

March 8, 2006
To: Faculty Council
From: Dominic L. Lasorsa, Journalism School
Re: College of Communication Faculty Forum on Curricular Reform

The College of Communication Faculty Forum on Curricular Reform convened on Wednesday, March 1, at 12 p.m. in CMA 5.160 (The Lady Bird Johnson Room).

Attending the meeting were 20 faculty members from all units within the College, as well as the chairs of these units. In addition, representatives of each of the four subcommittees of the University's Task Force on Curricular Reform were present to answer faculty questions about the Task Force's recommendations. These were former UT student Drew Carls, Associate Professor of Journalism Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Professor of Architecture Larry Speck, Professor of Mathematics Mike Starbird, and Professor of Philosophy Paul Woodruff.

The faculty were told that the meeting was being recorded to help in the preparation of this report to the Faculty Council but that no College faculty members would be identified in the report.

At the start of the meeting, the following handouts were distributed: (1) a meeting agenda (also sent to faculty earlier via email), which essentially consisted of the five major recommendations listed in order; (2) "Frequently Asked Questions on the Report of the Task Force on Curricular Reform," which one of the Task Force members provided for distribution; (3) "Change is no Disaster," comments by Paul Woodruff on the need for reform; (4) "Report of the Task Force on Curricular Reform recommends changes in core curriculum," an article prepared by the UT Office of Public Affairs, Nov. 1, 2005, which succinctly summarizes the recommendations; (5) "Basic Education Requirements," from the *Undergraduate Catalog*, including the Core Curriculum; and (6) "The Idea of General Education: What Every Student Should Know," a Jan. 8 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by Charles McGrath, which discusses undergraduate curricular reform issues at major American universities.

The first set of questions regarded the proposed changes to area requirements (Figure 1.1, p. 25 of the Report). A faculty member pointed out that the current requirement for a course in Communication will be dropped. A Task Force member responded that the new curriculum actually would enhance the students' opportunities to engage in "writing-component" courses, since three of the "flag" courses would be writing courses.

One faculty expressed concern about high school students not being admitted to their major upon admission to the University. Another faculty member said students might be frustrated about not being admitted to their major right away. Members of the Task Force defended the benefits of delaying declaration of a major until students had an opportunity to explore their options. They pointed out the importance of good advising at both the University and College levels. They also clarified that up to 80 percent of entering students in restricted colleges would be allowed to be "pre-admitted" to their desired major. One faculty member said that many students use the first years as a "shopping time" to find a major and that the College could capitalize upon this. The faculty member said that the College could use this as an impetus for creating courses that would promote our fields as something students should consider.

One faculty member said that the recommendations seemed appropriate for a small college of 1,000 students but not for an institution of this size.

A great deal of discussion took place regarding whether the creation of a new layer of administration, the University College, is cost effective. Why not, it was asked, put the money instead into the existing Colleges? For example, instead of spending money on advising at the University level, why not simply give those funds to the Colleges to allow them to do a better job? Questions were raised about how much the University College is going to cost. A member of the Task Force said it will be costly and that a capital campaign to raise funds will be necessary.

A question was raised about the uniformity of instruction across the signature course sections. Will faculty be able to agree on the nature of these courses and will students receive uniform instruction? A faculty member said a common syllabus model works fine in small classes but not large ones. A faculty member said “great teachers” want to teach what they want to teach, not something from a uniform syllabus. A Task Force member said the Task Force had considered this and saw its recommendation as a compromise. There would be “common threads” but not a totally common syllabus. He saw this as a plus. Students in different sections would be exposed to common material but in different ways, allowing “cross-talking” and “cross-fertilization” among students. A faculty member saw the appeal in having a “coherent theme” in the syllabi while allowing the faculty to take “individual initiative.”

Discussion ensued regarding the critical need for a new Communication building. One faculty member said, “We’re so busy putting out fires here. It’s hard to get excited about changes when we’re hurting so much. We need a new building!”

Discussion returned to the issue of “using current structures rather than creating an expensive new structure.” A faculty member asked, “Can’t we do this, signature courses, for example, without creating a University College? Can’t we put it in the existing structure?” A Task Force member said, “We know it doesn’t help to have a committee that proposes a new curriculum and then goes away. We need someone who will oversee the changes.” This, it was said, is a critical component of the recommendations. Professor of Biology David Hillis identified himself and said that this was one of the major thrusts of his “Alternative Recommendations” to the Task Force Report.

A faculty member said that “experience tells us that adding on a new layer of bureaucracy will slow change, not enhance it.”

A faculty member said “an alternative way to think about this is to situate the advisers in the departments, as opposed to the University College.” Likewise, the faculty member said, why not build on existing programs such as the Bridging Disciplines Program, rather than create a whole new level of bureaucracy? A Task Force member said the BDP is getting “good evaluations” but that the program is “very small, about 200 students a year.” In response, the faculty member said, “Why not scale up the BDP?”

A Task Force member said the recommendations require “someone who gets up in the morning and works on these matters full time.”

A faculty member said that the College should begin “thinking about interdisciplinary strands.” The faculty member said the College should “set up incentive systems to have faculty construct interdisciplinary courses.”

A number of faculty members said they were not sure that the recommended changes to the core curriculum would be any different from the current “check the box” distribution requirements. A Task Force member said this is why good advisers will be a critical component.

A faculty member said adding a multicultural perspectives and diversity course is a major step forward for the University.

Generally, many members of the faculty who were present seemed to support the recommendations, with the exception of the creation of the University College, seeing it as a new, superfluous layer of bureaucracy that will siphon off resources from existing structures. These faculty members said they preferred to see the recommendations implemented within existing structures and to see new funds put into existing structures, rather than the University College. As one faculty member put it, "I'm sympathetic to the goals of these recommendations. I remain unconvinced that we can't make these changes within the existing structure."

The meeting adjourned at 1:30 p.m.