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Table Discussion Final Summary - Balancing Academic Depth and Breadth

Portland State University

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2016 Winter Symposium
Table Discussions/ Input on
Curriculum Depth and Breadth

Scope of the Discussion:
A large part of discussion focused on how we should define breadth for our student body, the financial and societal contexts that can make breadth a difficult sell to students, and the importance of making the curriculum relevant to our students' needs and experiences. In terms of academic content, discussion was fairly general, noting the value of balancing knowledge with skills, and providing content related to life, citizenship and career. Quite a bit of discussion explored ways to structure the curriculum and design pedagogy to meet these goals, including the importance of transparency, and the use of interdisciplinary approaches, team work and community engagement. Finally, there was much attention focused on how to address challenges posed by students' increasing lack of college readiness and financial impediments. Many of the topics and suggestions that emerged from the discussion fall within the purview of Faculty Senate and will thus be the basis for future senate activity.

Faculty Senate Action:
- The Faculty Senate held a discussion about liberal education (February 1, 2016 Senate meeting).
- The Faculty Senate Steering Committee proposed that the Senate approve a Task Force on Liberal Education to explore these issues further (vote at May 2, 2016 Senate meeting). Their charge will be to suggest proposals for improving curriculum and pedagogy. As incoming Presiding Officer, Brad Hansen will sit on the task force as an ex officio member.

Intersections with the Strategic Plan:
The themes and suggestions that emerged from the discussion intersect, either directly or indirectly, with initiatives in Goal 1, Elevate Student Success; Goal 2, Advance excellence in teaching and research; and Goal 3, Extend our leadership in community engagement. Much of discussion focused on improving student success by making the curriculum relevant to students' needs and experiences, developing curriculum around local-global intersections, and providing students with the tools needed for success in life, in society and in careers (Goal 1, 1.3, 4.1, 4.3, 7.2). There was also considerable discussion about using pedagogy that is responsive to our students' diverse experiences and incorporates a variety of high-impact practices (Goal 2, 1.5, 2.3; Goal 3, 3.2). As indicated below, other themes address different aspects of these three strategic goals.

Themes:
First we list the themes or groupings that emerged from the discussion, with an APPROXIMATE number of comments that were submitted about that theme and a brief summary of the discussion when it was particularly long or complex. Following this summary, all comments made about each theme are listed. Note that these were table notes, and sometimes the intent of the note is obscure.

1. How should we define breadth? (19):

Many symposium participants felt that we should take into account student needs, student interests, and real world relevance when we define what the breadth of the curriculum should include. For some, relevance focused on career development and employer needs, while for others, relevance was related to our current global context, and for yet others, it was important to acknowledge the value of breadth in and of itself. A number of participants focused on the challenge of communicating the value of a broad liberal education in the current economic context. (Goal 1, 1.3, 4.1, 7.2; Goal 2, 2.3)

2. What should we teach? Academic content/ subject matter (23):

Participants explored the question of what content we should provide to students, as future citizens, employees and human beings. A number of comments focused on the need to address global issues, and several emphasized the value of connecting global with local concerns. Some argued that, in our interconnected world, dichotomies between humanities and science, skill and content, career prep and personal development, etc. are false divides and that we need to change the conversation. (Goal 1, 4.1, 4.3, 7.2; Goal 2, 2.3)

3. How should we structure the curriculum? What should be our focus? (27):

There were questions, but not necessarily answers, about how structured or open the curriculum should be, and a reminder that we should make decisions based on data and best practice. Some participants sought a balance of skills and content, others felt that the focus should be more on liberal arts content, another suggested using minors to develop skills. Many comments endorsed an integrated, interdisciplinary approach as a way to make connections, including connections between skills and content, and as a way to engage students. A tension was acknowledged between using the first two years to build a foundation for learning, while the majority of students enter PSU as juniors. And there were a few question about whether the traditional structure of 180 credits, etc., makes sense. (Goal 1, 1.3, 2.3, 4.1, 7.2; Goal 2, 1.5; 2.3)

4. Pedagogical and curricular transparency/ Importance of being explicit (18):

Many participants spoke of the value of transparency in different aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, arguing that we should explicitly address the utility of general education and cross-disciplinary study, and establish clearly the relevance of the curriculum and its applicability to life, citizenship and career. (Goal 1, 2.2, Goal 2, 1.5, 2.3)

