, highlighting successes but also emphasizing areas in need of improvement. As we noted above, the major problems are the lack of a clear identity and the uncertain and expanding boundaries of the program. It also offered a [Brief History of General Education at Harvard](#), interpreting the current program in relation to its predecessors, and it concluded by outlining a range of possible improvements.

⁶ The liberal arts education in the middle ages was typically divided into two parts. The Trivium comprised the three foundational courses: Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric. (Our word "trivial" derives from this part of the curriculum.) The Quadrivium, which was the more advanced part of the course, comprised Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, Music.

⁷ See, for instance, the discussion of Eliot's elective system in Morison, *op cit.*, pp. 341-6.

The Interim Report generated much discussion. After collecting extensive feedback from faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and administrators, the Committee now offers this Final Report. We propose an implementation of General Education that reflects and focuses the philosophical principles that motivate the program. These proposals aim to help the program achieve the high aspirations the faculty had in improving it.

3. Proposals

The Committee proposes:

- A General Education requirement consisting of four diverse courses explicitly developed to satisfy the aims of General Education.
- A College or Departmental course in Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning.
- A Distribution requirement consisting of three departmental courses that range across the divisions.

In addition to these major proposals, we outline an administrative support structure for the General Education Program and suggest incentives for faculty and teaching fellows offering General Education courses. The rest of the Report contains details about these proposals, as well as concrete suggestions about structure and implementation.

The General Education Program should be divided into three parts. The first part consists of four courses in General Education. These courses are designed explicitly to satisfy the principles of General Education, and will be approved by the General Education Standing Committee (GESC) as doing so. The second part consists of a College level course requirement in Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning, similar to the current requirements in Expository Writing and Foreign Languages. The third part consists of a Distribution requirement of three departmental courses, spread across the three divisions of the FAS and SEAS.

This results in a structure that separates out the two major aims of the current program, while also allowing the student greater freedom to explore the entire catalog of courses.

In particular we propose the following specifics:

- **Four General Education courses:** These courses aim to prepare students for a life of civic and ethical engagement with a changing world.
 - Students should take four diverse Gen Ed courses, each of which is explicitly designed to address the *Ars Vivendi in Mundo* philosophy.
 - Each Gen Ed course will have a tag, or more than one tag, that indicates the perspective(s) from which it approaches the issues of General Education. Ordinarily no course will have more than two tags.
 - Students must take at least one course with each of the four tags.
 - For courses with more than one tag, students may select the requirement that the course fulfills. However, no single course can count for more than one tag.
 - The tags will be broadly divisional.

- Aesthetics, Culture, Interpretation
 - Individuals, Societies, Histories
 - Science and Technology in Society
 - Ethics and Civics
 - The first three of these tags are intended to align roughly with the three divisions of FAS (grouping together SEAS with the Natural Sciences). They can also be thought of as perspectives that combine and broaden the former Gen Ed categories in the usual way.⁸ The final tag is intended to align roughly with the current Ethical Reasoning category.
 - In this way, courses that are currently successful in the Gen Ed Program would clearly be eligible to stay in the program.
 - For new courses, the following method might be used to determine the tags associated with them. By default, the department in which the faculty member holds his or her primary appointment would determine the tag associated with the course. Faculty members could propose to the GESC, however, a different or additional tag.
 - Courses should be approved for a certain number of iterations, after which they are reviewed by GESC for re-approval, should the faculty member teaching them so desire.
 - Existing courses in the program would require re-approval after a similar number of iterations.
- **One College course in Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning:** This course ensures that students have an appropriate level of numeracy.
 - Students, typically in their first year, would take an EMR course. Courses fulfilling this requirement could include dedicated EMR offerings as well as Departmental courses in quantitative areas (e.g., Statistics, Math, Applied Math).
 - We envisage that a committee comprised of faculty from across the College would curate the set of EMR courses and determine those Departmental offerings that satisfy this requirement.
 - Courses satisfying this requirement would be available at levels appropriate for students with varied quantitative backgrounds.
- **Three Distribution courses:** These courses encourage students to explore a range of disciplinary methods and content.
 - Students should take three departmental courses that are spread across the divisions of FAS and SEAS.
 - 1 departmental course in Arts and Humanities
 - 1 departmental course in Social Sciences
 - 1 departmental course in Natural Sciences or SEAS
 - Courses in the area of the student's concentration may not be used to satisfy the distribution requirement.

⁸ That is: Aesthetics, Culture, Interpretation unites AIU and CB; Individuals, Societies, Histories unites SW and USW; Science and Technology in Society unites SLS and SPU while also explicitly putting these in a social context. This way of combining the existing categories is already explicitly in place in the current program.

4. Implementation Proposals

General Education courses should be among the best in the College. But they are also the hardest to teach well. A good General Education Program will require financial support from the Administration and buy-in from the Departments. The following should be offered to Faculty and TFs teaching in the Program. The Committee regards a well-developed set of supports and incentives as crucial to the success of a strong Program in General Education.

Faculty

- First-rate course development support
- First-rate IT support
- Course administrative support (head TF)
- Assistance in recruiting and supporting TF's and TA's, including dedicated Preceptor support for larger courses, and Digital TF or Digital Preceptor when appropriate
- Specialized training for TFs and TAs in teaching General Education courses and in assessing student work
- Pedagogical Community for faculty teaching in the program and for TFs and TAs
- Financial support for teaching in the program
- Awards for faculty members offering the best courses in the Gen Ed program

TFs

- Small section sizes (target of 12, cap of 14)
- Experienced TFs
- Training
- Supplemental pay
- Performance awards for high-achieving TFs in the Gen Ed program

In turn, Departments should make a commitment to the General Education Program.

Departments

- Think of General Education as critical to their educational mission
- Work with the Standing Committee and Divisional Deans to ensure that an appropriate number of courses are offered on a regular basis
- Searches for new faculty should take into account needs of Gen Ed
- The Dean should determine appropriate incentives for Departments to offer courses in the Gen Ed program.

Respectfully Submitted,

Members of the General Education Review Committee

Sean D. Kelly (Philosophy), Chair
Jennifer Hochschild (Government, and African and African American Studies)
Maya Jasanoff (History)
Stephanie Sandler (Slavic)
John H. Shaw (Earth and Planetary Sciences)
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