University Senate Roundtable Discussions
Tuesday, February 14, 2012

1. What do our students need to know and know how to do as a result of liberal education?
   - Employers want communication skills—written and oral—as well as leadership skills
   - Broad critical thinking skills across disciplines
   - Analytical problem solving skills
   - We should prepare our students to be life-long learners
   - We shouldn’t think of “ethical reasoning” as a “competency”
   - Experience or be exposed to literature, history, economics, music, psychology, etc. (breadth).
   - How to access resources and critically think and problem solve; to be able to pull from various resources and transfer knowledge to new situations.
   - Communication—all forms (verbal, written, etc.).
   - Skills related to developing interpersonal relationships, facilitative skills, collaboration skills
   - Math and analytical skills
   - Lab science
   - Ability to analyze and look at both quantitative and qualitative data; to understand scientific evidence
   - Cultural diversity and other forms of diversity; the ability to see other perspectives
   - To think globally
   - Interdisciplinary and integrated courses

2. What are fears and concerns that people have regarding liberal education reform?
   - How is the transition going to work?
   - Is it really going to happen?
   - Are we making connections for students which they could more profitably be making for themselves (regarding bundles)
   - Some specialized/discipline-specific knowledge doesn’t lend itself well to integrative learning
   - A “watered down” curriculum
   - That students will be resentful of the integrative models because it erodes their decision-making or opportunity for exploration
   - That we are replacing one overly prescriptive model with another
   - Distribution as it stands gives short shrift to disciplines in arts and humanities
   - Do we have adequate resources to support the new requirements?
   - Can we maintain or guarantee quality for experiential learning requirements like immersion experiences?
   - Will assessment be driving curriculum to too great a degree?
   - That there is a climate on campus such that concerns about LE reform are dismissed as curmudgeonly opposition to change rather than genuine concern about the quality of liberal education we provide
   - Workload concerns about assessing the new LE requirements
   - What is too much and what is too little in terms of credits and requirements.
With having many requirements, how much debt does this create for students? Will too many requirements interfere with graduating in a timely and economically feasible fashion? Offices on campus are seeing increasing amounts of student anxiety related to finances and knowing they will be graduating with large debts.

- Will the new curriculum be what employers need and want.
- We won’t accomplish our LE reform in 2012; and thus our goals and outcomes will need to change again by the time we approve a new framework.
- Fear that some departments might have to rebalance—losing or gaining some resources.
- How does a new framework and requirements work for transfer students, especially those already bringing in 60 credits.

3. **What should be the priorities in liberal education reform**

- Need to be sure that we can accommodate transfer students
- Simplification without sacrificing quality
- Make LE relevant (or keep it so) for our students
- Maintain breadth
- Importance of disciplines shouldn’t be overlooked in emphasizing integration and interdisciplinary approaches
- Give our students what they need so they can contribute to the world and society at large (and find employment), e.g., confidence, leadership skills, ability to think, etc.
- Get LE reform done in a timely manner.
- Get our students done in 120 credits.
- Teach what it means to be responsible in all facets of life, including life skills.

The table of senators I listened to addressed all three questions together and continued the same discussion from one session to the next. Here are points raised:

1. The importance of insuring that students can graduate in four years and that no reform make that more difficult.
2. The importance of not focusing on four-year graduation rates, or goals, as a basis for deciding what is optimal as far as reform is concerned. The importance of understanding and supporting legitimate reasons why students might want and need to take more than four years to graduate.
3. The idea of requiring breadth courses be taken early in a student’s undergraduate career.
4. The idea of spreading breadth across a student’s undergraduate career.
5. The importance of teaching students what a liberal arts degree means so that they can explain to prospective employers what they have learned and what this offers employers. Making liberal education practical.
6. The importance of thinking about liberal arts education outside of and beyond preparation for and orientation toward any kind of job and career, including thinking of liberal arts education as preparation for informed and engaged citizenship.
7. The idea that liberal (arts) education is not about using this education for an instrumental, practical end, but rather is and should be about understanding and appreciating knowledge for its own sake, for its intrinsic value.
8. Liberal education should teach students to recognize that problems have multiple solutions, and that they can and should be approached from multiple perspectives, including those represented by different disciplines. Liberal education involves teaching students that different disciplines involve different kinds of thinking that are not readily translatable or convertible into the terms of each other but that are nonetheless all valuable.

9. Liberal education should be about your life and not just your career, and what it enables you in relation to your life is far more important than what it does for your career.

