Approved January 22, 2013

College of Arts and Sciences
COMMITTEE ON THE CURRICULUM

Meeting Minutes
December 18, 2012

Present: Andy Bernstein, Jerusha Detweiler-Bedell, Jeff Feld-Gore, Jim Grant, Tuajuanda Jordan, Peter Kennedy, Joel Martinez, Bethe Scalettar, Freddy Vilches, Julia Yeckes, Tamara Ko, recorder.

Absent: Judy Finch, Dan Kelley, Sara Rangel

Guests: Paul Powers, Director of Exploration & Discovery

The meeting was convened at 3:34pm.

Minutes from December 11 were unanimously approved. The atmosphere vibrated with a sense of urgency, partly driven from the pending holiday break and partly from the knowledge that the Committee tasks would be picking up in the spring semester.

I. Course Proposal Subcommittee

*HIST 398 Scientific Revolution*
This is a one-time summer offering and now includes a sophomore standing requirement, and changes in the title and content description.

This proposal was unanimously approved.

II. General Education Discussion

*The Big Questions*

1. *Exploration & Discovery: Role of director and steering committee, and the Committee’s role in moving forward. Should E&D be one or two semesters? What basic information is needed to decide?*

2. *Guiding Principles of General Education: MNS is well articulated through A, B, and C – what of SS and AH?*

3. *General Education Course List: What departments are over/under-represented? What specific changes need to be made?*
Co-Chair Martinez would like the Committee to get a sense of whether or not progress can be made with these questions in a reasonable amount of time so that something may be proposed to the faculty by the March faculty meeting.

Professor Kennedy asked what the teaching objectives are for fall and spring semesters. Is the spring semester experience meant to reinforce the skills that are developed from the fall semester or is it meant to create a brand new set? How much of the general education principles are captured by E&D? Can the experience be one that is tightly focused in one semester? He has heard that there are some issues with core being too ambitious and trying to accomplish too many objectives. Professor Bernstein added that a number of his colleagues have found that the research component in the second semester does not work well. Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell pointed out that the external review did also affirm that sentiment.

Ms. Yeckes said that core did not feel balanced to her as a first-year student, and she would recommend splitting the core readings over the course of two semesters as opposed to just fall. The students have no sense of a shared experience during spring semester, and shared texts would help to build that commonality. Similar research experiences could be then measured across the board to compare how different courses are doing. The professors could also have a little more creative freedom in selecting some of the other texts if the core reading was more spread out.

Professor Scalettar pointed out that the students have varying research experiences during the second semester – from learning about vampires to bioethics, and it is a criticism that the second semester is all over the map. However, one student did say that the second semester did cultivate a sense of community, so perhaps making E&D a one semester course in which the first half contains some basic similarities with the second half left to the teaching professor (similar to what Ms. Yeckes had suggested).

Moving beyond the anecdotal though, the bigger and broader picture is that the spring semester of E&D does not achieve the goals it sets out to achieve. Professor Vilches queried what the faculty would think of a one-semester core as there seems to be no present indication of that thought. Associate Dean Grant reminded the Committee that the faculty did pass the new general education with a two-semester core in mind.

Associate Dean Feld-Gore said that in talking with students, none of them felt like they belonged to a community because of this shared course. It is a great goal but it may not be achieved without being integrated into the curriculum in some other way. Students do not understand that a connection is supposed to exist between the first and second semester of E&D.
Professor Bernstein would support splitting the two semesters and using the old Inquiry series as a model. It was really a compromise back when E&D was first being created that the core text would be the focus of the fall semester and that individual professors would have control over the spring – this is why the two semesters feel so disjointed.

Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell surmised that faculty may not be used to separating the two semesters but data shows that there are more adjuncts in the spring semester, with those teaching in the fall having a more sense of community. There may be less resistance if E&D is tightened to a one-semester course. As of right now, there does not seem to be a very compelling argument for anyone to maintain a two-semester E&D course; if anything, there is support for a fall only semester.

Director Powers updated the Committee that nothing dramatic has happened since the last meeting. He has met with Director Mark Figueroa during the interim, and found out that a previous assumption he had is actually incorrect. Director Powers had believed there to be a serious stumbling block in trying to go to a one-semester core because the average class size would be hurt in the spring semester (what with trying to figure out where to place those first-year students), thus negatively impacting the College’s public reputation in comparison to other schools. However, the collected data is actually based off fall semester numbers only; many schools maintain their numbers by only keeping fall course enrollments low and then distributing their students off into other courses in the spring.

