

SUMMARY OF THE McCOMBS SCHOOL FACULTY FORUM ON UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULAR REFORM

The McCombs School Faculty Forum on Undergraduate Curricular Reform was held on Friday, March 3, 2006, from 3:00-5:00p. Approximately forty people were in attendance. Professor Laura Starks presented a short over-view of the Task Force Report and Professor Linda Golden moderated the forum. The forum was attended by several Curricular Task Force members, some non-McCombs Faculty Council Executive Committee members, and McCombs tenure- and non-tenure-track faculty.

The McCombs Faculty Forum discussion was lively, informative, and constructive in tone. There was considerable discussion with the Task Force members, as faculty sought information and clarification. The forum concluded with a discussion of approaches to curricular reform not recommended by the Task Force, and the discussion generated by the Task Force Report and McCombs Faculty Forum has continued.

Below are major points and comments made in the Faculty Forum, followed by highlights from the alternative recommendations discussed in the forum and over-flow discussions after 5:00p. This is an attempt to preserve the discussion and convey its essence. Therefore, this document may contain some conflicting ideas.

Major Points from the Forum

- The Task Force was commended for its hard work and diligence. McCombs faculty at the forum commented on the importance of continuing to enhance the quality of undergraduate education across The University. The importance of addressing how The University could best provide an outstanding education and experience for all undergraduates, and directing attention toward that goal, was widely supported.
- It was acknowledged with concern that different colleges face different situations with their student body and applicants. Colleges have different external environments that they must adapt to (e.g., competing with business schools that allow a declared major upon entry). In addition, different colleges have different problems and issues that they face (e.g., advising diverse majors and undeclared students versus a student

body that tends not to change majors and is highly career-directed upon college entry, as with the Business School). There was considerable concern expressed that strengths of one college may be lost (e.g., a strong college placement and advising system that a college has), if The University mandates changes across all colleges to address challenges faces by some colleges, but not all. The Business faculty are concerned about losing their competitive advantages, which are important to attracting strong students (i.e., front-end enrollment whereby incoming freshman can declare business as their major, and outstanding college-based advising and placement). It was pointed out that unlike the situation faced by some other colleges, business students do not tend to move out of the McCombs School once they have entered: McCombs has a very low attrition rate (low single digits).

- A major issue is freshmen entering The University who want to be business majors and will not ever be able to be admitted to the McCombs School. Some thought it critical to emphasize in the UT admissions letter that being admitted to the business school after entry to UT is highly unlikely (i.e., changing majors into business). It was suggested that the Business Foundations Program could be expanded to help address this demand as those students interested in business training ultimately pursue other majors.
- There was concern about students experiencing a loss of short- and long-term identity with the college to which students had been admitted, if they were attached to University College formally for the first two years even after having declared a major on entry to UT. A “dual system” (University College and major college) for the same person would be inefficient. And, if students were able to opt for University-wide and/or college major advising, this could hurt the morale and operation of college advising functions that are working well for their majors, as is the McCombs undergraduate advising. From advising to identification with a career major, being required to reside in two “colleges” could result in chaos and confusion.
- A part of the discussion centered around whether or not the students wanting to come to UT-Austin are doing so out of a sense of history and loyalty to the institution, rather than an active desire to acquire the education offered. In the context of a discussion of the University problem of undeclared majors, the point was made that it may be the bigger issue, because some students may coming to The University before they are ready to focus on their education intensely to prepare for graduation and career. Thus, we might want to redirect these students, not ready to make a decision (beyond what The University can do or provide), to other educational environments and institutions.
- According to Task Force members present, the Task Force recommendations are not meant to replace current processes, but to enhance and supplement programs and systems already in place.

Signature Course Comments

- The faculty members present agreed that the undergraduate curriculum should be constantly evolving in order to create appealing classes that add to the goal of a similar educational experience.
- While transfer students cannot be forced to take the courses, Signature Courses could be a requirement for all UT undergraduates, as students seldom take their entire core course load (42 hours) here. It was discussed whether students not taking all of their 42 hours in residence at UT-Austin would detract from the goal of a similar educational experience.
- What incentives would be given to faculty (and colleges) for participating in the signature courses? Appropriate incentives were deemed necessary; yet, there were questions about what resources would be needed, what their cost would be, and where they would come from.
- Page 25, Figure 1.1 of the “Report of the Task Force on Curricular Reform” dated October 27, 2005, states the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board requirements for semester credit hours. The signature courses would replace only *additional* credit hours that were added at the discretion of the institution. The freshman course could concentrate on writing skills, which appear to be lacking in incoming students. Questions were raised as to whether this would be the best way for freshmen to obtain this common experience, and the amount of bureaucracy involved in the current proposal. Implementation issues were raised due to the large sections and large numbers of TAs needed. Individual colleges currently have specific ways of training TA’s, etc., but as far as a large scale university-wide training, there are no reasonable models to follow.
- Page 11 of the Task Force Report calls for the redirection of a portion of the core curriculum to courses that examine technology problems facing society today and in the future. Currently, of the 42 hour requirement for core instruction, six have been defined by the Texas legislature. An additional three hours are available, and it was suggested that those hours be applied to learning technology. Opinion was rendered that the hours should not be limited to a natural sciences course, but anything related to technology (computers, etc.).
- What would be the metrics for measurement of success for this and other Task Force proposals? What would happen next if this idea does not work and the student “common experience” is negative?