5. Pedagogical practice (21):

In addition to arguing for greater pedagogical transparency, underscored the value of four elements of curricular and pedagogical design: building in connections between people (student-student/ student-teacher/ etc.), developing critical thinking, assigning effective teamwork and requiring community-based experiences. (Goal 1, 4.1, 4.3; Goal 2, 1.5, 2.3; Goal 3, 3.2)

6. Extracurricular Experiences (7):

Several suggestions were made to help extend learning beyond the classroom, including designing class schedules that create opportunities for increased student interaction, creating more social

spaces, and using more team assignments. As one participant noted, breadth can come from contact with other students, yet that contact is not easy to find at PSU. (Goal 2, 1.5)

7. Career exploration and life advising (7):
Several participants spoke of the importance of career and life advising. Others argued for a career exploration experience for every freshman. (Goal 1, 4.1, 5.5; Goal 3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3)

8. Study abroad (5):
Some participants spoke to the value of study abroad and the need to provide students with access to quality programs that can be integrated with their major. (Goal 1, 7.1)

9. College preparedness/ skill building (19):
A number of participants spoke about the lack of college readiness among students, and our need to meet them where they are and find ways to address their needs without stigmatizing them. Suggestions included creating short, skill-based courses (4 weeks), scaffolding those (and other) courses, to help students improve their skills, particularly in writing. (Goal 1, 1.3, 5.5; Goal 2, 2.3; Goal 3, 1.3)

10. Helping students move out of their comfort zone (6):
Some participants spoke about the importance of challenging students to question their assumptions and boundaries, while others noted that our students already come with a variety of life experiences, and perhaps they don't need us to push them in this way.

11. Financial concerns/ impediments (19):
A number of comments focused on the practical and economic problems that our students face. Some people argued for a need to address students' basic needs, by making resources more accessible, lobbying the legislature on students' behalf, etc. Other participants noted the challenge of interesting students in some coursework if it requires paying for classes that don't seem relevant to their future career. (Goal 1, 1.4, 4.3, 5.4)

12. Miscellaneous (13)

LIST OF ALL COMMENTS

1. How should we define breadth?:

- Current students need to be included in these discussions.
- Re-examine our academic understanding of "breadth" and "depth" to be sure they evolve and are relevant to the students we serve.
- In addressing our questions we, while valuing our vantage points, must acknowledge the limitations of our perspective (have we experienced job search etc. outside of academia?). We should interview graduates 3-10+ years out as to what elements of their education they value. Also - Employers
- How is what we learn relevant to our lives?
- How do we bring in students' experience and knowledge to provide breadth?
- World applicability - take a set of problems - contextualize and reset.
- Prepare students for careers and global citizens?
- Who are we serving? "Traditional"? Point of view, international students.
- No such thing as a "traditional" student. How do you meet the needs of everyone?
- Relevance of a broad range of skills and knowledge in life.
- Citizenry vs. employment
- Lives, careers, academic expenses: Our older students already have their plan and want to get through their program to degree. They are focused coming into PSU.
- Consequences for rushing through degree - balance career decision making with liberal arts.
- Are students missing the point of education as (just) about money? - How to communicate this point?
- How to engage students who have a more transactional approach to their education? They know they need a Bachelor's degree.
- Consumer model of education. How does this class bring value? Insight takes time! Creative engagement:
- Spend money = expectations
- Change the mindset. What do people value?
- We tend to focus on a career-oriented path. Do students understand the value of humanities?
- Practical/technical vs. liberal arts/general education
- Depth vs. breadth or rigor vs. relevance
- General mistrust of higher education.

2. What should we teach? Academic content/ subject matter:

- Practical citizen
- Prepare students for careers and global citizens?
- Academic subjects: politics, history, media, etc.
- Show future adaptability - tasks and subject areas.
- 1-credit freshmen seminar - every week new topic.

- Professional focus: history of profession; issues and practices vis-a-vis ethics; global contextualization of ethical decision-making.
- Domestic issues are comparable internationally; translating transnationally. "The life" is Portland, but also reflective of global urban environments.
- Importance of global context, integration in classroom.
- Prepare students to be global citizens
- Engaging international students for intercultural conversations - all diversity = richer experience.
- Integrate global communities
- Depth and rigor will come with the territory.
- The need to put a wider range of disciplinary concepts in play for each student. Embedded in curriculum.
- We have easy access to breadth (via web), but we need to make sense of what's there.
- Divide between humanities and non-humanities is artificial.
- Dichotomy: general human being vs. specific economic role is a False dichotomy in rapidly-changing world.
- Skill – content education: is there a tension? There are connections, does not have to be. Can't it be both?
- Why dichotomies?
- Career and citizenry: Technical skill/liberal arts and humanities. Change the conversation
- Utility and Utopia. University needs to foster conversation that combines the two.
- Important to address issues/questions from international student point of view.
- Value-based inquiry is what we do and it happens in the classroom every day. What professional skills matter?
- Focus on career preparation is greater than focus on exploration and general knowledge.

