The Generalists vs. the Specialists

Hurdles to Implementation

The Alcalde November/December 2006

The Commission of 125

Undergraduate

The University of Texas had two departments: the Academic Department and the Law Department. So from its very beginning, the University assumed a dual character, or, if you prefer, a split personality. On the one hand, it was seeking to broaden young minds and offer a ground for exploration, with all the modifiers that implies: classical, liberal, well-rounded, broad. On the other hand, it was seeking to prepare students for a specific profession, back then, law. In the 124 intervening years, the list of professions has grown. UT now prepares students for a specific profession, back then, law. In the 124 intervening years, the list of professions has grown. UT now prepares students for a specific profession. In the first task, the university, it was seeking to equip undergraduates with a core body of knowledge essential to a well-balanced education. In an assessment with which any alumnus of the last 50 years can identify, it concluded, “For too many degree plans, the current curriculum resembles little more than a vast à la carte menu. While this makes for great flexibility and variety, course-selection decisions are frequently driven by class availability, convenience, and whim rather than by a well-conceived plan of instruction.”

The report continued: “To have a first-class undergraduate educational experience, the Commission believes every student should:

• Receive a broad education that includes exposure to culture, literature, foreign languages, the humanities, and the arts;
• Explore mathematics, science, and technology;
• Learn to think and read critically, write cogently, speak persuasively, and work both independently and as part of a team;
• Engage in open discussion, inquiry, discovery, research, problem-solving, and learning to learn;
• Examine questions of ethics and the attributes of effective leadership; and
• Acquire a sense of history and the global community together with a respect for other cultures.”

The commission, in its ongoing work, suggested a new “University College” that would house these staples, a caldera themes which led the university on their way to intellectual and degree fulfillment before deciding which they find most palatable. The University College would also centralize academic and career advising and have its own dean, who would be responsible for the core curriculum. The then-leader of the Task Force on Curricular Reform now leading UT — President Bill Powers. Curricular reform is his baby. The tug of war between the generalists and the specialists remains — between the free-spirited explorers for whom higher education is the foundation of their future intellectual and even spiritual lives and the vocationists, who satisfied in high school whatever thirst they had for broad education and now want to drill down as deep as possible to specialize in something that will guarantee their professional niche.

But the tension between the generalists and the specialists remains — between the free-spirited explorers for whom higher education is the foundation of their future intellectual and even spiritual lives and the vocationists, who satisfied in high school whatever thirst they had for broad education and now want to drill down as deep as possible to specialize in something that will guarantee their professional niche.

Smuggle has led to compromise, and the Task Force’s latest document offers the following concessions: students can declare majors immediately; all undergraduates will enroll in the University College — not just freshmen, the new entity will be called not the University College but the Baccalaureate College. As for the advising, it remains undecided. UT’s first shot at centralized advising, the Undergraduate Advising Center, was overwhelmingly successful but was quietly shut down in 1997. No details yet on how the new centralized advising would work:

Despite the changes, questions linger:

• If all UT students are enrolled in the Baccalaureate College, how is it any different from UT as a whole?
• Where will the money come from and, assuming it can be found, is this the most pressing need for it? With tuition soaring, buildings crumbling, academic budgets stretched, and class sizes bloated, should adding a whole new college that some say is redundant but top the to-do list?
• Will the Signature Courses, with their massive size and heavy reliance on TAs, really offer the kind of signature experience the Commission of 125 envisioned?

These issues and others must be addressed if the proposed changes are to clear the remaining significant hurdles to implementation: 1) approval by the Faculty Council, 2) an OK from the Board of Regents, and 3) the blessing of the state legislature. Of the three, the first hurdle might be the highest.

As of press time, the latest development was the appointment of Paul Woodruff, a former director of UT’s Plan II honors program, as the first dean of undergraduate studies and the man to oversee the implementation of the new core curriculum. A professor of ancient Greek philosophy, Woodruff studied at Princeton and Oxford, bastions of the classical education. Woodruff harbors no delusions of the challenge that he and the core curriculum face. His last task, he says, is to listen. But he’s also confident of success: “We will prove that a top research-oriented university can bring as much passion and coherence to undergraduate teaching as a small, elite college.”

