

Working with Existing Degree Structures
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My colleagues on this working group have submitted some interesting new models of “the undergraduate curriculum” for your consideration. My contribution is more modest, focusing on working within existing structures and offerings, or making minor changes, in order to achieve our goals of improving student learning, retention, and so on.

First of all, a recognition that some of our terms will need further discussion, too:

1) Student Success: we ought to settle on a working definition of this concept so that all parts of the university are working with the same goal in mind. Further, we ought to develop measures so we can better determine student success, and not just as an outcome, but measured against where students were when they were admitted.

2) Breadth Requirements: it is curious that the little-known student option of the two-year Associate Degree has a greater breadth requirement than do many of the baccalaureate degrees at VIU. We ought to examine the current breadth policy and try to measure how well students are meeting those requirements. Then we can consider whether we wish to re-open the breadth discussion. Perhaps we ought to re-frame these as *competencies*?

3) Learning Outcomes: in order to approach the question of how our degree offerings are truly serving our students, I think we need to consider the outcomes we, and they, expect. These will move beyond disciplinary breadth and into competencies like technological literacy, information literacy, “leadership”, study abroad experience, understanding other cultures both at home and globally, etc., etc.

Option A: Greater Flexibility within Programs/Majors/Minors

A relatively easy way to achieve distinctiveness around inter- and multi-disciplinary activity is to reduce the number of required courses a student needs in order to complete her degree, allowing courses from other disciplines to meet those requirements. This approach may still require some support in the way of registration practices (i.e., cross-listing of courses) or some course re-design.

Degrees may need to be reexamined for laddering-in and transfer ease, as well.

Another approach may be to “bundle” some commonly-completed double and triple Minors into “pseudo-programs” that could then be marketed, perhaps to international students in the first instance.

Option B: New Courses and Teaching Flexibility

Faculty are creative people. Creating new courses can be very satisfying. However, that can be stifled if the course has no chance of being offered. What do departments need to consider about their programs that will then encourage the creation of new, relevant courses with inter- or multi-disciplinary approaches? And perhaps more important, how do faculty and administrators work together to find the resources to offer them? And finally,

what supports need to be in place to encourage innovation in delivery, from the use of technology, to shared and team teaching arrangements, within and across departments?

Option C: New Degrees from Existing Resources

Recognizing the fiscal constraints, faculty have proposed combining resources in existing departments into new Majors that do not cost anything more in the way of courses. A proposal from Liberal Studies and Modern Languages has been sketched out at the concept stage; another in Environmental Studies got a start some years ago but has lain dormant for awhile.

Option D: First-Year Experience

Whether we embark on significant change to our degree structure or not, and no matter what form it might take, another initiative specifically aimed at retention of students is the First-Year Experience approach. At its most basic, the term “first-year experience” describes what an institution does to integrate new university students into its culture. Research shows that students succeed better if they feel integrated into and engaged by a larger university community on one or more of these levels: **social, academic, or service**. The “first-year experience” not only describes what an institution does to try to achieve this integration, but identifies and formalizes that activity (that is, schools create “Offices of First-Year Experience” or other structures).

The National Resource Center on First-Year Seminars, based at the University of South Carolina, organizes its data according to five types of activity aimed at this integration of first-year students:

- **Extended orientation** – this is the most common category of activity, and includes not only orientation activity before the term begins, but typically follow-up activities, perhaps an institutional “ritual” for first-year students (first-year convocation, e.g.), and also academic interventions
- **Academic seminars with generally uniform content** – these are introductory courses/seminars that all students must take, often known as “UNIV 101” and things like that – a smaller version of the “foundation year” (a “foundation course”?)
- **Academic seminars on various topics** – these are basically stand-alone courses delivered by one or more instructors, often interdisciplinary in approach; students choose one from among several offerings
- **Pre-professional or discipline-specific seminars** – courses designed specifically to introduce students to the methods, vocabulary, expectations, and so forth, within a discipline
- **Basic study skills seminars** – focus on sets of skills that are seen as essential to student success

We engage in a number of activities here at VIU that fall into one or another of these categories. But there could be more intentional, coordinated approaches, and they would fit both with the existing degree programs, and with the models suggested by my colleagues.