3. How should we structure the curriculum? What should be our focus?:
- Curriculum as structured (guided) or open (flexible)?
- Structured vs. flexible curricula?
- Look at existing literature best practice is available. NOTE: better to say: Review literature for best practices and adapt as needed to fit the PSU community goals.
- Be serious on data
- Integration of curriculum? - Model of "learning garden".
- Freshmen and sophomores build the foundation.
- Majority of our students are junior transfers. They don't have the "traditional liberal arts" structure we offer in freshmen and sophomore. They may be reluctant to branch out for fear of low grade, not passing, etc.
- De-emphasize specific skill (GIs) and focus on more of the liberal arts.
- Enhance thinking/learning around analytical thinking.
- Balance of practical skills and general education.

- The real need for interdisciplinary learning - making connections to solve problems, correlation between skills.
- Interdisciplinary study is important.
- Intentional use of a minor: Skills-based minor - encourage creative major/minor articulation.
- Some expectations:
  - Being able to engage in the culture of your academic area (comes from immersion, not from a particular collection of courses).
  - Commitment to the common good. Being involved in the city is a great contributor to this.
  - Be able to think. Convince public of the value of this.
- Engagement: Challenge of engaging (how do I become engaged across curriculum?)
- Opportunities for engagement are aimed toward "traditional" students, how do we meet non-traditional students where they are?
- How does the question change when we look at dramatic differences in completion for lower SES quartile vs. higher?
  - We do need to be able to say, "Yes, you're going to get a job out of this..." how to build in the breadth?
  - Kevin's example of "flipped" degrees.
  - Use application more - frame larger issues in the student's cultural, regional context - enter the curriculum from a place of strength
- Structure of learning: Why 180 credits? Why four years? Why semester/one week/one year courses?
- Why four years? Why credit requirements? What parts of online education can we apply to a brick-and-mortar institution?
- How to allow students to exercise choice in exploring classes outside of their majors and the FRINQ/SINQ sequences (music, art, anthropology, intro's). Bring back the tuition plateau.
- FLASH - freshman employment program. Out-of-classroom experiences.
- Local = bonding, global = bridging
- How to deeply engage students?

4. Pedagogical and curricular transparency/ Importance of being explicit:
- Explicitly address the utility of cross-disciplinary and general education understanding/skills in a time of change.
- Need to make connections and experiences more intentional from FRINQ to Capstones
- Clarify from beginning:
  - Relevance of skills and knowledge base
  - Applicability of tasks
  - Defense of the need to know
- Making connections: between classes, uni/professional world, define intentionality
- The classes that are considered "fluff" or a luxury by both students and the public - need to make a better case in the classroom and the public.

- Articulation of subject units
- World applicability - take a set of problems - contextualize and reset.
- Participate in a conversation!!! Bring it to them. Empower/enable students to do this.
- Are students missing the point of education as (just) about money? - How to communicate this point?
- Establishing relevance, facilitate connecting dots, provocation.
- Across years within in a department.
- If students arrive with focus on basic needs, who is responsible for finding their connections? Interested in such a way that you can't miss it. By design...can't miss it.
- Use application more - frame larger issues in the student's cultural, regional context - enter the curriculum from a place of strength.
- Articulate values of student experience.
- Interconnectivity of "life", citizen, career: Give students agency in their education.
- Utility and Utopia. University needs to foster conversation that combines the two.

5. Pedagogical practice:

Building in People Connections:
- Cohort?
- Making connections/engagement: Student to student; Student to faculty; Student to community
- Finding support, community. Include Financial help
- Role of relationships between faculty and students.

Critical Thinking:
- Critical thinking is adaptiveness to the roles after graduation (and later in life).
- Problem solving skills and community engagement: Empower students
- Teaching how to think.
- Moving from recipient of knowledge to a produce of knowledge.

Team-work:
- Team assignments to require students to network and interact outside of class including use of technology.
- Real world team project: academic subject vs. real world entity
- Problem solving - as a team - teams comprise of opposite types.
- Students can make choices to dabble before diving into one area or not!
- Hands-on teamwork in every discipline. Teach students how to learn.
- Team-base curriculum development to broaden perspective.