University College and Centralization of Advising and Placement

- The McCombs Faculty expressed great concern about University College, including perceived potential to eliminate successes and strengths that the McCombs School has worked hard to develop (e.g., declaring a major on UT-Austin entry, a strong McCombs School advising program, and McCombs career placement services). Task

Force members reported that University College would not take the place of FIGs, Career Services, or individual college advising (page 15 of Task Force Report).

- What would happen to a student who, after four semesters in University College, does not have a GPA high enough to get into a college major?
- As guardian of the core, a coordinating board of the University College should determine the best way for core courses to flow together. The core content should be appropriate and topical, especially since the University core has not been programmatically addressed in twenty-five years. McCombs faculty generally agreed that The University undergraduate core, its nature and content, does need to be addressed. It should be of high quality, interesting, and relevant. Further, the courses should be interdependent on each other (integrated). The idea of assigned “guardian of the core” responsibility was acceptable, but “University College” was not.
- In discussing implementation issues around University College and University-wide advising, some Task Force members stated that 65% of students change majors. It was pointed out during the conversation that this is not the case in the McCombs School. Business majors tend to remain Business majors and not change colleges (approximately 2-3% change). McCombs has developed excellent advising for its majors and would not want to see that diluted through University-wide advising. Other colleges, however, could decide to build their advising in the context of a “University Academic Advising Center,” also potentially appropriate for undeclared majors. Some faculty were wondering if the University could not resurrect the previous “University Advising Center,” which was award winning. This idea may be re-implemented and made mandatory for students not having college-based advising or who are undeclared.
- The difficulties of advising 4,000 freshmen were discussed. In addition, what about the students that do not want to be advised, or are transferring from another college? Although the proposed structure is flexible and geared to those who truly do not know what they want to do regarding the college education experience, students who are confident in their decisions should continue to be encouraged to follow through on those. It needs to be made clear to the student where the appropriate advisor is for them (to avoid confusion and conflicting advising).
- Similar concerns exist for placement as exist for advising. The McCombs School has worked extensively to develop an effective Placement Center for its students and does not want it students to loose that resource or have the Placement Center’s current effectiveness diluted.
- Significant concerns were raised about the impact of University College and first two year “centralization” on the McCombs Honors Program, which is a very strong program. There were fears that any “reframing” of the McCombs Honors Program to adapt to University College (and absence of a major declaration on entry to UT-Austin) would result in undermining its current success. Some students report they

would not have come to UT if they were not certain of entry into business or the Business Honors Program.

- An entity like the concept of University College would be helpful to some students, as might University advising. For other students, socialization toward career goals might be impaired or mitigated without a freshman college identification.

Alternatives and Suggestions from the McCombs School

The faculty comments below were made either at the conclusion of the McCombs Faculty Forum or in discussions shortly after. The forum concluded with a call for alternatives and suggestions from the McCombs faculty.

- Instead of having a free-standing University College as the “guardian of the core,” it was suggested by some faculty that there be an Undergraduate Dean responsible for the core requirements and the quality of the first two years of the UT-Austin undergraduate educational experience. This person could be a Dean and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (with freshman, sophomore auspices) and occupy a position on the organization chart of the Provost’s Office (see Provost’s webpage).
- The name “University College” should be changed, if such an entity were to exist. Is a “college” needed to be able to accomplish the goals? A Dean and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education could be in charge of the “Undergraduate School” when an appointment or course number infrastructure is needed for undergraduate education purposes. Some, but not all, of the University’s freshman and sophomores might be members of that school. If all were members, it should not be to the exclusion of promised McCombs student membership (not altering the current relationships the College is developing with its incoming freshman and sophomores).
- Continue benchmarking against other major University’s educational practices with freshman and sophomore programs, identifying best practices.
- Few issues were raised on flags and strands, and these do not appear to be very controversial within the McCombs School. These might be implemented as soon as the infrastructure is in place, at least for initial piloting, if not beyond.
- Re-implement the University Advising Center for undeclared majors, at least. Do not require it for students of colleges with strong advising and placement already in place. Require those students to remain with their colleges for advising, but meet the needs of students with undeclared college majors who could be a part of a type of University College out of the Provost’s Office.
- Investigate an interdisciplinary, cross-University major (for graduation). Such a program may have existed in the past. This might be an enhanced educational

opportunity for students whose interests do not match a single major during their four year University career and who have genuine cross-disciplinary interests not grounded in a specific field or area of study. If the “Undergraduate School” (aka “University College”) were to grant (interdisciplinary) degrees this might be the appropriate degree-granting unit.

- Full scale *beta tests* of pilot signature courses should be conducted. The beta tests could include 25-33% of the incoming Freshman class. Surveys would evaluate performances and training of each TA with queries of both the TAs and students in the course. Professors opinions should also be included in a formal evaluation. Thus, a set of objectives would be established and performance evaluated against those objectives for all involved in the process as the pilot signature courses evolve. Reasons for deviations from objectives should be identified for further signature course enhancement. The University has learning professionals in place who could assist with this development, measurement, redevelopment process.
- Finally, in strengthening the quality and relevance of undergraduate education, in general, across the University, make the undergraduate curricular changes flexible enough to enhance the McCombs students’ education without diluting McCombs resources available to students (e.g., college advising and placement) and freshman/sophomore McCombs integrative experiences already in place.

Written by Linda L. Golden from
information provided by forum note-takers
and in conjunction with various McCombs’
faculty who were in attendance at the
Faculty Forum