

Recommendations for revision to Pathways proposal, 11/17/14

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December 4, 2014

### **1. Prefatory remarks:**

I remain skeptical of the overall impact of this proposed change on undergraduate education at Virginia Tech, including the sense that the time and money spent on revising the general education program will not be met with desired changes in student learning. The existing areas of the CLE seem adequate to student learning, and it would seem that a simple revision of the existing goals would have been a more efficient approach to improvement, given the amount of resources that will be required to implement the proposed curriculum.

That said, this document includes specific suggestions for revision in order to improve areas of vagueness and lack of specificity in the existing proposal. All of my comments are focused on learning outcomes and indicators, as getting these right is crucial for successful implementation of the curriculum and its assessment.

### **2. Suggested revisions:**

#### **A. p. 8, Core Learning Outcomes and Indicators, Discourse**

Problem: The Indicators of Learning are somewhat vague and do not focus on writing in a robust or specific way, as do the existing goals for Area 1 of the CLE. While it is clear that the Discourse Core Learning Outcomes do not only focus on writing, we know that improving students' writing skills is one of the most pressing issues of the general education curricular revision. As a result, getting these Learning Outcomes and Indicators accurate, specific, and clear is crucial.

Proposed solution: Revise the Discourse Indicators of Learning to include some existing goals from Area 1 of the CLE, replacing and condensing the existing indicators as follows:

Indicators of Learning:

1. Discover, comprehend, analyze, and evaluate information from a variety of written, oral, and visual sources.
2. Understand modes of verbal discourse that are central to college-level academic work, such as argument, interpretation, analysis, and metaphor.
3. Develop clear and effective prose through attention to style, grammar, and other elements of composition.
4. Read texts and write analytical and interpretive prose as a reciprocal means of expanding powers of understanding and imagination.
5. Exchange ideas effectively with an audience and use feedback from that audience to assess one's written or spoken texts.

#### **B. pp. 9-10, Core Learning Outcomes and Indicators, Critical Thinking in the Humanities**

- i. Problem 1: The first problem in this Core Learning Outcome concerns the disconnect between

the indicators and general outcomes. The outcome concerning how students will “understand that they are a small part of a larger global community and to engage with diverse individuals, groups, and ideas that have changed and will be changing over time” is not matched with any specific indicator. Thus it is unclear how the courses that meet the specific learning indicators will include content that meets that outcome.

Solution 1: Either drop the language in the description of the outcomes or address this outcome in a learning indicator. In my proposed recommendations for revision (below under Solution 2), I have not included an indicator of learning related to this issue because it is my view that it should be dropped from the overall Learning Outcomes of this area. However, if CUSP decides to retain this LO, then another indicator that addresses it should be added to those proposed below.

ii. Problem 2: The learning indicators are vague and mix concepts and practices. For example, reading complex texts is not a concept in the humanities but a practice. In addition, fundamental concepts, theories, and methods in the humanities are mentioned as categories but there are no specific concepts, theories, or methods presented. As a result, the indicators seem superficial and open to question. Finally, the existing indicator #3 is confusing because the preposition “within” seems to be the wrong word to use. The point here is to interpret texts and artifacts that *come from* varied contexts; at least, that is what I glean from the indicators as presently written.

Solution 2: Revise the learning indicators as follows:

Indicators of Learning:

1. Identify ongoing concerns in humanistic traditions, such as the meaning of freedom, the problem of representation, questions of identity and belonging, and principles of moral behavior (among many other persistent concerns), as evidenced in canonical and noncanonical works.
2. Analyze texts and other created artifacts using theories and methods of the humanities, such as the close reading of complex texts.
3. Interpret texts and other created artifacts from multiple historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts.
4. Synthesize multiple complex sources and create a coherent narrative or argument.

### **C. pp. 10-11, Integrative Learning Outcomes and Indicators**

i. Problem 1: It does not make sense to me to have these LOs be integrated throughout the core courses. I do not understand why these LOs can't be addressed in individual courses, as their distribution throughout the curriculum will actually diminish rather than enhance their impact (in my view).

Solution 1: Require a course in Ethics and a course in Intercultural and Global Awareness, adjusting the credit requirements of the other areas as necessary or simply requiring that students take one course that is an E and one course that is IGA from choices that also meet those other requirements.

Problem 2: The Philosophy department has made revision suggestions to the Ethical Reasoning Learning Outcomes and Indicators that make sense to me, as the existing text reads as if it were not written by people who deeply understand ethical theory and reasoning. In particular, the

notion in the existing first Indicator of Learning that there are ethical theories and one relates them to “personal beliefs” in terms of which best “applies” suggests a static element to personal beliefs, rather than the idea that studying ethical theories can and often does challenge and change one’s personal beliefs. The idea of personal beliefs should be taken out of the Indicators of Learning altogether, as the relation of ethical theories to personal beliefs would be an expected result of such learning in this field but not necessarily one measurable in the institutional domain.

Solution 2: Change the Ethical Reasoning Learning Outcomes and Indicators as follows:

**Ethical Reasoning** is the principled evaluation of moral and political beliefs and practices. In today’s complex and diverse world, ethical behavior requires more than just the desire to do the right thing. Foundational learning of ethical theories, issues, and applications will support students in formulating and executing ethical decisions in their professional and personal lives. Courses addressing this outcome must meet a majority of the learning indicators.

**Indicators of Learning**

1. Explain, contrast, and critically evaluate influential ethical theories.
2. Identify ethical issues in a variety of contexts.
3. Articulate and defend positions on ethical issues in a way that is both reasoned and informed by the complexity of those situations.

iii. Problem 3: The first indicator of learning in Intercultural and Global Awareness mentions only the advantages, but not the challenges, of diversity and inclusion. If there were only advantages, we wouldn’t have the problems that we encounter with this issue today. In addition, it is in the study of challenges that we will be able to address solutions to the social problems attendant to exclusive and homogeneous communities and organizations.

Solution 3: Change the first indicator of learning under Intercultural and Global Awareness as follows: 1. Identify advantages and challenges of diversity and inclusion in communities and organizations.

**D. p. 12, transfer students and the Integrative Learning Outcomes**

Problem: It is unclear how the Integrative Learning Outcomes will be accomplished by transfer students who have finished requirements for the distribution model, as the document is vague on this point: they “would have the opportunity to encounter these concepts in an FYE course or in courses in some majors that already focus on ethical reasoning” and, one would suspect, intercultural and global awareness. This statement is tantamount to stating that the integrative learning outcomes are not possible to accomplish or assess for students who are transferring credits in to fulfill the distribution model. Again, this speaks to the problem of having these learning outcomes as integrated throughout the curriculum but not supported by specific courses.

Solution: Require that transfer students without specific courses that meet these integrative requirements take at least one course in ethics and one course in global awareness to fulfill their general education requirements.