Community-based learning:
- Model getting out in the community to apply knowledge.
- Community work experience requirements.
- Real world team project: academic subject vs. real world entity
- Service-based learning. Value of an urban campus. Civic engagement creates lifelong skills.
- How do graduates give back to community and how do we meet the needs of community?

- Problem solving skills and community engagement: Empower students
- Faculty mentorship linked to community mentorship.

6. Extracurricular Experiences:
- Breadth hampered by students leaving after class which limits student interaction. How do we provide opportunities to interact in-class or outside of class?
- Logistics - students come in with a plan to have restricted time on campus. Build in opportunities to interact in the student's' time on campus.
- Flexibility of scheduling to provide more campus time.
- Team assignments to require students to network and interact outside of class including use of technology.
- More social spaces? Cohort model?
- Breadth as coming from contact with other students - hard to get at PSU!
- Student organizations

7. Career exploration and life advising:
- Every freshman should have a career exploration experience - job shadowing? Non-obvious career opportunities with majors.
- Life course advising
- Navigation of: career trajectory, academic career planning
- Career exploration and preparedness. Earlier. What is our role?
- Career counseling earlier in academic career.
- Educate parents and students about paths available.
- FLASH - freshman employment program. Out-of-classroom experiences.

8. Study abroad:
- Prepares students to be global citizens:
- We have a number of opportunities for faculty and students to study abroad.
- There is still a need to continue to develop and expand their global reach.
- Many departments are not supporting study abroad, but there needs to be more support.
- Standards across international programs need to be carefully revised.

9. College preparedness/ skill building:
- The question of addressing reading and writing literacy.
  - Not all are well-prepared. What is our role as educators to teach reading literacy and writing?
  - Scheduling - a semester system might help do both, or 4-week courses, one at a time.

- o   Scaffolding - also scaffolding (external)
- o   Continuity - build coursework across a year.
- Remediation: more courses to serve those who need the math, etc. looking at our assumptions about skills they bring in.
- Time management
- Focus on skills assessment and improvement.
- Presentation skills: written, oral, self - as in present
- Tailored communication
- What is the role of high school?
- Lack of preparation at entry.
- Role of remediation
- How to support students of varied levels of preparedness?
- Shifting from an oral culture to a written culture. - Writing and critical reading.
- Models: pathway programs, dual/co-enrolled
- Choose different language to de-stigmatize remedial and developmental.
- Who are we serving? If our goal is to serve everyone, what does our product look like?
- Be more flexible and responsive to students' needs - meet them where they are.
- Inclusive excellence

10. Helping students move out of their comfort zone:
- Embrace discomfort
- Breaking down assumptions before building up students with greater comfort with the ambiguity of the world-in-becoming.
- Challenging students to question their assumptions.
- Pushing boundaries: From their life experiences - maybe they don't need it from us?
- Do they need new experiences? - They have already been there.
- Students come in with a variety of life experiences

11. Financial concerns/ impediments:
- Practical nature of student financial concerns is a major issue.
- Students might complain about paying for classes they don't want or don't feel they need to get the job.
- Can we do everything? What should we provide as depth?
- Does financial accessibility address this?
- Example from India and Germany - not necessarily, but it would help.
- Empirical evidence: financial concerns have a significant impact on completion, especially for women.
- Barriers - budget model (Engineering and SBA Capstone revisit? - define the goals for a general education capstone)

- Try to fit more within.
- Invoke legislature to refund education.
- Create faster, need-based resource redistribution.
- Student pressures/anxieties: money.
- Basic needs: food, housing, spaces to fulfill these scaffolding of needs.
- More opportunities, but also more costs - digital divide.
- Phone, etc. as leveler, gap - making it accessible.
- Easier access to student services so first generation students have the support their family may not be able to provide.
- Cost reduction - degrees, e-texts, self-paced.
- Economic pressures; lack of emphasis on self-awareness; new dynamics in education at all levels. Lack of preparation at entry.
- Financial accessibility
- Address paths to access.

12. Miscellaneous:
- Marathon, not a sprint.
- How do we transfer PSU's uniqueness to an online environment?
- Quality vs. quantity
- Honors - don't set up elitism, these are part of majors.
- Honors - better advertisement, recruitment
- PSU identity - an aspiration to be the best PSU we can be.
- Better advising
- PSU as a career enrichment, as well as career prep.
- PSU in the city, not necessarily PSU-initiated.
- Education as having an "app" or "device"?
- Challenge: Faculty life-experience, particular to academic vs. practitioner.
- Accreditors are more flexible than previously thought?
- CARING about students, each other, and ourselves