10. Liberal education reform should prepare students to be flexible enough to adjust in a world where they will likely need to pursue multiple and changing careers.

11. Liberal education reform should enable UWEC to preserve and promote its status as the premiere undergraduate liberal arts institution in the Upper Midwest, and at least among the regional comprehensives within the UW System. Liberal education reform should be about promoting that as UWEC’s distinct mark of excellence.

12. Liberal education reform at UWEC should not be conceived or implemented by thinking first or last in terms of how it enables UWEC to compete with other institutions.

13. Critical thinking is the most important skill that a liberal education should foster, especially in a world where it becomes ever more crucial to be able to distinguish different qualities of information.

14. Critical thinking is a useful and important skill but not the most important.

15. Liberal education reform should insure that students take courses widely across the disciplines while not requiring them to take everything. But they must take courses in the arts and humanities, courses in the social sciences, and courses in the natural and physical sciences.

16. Students don’t necessarily know how to make the best choices by themselves and we need to assist and teach them how to do this.

17. Liberal education reform should emphasize fundamental skills over in-depth pursuits of particular kinds and directions of knowledge. Writing and communicating effectively is the most important such skill.

18. Liberal education is about pursuit of knowledge that exceeds and supersedes cultivation of mere skills, especially ones of fundamental kinds.

19. Whatever reform is implemented, this must require students to read more, more often, and more deeply as well as foster a love for reading. Today’s generation of young people are reading less and less and this is costing them, and us all, as a result.

20. Liberal education reform needs to work with where students are at today, and what they are like today, in terms of their motivations and interests.

21. Liberal education reform should emphasize training in how to collaborate effectively as members of teams and groups. Too often our current students are insufficiently adept at this.

22. Our students currently work well as members of teams and groups. Promoting strong individuals is a worthwhile goal of a reformed liberal education here at UWEC.

23. Liberal education reform should emphasize the adaptability and flexibility of knowledges and skills learned.

24. Liberal education reform should emphasize that knowledges and skills mean fundamentally different kinds of things in different disciplinary contexts and are not necessarily readily adaptable or flexible, while adaptability and flexibility are not always desirable goals because this can lead to superficial and reductive misunderstandings of complex ideas.

25. Liberal education reform should involve simplifying and streamlining what we currently require.

26. Too much simplification and streamlining risks emphasis on and demand of rigor.
27. Liberal education reform should provide students freedom, but restricted freedom—freedom within broad categories. Perhaps beginning with eliminating or modifying the current general education subcategories would be a good idea.

28. Too much freedom for students to choose for themselves when they don’t know what they are choosing among or how to make these choices will lead to them choosing what they, and the rest of us, will ultimately regret. Students may well end up choosing away from fields of knowledge that are vital for a liberally educated person.

29. Introduction to the liberal arts courses or units might well be useful early on in students’ undergraduate careers.

30. It is important that we preserve the spirit and the rigor of the traditional liberal arts and not move in the direction of turning UWEC into the equivalent of a trade school.

31. Some of our students would be much better off at a trade school and we should encourage them to rethink their choice to come here.

32. Faculty and staff rightly should be concerned about the increased workload demanded in bringing assessment practices ever more directly and extensively into everyday matters of curriculum and pedagogy.

33. Likewise faculty and staff rightly should be concerned about reductively teaching solely or only toward limited and time-bound kinds of goals and outcomes.

34. Faculty and staff rightly should be concerned about tendencies toward, and pressures toward, reductive and limiting kinds of uniformity and cookie-cutter standardization across classes, departments, programs, and approaches to teaching across different fields.

35. Faculty and staff should rightly be concerned that a reformed approach to liberal education that we might adopt will result in a mismatch between what students choose, even demand, to take versus what courses and other kinds of educational experiences existing faculty can supply. This will create bottlenecks for students, leading to their greater frustration, possibly even accelerating transfer rates out of UWEC, and it will cause demoralization for faculty while faculty resources will be wasted inefficiently. Inadequate attention has been paid in discussing liberal education reform to how reform will match what (existing) faculty can provide.

36. Faculty and staff should rightly be concerned that reform will make for a lower quality liberal education experience for students and instructors, especially if this is only based on currently faddish ideas.

37. Liberal education reform should embrace new directions and new initiatives in thinking about how this kind of education should be conceived and pursued. We should be willing to take risks.

38. We need to think very carefully about what(ever) we do, given the increased competitiveness of the market for higher education, especially from for-profit institutions, while not wanting to end up attempting to compete with the latter by modeling what we offer on what they do and ending up trying to do what they will always do better.