Director Powers also asked Director Figueroa if it would be possible to obtain data on whether or not having a tenured/tenure-track faculty member teaching E&D over an adjunct member would impact retention rates. Director Figueroa said it might be possible to get such data but that there may not be any concrete numbers. Director Powers informed the Committee that it will be important to establish some objective measures and a baseline in order to get some good data. Patience will be needed when working with the data but it would be easier to get much more realistic information. Additionally, Director Powers will be meeting with Dean Lisa Meyer and Assistant Dean Garcia to determine how core affects recruitment and retention, and whether there are numbers on how many students are attracted to the College. Director Powers’ aim is to compile a full account of data (e.g., all senior surveys for 2010 and 2011, course-specific evaluations) for the Committee before he leaves for an overseas program in January.

Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell would be interested in looking at the course ratings of fall versus spring semester as those would be a helpful comparison; the past five years of general department statistics would also be useful data. Director Powers responded that such data would be easy to find, citing that most comparable schools have a first-year curriculum that is either one or two-semesters long. He strongly believes that the Committee should look at a few models
that may come in focus if a certain direction is decided, and can identify a few higher priority issues with E&D (e.g., over-reliance on adjuncts, concerns about retention).

If pressure is lessened on E&D, maybe those desired goals and objectives could be weaved throughout the rest of general education. The bar is not set at the appropriate level, and it seems that the current consensus of the Committee – in the absence of teaching evaluation data – is to propose a one-semester core knowing that there will be a significant ripple effect from that change. For instance, where will the first-year students go the second semester?

Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell responded that individual departments could make a home for these students, since the spring semester of core is designed to revolve around a certain focus anyway. She asked the Committee if it would be possible to come up with dates or deadlines – what information is needed to make a decision?

Director Powers said there is an idea that the research in the spring is uneven – although he also does believe that some individual experiences are fantastic. He had just attended the James Kopp Research Presentation, and while many of the presentations were terrific, they were also all of the same type of research. While he admits that he is hesitant to embrace the generic research model, it does work well when it works.

Dean Jordan informed the Committee that the College has just been granted a Mellon Grant Award of $700,000 to infuse the general curriculum with arts and humanities research. She believes that the second semester would be a good opportunity for departments to build on individualized research experiences. Currently, juniors and seniors are given research experiences and this grant is designed to make that opportunity available earlier.

Associate Dean Grant encouraged the Committee to think more creatively about a one or two-semester model, and give the second semester back to departments. Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell pointed out that one problem with requiring the sciences is that there is already a tight regulation of sequencing in that division. Associate Dean Grant responded that it could be a way for MNS to utilize a free course; if it is not needed, then the course is not needed. Ms. Yeckes suggested calling the first semester E&D and then having each department create a lab or research component for the second semester, and that students must fulfill this requirement before they declare a major.

Dean Jordan struggles with this idea that the curriculum needs to be so controlled, and that students must be required to accomplish certain requirements by a certain time. It does not matter when students fulfill the curriculum; it just needs to happen prior to graduation and they simply need to be provided the opportunities to encounter it during their four years. The Committee should focus energy on making core one semester, and understanding its goals and objectives.
Let students be free to explore a liberal arts education. Why should the curriculum be so prescriptive at every level? The point of the Mellon Grant is to allow people to be creative.

Professor Bernstein affirmed Dean Jordan’s sentiment, as the history department made a decision to encourage students who want to be majors to participate in that more serious research. He likes the idea of not being too regiment and allowing departments some free reign. There is also the idea of not having the first-year students all in the same course again after fall semester because the older students can serve as models. The experience of the older students would help to enrich the classroom experience for both the first-year students and the professor.

Director Powers said the prospect of a one-semester core should really be considered; there is a kind of tension between what E&D is trying to accomplish in general education and what departments are trying to do. The other goal E&D is trying to accomplish is breadth and highlighting specific skills, as he does not want to give up on pre-major breadth.

Dean Jordan responded that general education is meant to provide that pre-major breadth while core supplies the foundation. If first-year students are engaged in the same curriculum, then there is this cohort identity that will help the along the line. If this is not obtained in core, it is possible to receive this education somewhere else.

Ms. Yeckes does not believe taking the second semester away would hurt the breadth of education; in fact, it may actually help it. Four years is not a lot of time for a student, and the second semester traps the first-year students into this model of what they supposedly need in order to receive a solid liberal arts education. Removing the second semester would give them more opportunities to sample other campus options.

Professor Scalettar would be very interested in learning about the faculty sentiment towards the effectiveness of research skills taught during the second semester of core. While student evaluations are important, it would be an interesting comparison to determine whether faculty believe in the success of E&D. Co-Chair Detweiler-Bedell will take the lead on drafting a brief survey for faculty.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:49pm as well wishes were exchanged for the holiday season and people heartily exited the room with a bounce in their step.