The tug of war between generalists and specialists has never been resolved to the satisfaction of everyone, and may never be. But, in the meantime, there are those who have found significant ways to help undergraduates gain a better grasp of the strange new world in which they are submerged. In addition to Plan II, which is more than 75 years old, the Freshman Research Initiative and the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Internship are two existing programs that offer undergraduates a way to explore the world of ideas before settling down into specialty...
Re-imagining Undergraduate Education through Intellectual Entrepreneurship

by Richard A. Cherwitz

Increasing accountability in higher education is the subject of intense national discussion. Witness the recent recommendations of the secretary of education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education and the controversy created in its wake.

In these conversations, which frequently bog down in heated debates about the effectiveness of education, a serious worry, one that has occupied the attention of UT president William Powers, the Task Force on Curricular Reform, and the Faculty Council: How can students negotiate the undergraduate curriculum, choosing what to study from the wide array of opportunities available?

Many undergraduates are uncertain about a major, handfuls of specialized opportunities make little sense, frequently appearing to have limited connection to students’ personal interests and professional goals.

Career and professional development opportunities come too late in the game. Emerging at the back end of education, these opportunities not only are seen as inherently separate from the academic and intellectual work students undertake within their discipline but also tend to be viewed as non-academic and secondary to scholarship and study.

Undergraduate pedagogy sometimes is overly didactic; students are spoon-fed disciplinary knowledge without sufficient attention to how their interests might serve their aspirations. This would be a rigorous academic exercise—one where students become anthropologists of the academic landscape, interrogating and reflecting upon the discipline/career to which they aspire.

Students not only would explore UT’s vast academic landscape but would ponder systematically and write incisively (as ethnographers of a discipline) about their own participation in it; the course would culminate in students designing and proposing an entrepreneurial plan for their academic career at UT, one enabling them to meaningfully pick a specialized major and guiding them in weaving together a tapestry of courses across the curriculum defining and linking their intellectual, personal, and professional identities.

The proposed IE Mentorship Course complements and supplies one mechanism for implementing some of the thoughtful recommendations made by President Powers, the Task Force and Faculty Council—including the recently created dean of under-graduate studies positions, “signature courses,” and the much debated Baccalaureate College, which could house the IE Mentorship Course. By providing students greater agency in their undergraduate education, this course might shift the metaphor and model of students’ education from one of “apprenticeship-certification-entrainment” to one of “discovery-ownership-accountability.

It might significantly enhance the education of first-generation and underrepresented minority students, an effect already well-documented by the IE educational philosophy and Pre-Grad Internship upon which it is modeled.

The Freshman Research Initiative

by Sarah Simmons, College of Natural Sciences

One of the greatest opportunities a major research university can offer its undergraduates is the chance to do front-line research in faculty laboratories. Early research experience profoundly affects graduate school performance and long-term academic and career success. But getting undergraduates into research labs has always been a great challenge. Enrollment is high—The College of Natural Sciences alone has 8,700 undergraduates in more than 50 degree programs. And although UT Austin received $380 million in annually sponsored research, our efforts have been recognized nationally. Both the National Science Foundation and Howard Hughes Medical Institute have pledged a total of $4.7 million over the next five years to support this initiative.

There is hope: Consider UT’s Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Pre-Graduate School Part. In part, the national-acclaimed inter-collegiate IE Consortium, this mentorship offers upperclassmen the chance to work with veteran graduate students to determine whether they should pursue advanced education and, if so, in what discipline. This internship isn’t merely an “applied” or “work” experience where students “just do it” in a laboratory they might not own their own education, discovering how to leverage knowledge for social good—so be “citizen-scholars.”

Interestingly, interns, most of whom are seniors and seniors and more than 40 percent of whom are first-generation or underrepresented minorities, wonder why the Pre-Grad Internship was underfunded during their college years to step back and assess the meaning and significance of disciplinary knowledge.

As the recommendations of the secretary of education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education are scrutinized, we must refine from becoming enured in debates about the meaning of assessment. Instead, academics should boldly re-envision the undergraduate experience, allowing students to become entrepreneurial: to study themselves, their disciplines, and the way they are taught and studied. How can students develop the twin missions of the research institution—education and discovery for the benefit of society? The IE Mentorship Course is a modest first step.

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