Hamilton

The President

September 2008

Dear Friends,

In 2000, the Hamilton College faculty adopted what was then dubbed the "new curriculum" and what we now refer to as our "open curriculum." Among its prominent features are an emphasis on writing and an absence of distribution requirements. That is to say, while every Hamilton student must pass three "writing-intensive" courses and meet the requirements for his or her major, no one is obligated to take any other particular program of study.

Students often cite the open curriculum as a reason for choosing Hamilton. And enrolling students have, since the curriculum was instituted, been characterized by rising standardized test scores and high school class rank.

Yet it is understandable that some remain nostalgic for the old slate of requirements. Lamenting their passing, alumni occasionally will say something like: "I never would have taken a course in art history (or music or psychology or philosophy) if it hadn't been for the requirement that I had to fulfill. I have always been grateful that I was made to take that course." Fair enough, although there are likely other required courses that they remember less fondly or not at all. But from current students and recent graduates I routinely hear something at once similar and different. It goes like this: "Were it not for the freedom from requirements that comes with the open curriculum, I would never have been able to take that great course in Chinese (or history or astronomy or statistics)."

We are continually reassessing our ideas about curriculum. Indeed, our faculty members, who are responsible for the academic requirements at Hamilton, have a range of attitudes about the open curriculum. What is indisputable is that the world – and in particular the world of knowledge – has changed dramatically over time. A half century ago, when there were fewer disciplines, curricular requirements at most colleges were similar. The schema followed departmental lines; it was essentially a matter of allocating to each department or division a certain number of required courses, with periodic disputes over perennially contentious cases, such as foreign language and math.

Today there is more competition among a broader array of course offerings. In the middle of the last century, for example, fully developed programs in neuroscience and computer science did not exist, nor was there a course in bioinformatics at Hamilton. Although the 1958-1959 Hamilton College *Catalogue* does in fact list "mathematics for digital computers," it includes neither Chinese nor Hindi. The expansion that we have seen reflects real changes in our intellectual universe; such programs are here because they bring important new scholarly values to the College. Furthermore, various interdisciplinary fields have emerged at colleges and universities everywhere over the past few decades, such as biochemistry, bioethics and environmental and cultural studies. These are not just combinations but often new disciplines that develop at the interstices of traditional departments, sometimes ultimately becoming departments themselves.

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We all probably still agree that overall balance is beneficial, but it has been a long time since faculties could easily come to a consensus on an ideal distribution. Consequently, a professor arguing that students must have a course in X is likely to be seen as pleading *pro domo sua*.

The alternative to an open curriculum, as schools that have maintained distribution requirements have discovered, is the necessity of subdividing them in complicated ways, using grids and matrices to accommodate the interweaving of the various desiderata. The result is a proliferation of polyvalent courses that can count here or there, in this box or that, so the business becomes more like a puzzle and requirements lose much of their intuitive quality.

Our adoption of the new curriculum gave us at the same time a new responsibility, for almost all open curricula are predicated on rigorous advising. It seems reasonable that if students can range freely over the curriculum, they should at least have to persuade a faculty member that what they are doing makes sense. How well are we succeeding on that score, and are our advisors pushing back as much as they should? These are questions on which our strategic planning subcommittees have recently reflected and which are constantly on the mind of our dean. We know that there is always room for improvement; the role and shape of advising will doubtless be an important part of the new strategic plan on which we are working.

But I will hazard some anecdotal responses to the question of whether our students are achieving "balance" or "breadth." At matriculation in the Kirkland Cottage in August, I asked many of the 463 incoming students what they would be studying during their first semester: in every case, they described a wide range, usually including science, social science and literature or the arts. I was awed by their thoughtfulness and their ambitions.

At our June 2008 commencement, I was likewise struck by the remarks of Dean Joe Urgo regarding the award-winning seniors. Of Marco Allodi, chemistry major and winner of the James Soper Merrill prize, Dean Urgo noted that "When not in the chemistry or physics lab, Marco has studied poetry, Spanish language (including a semester in Madrid), modern history, the Adirondacks, mathematics and music, all the while maintaining a GPA of 94." Salutatorian Nguyen Nguyen, who majored in math and physics and had a grade point average of 95.6, took introductory French, linear algebra, principles of chemistry and quantum physics in her first semester. She went on to enroll in classes in music, writing, comparative literature, computer science and economics and spent a semester in Paris, where she studied grammar, politics and statistics in French. Valedictorian Kristin Alongi, who majored in chemistry, minored in mathematics and graduated with a grade point average of 96.6, took courses on the American political process, along with sociology, psychology, computer science, women's studies, philosophy and dance.

Are these cases typical? Probably not. Do students sometimes graduate without having taken a single course in science or Western civilization or art (or whatever else corresponds to one's personal idea of what is essential to the well educated individual)? Of course they do. And we must work harder to persuade such students of the importance of adding history to a physics curriculum, music to an anthropology concentration, or science to an Asian studies major.

But in the meantime, Hamilton is attracting superb students whose inquisitiveness our curriculum encourages and who become first-rate critical thinkers, writers and speakers. We can work with that.

Sincerely yours,

Joan Hinde Stewart