

General Education at Princeton University

*A statement by
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The last time Princeton University conducted a comprehensive review of its general education requirements was 1995—over 20 years ago. That alone would have been reason enough to undertake a fresh review of the goals and effectiveness of these requirements. But the strategic planning process provided an additional reason. In reflecting on the priorities and opportunities in particular areas of study going forward, several of the strategic planning task forces recommended changes to the general education requirements and the academic calendar. It was important to have a forum in which to evaluate these specific recommendations in the context of the undergraduate curriculum and degree requirements as a whole.

The Task Force on General Education was created to serve this dual purpose. It was the last of the task forces to issue a report and was therefore able to consider relevant recommendations made by all of the other task forces. Its work was guided by a long, detailed charge that included questions from the highly general (e.g., “What do we want Princeton students to gain from their undergraduate education?”) to the highly specific (e.g., “Should we include a ‘diversity requirement,’ as the Special Task Force on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion urged in their May 2015 report?”).

The task force took a multi-method approach, consulting with various campus constituencies, excavating Princeton’s history of general education requirements, analyzing student transcripts and survey data, and comparing our requirements with those of peer institutions. The result is a comprehensive, well-grounded report on the past, present, and future of general education at Princeton that has already generated lively conversation and robust feedback from faculty, students, and alumni.

We would like to thank the task force for an excellent process, a thoughtful set of recommendations, and a highly readable report. Their work has given us a strong basis for moving forward to consider recommended changes to the general education requirements and the academic calendar.

Those recommendations will now move into faculty committees for further development and vetting, with the ultimate decision on each made by a vote of the faculty. This response aims to facilitate that transition. We will highlight the major themes of the task force’s recommendations, reflect the feedback we have received, weigh in on a couple of resource issues, and describe next steps.

Curricular reform

The University’s current approach to general education requires students to take courses that adopt seven different ways of knowing: ethical thought and moral values, historical analysis,

literature and the arts, social analysis, quantitative reasoning, science and technology, and the study of knowing itself (epistemology and cognition). The current system also requires training in writing and proficiency in a foreign language.

The task force report offered a robust affirmation of this approach: it recommended continuing with the seven-category ways-of-knowing framework and the writing and foreign language requirements, and keeping the total number of required courses the same. These recommendations were grounded in data on students' course selections, evaluations, and experiences with the requirements, as well as comparisons with the general education requirements at peer institutions, most of which are similar to Princeton's. We found the affirmation of our current system compelling, and so did the vast majority of faculty, students, and alumni who commented on the task force report.

In the context of this overall affirmation, the task force recommended a variety of specific changes to course requirements and offerings. These recommendations for change clustered around four major themes:

Improving the implementation of current requirements. The task force recommended several changes that would strengthen the alignment between course offerings, the structure of the curriculum, and our current general education requirements. These changes are designed to improve on the execution of the current system of requirements, rather than to rethink or alter those requirements. They include revisions to the description and definition of existing distribution areas, reconsideration of the attachment of distribution areas to specific course offerings, the creation of "Sophomore Signature" courses, the creation of writing-intensive methods courses in departments, and standardization around a single, spring Junior Paper. These recommendations seem entirely sensible, and we received overwhelmingly positive feedback about them.

Increasing flexibility. The task force recommended several changes that would increase the flexibility students have in their selection of courses and concentrations. These recommendations include allowing courses to satisfy more than one distribution requirement, creating course "tags" that would co-exist with existing distribution areas, giving students choice about which areas to emphasize as they select distribution courses, and increasing the number of joint or mixed concentrations offered across departments. We heard widespread support for these changes and for the goal of increasing flexibility more generally. The main misgiving expressed in the feedback was also expressed in the task force report itself: concern over whether it should be possible for a student to graduate with an A.B. from Princeton having taken just a single course in science and technology.

Strengthening the study of social and cultural differences. The task force recommended new requirements to ensure that students take courses examining social and cultural differences. Specifically, they recommended that students be required to take one course that focuses on a nation or region outside the United States and one course that explores the intersections of culture, identity, and power. These courses would be "tagged" and therefore would not add to the total number of courses required for general education

purposes. In addition, the task force recommended strengthening the foreign language requirement, so that even students who met a proficiency requirement in a foreign language would be required to take one course taught in a foreign language at Princeton. All three of these recommendations came in response to specific questions in the task force's charge.

We received substantial feedback about these recommendations, more or less equal parts positive and negative. Positive feedback focused on the importance of equipping students to be truly global citizens and to cross social and cultural boundaries more comfortably. Negative feedback focused partly on a reluctance to add requirements of any sort, even in conjunction with adding flexibility. A number of faculty also expressed misgivings about how these particular requirements were conceived. These faculty members suggested that requirements directed at particular subject matter fit awkwardly with a curricular framework that emphasizes ways of knowing rather than areas of content. Some also worried that the proposed requirement on culture, identity, and power could be interpreted to reflect a specific viewpoint rather than an area of study.

Augmenting ways of knowing with modes of learning. The task force's boldest recommendation was that the University incorporate into its thinking about general education an explicit recognition of the role that experiences outside the classroom can and should play. As the task force report states:

We want to broaden the definition of "general education" to include not just courses centered on different ways of knowing, but also on a set of experiences that help ensure students extend their learning beyond the classroom setting. These "modes of learning" experiences could occur through travel abroad, participation in service and leadership opportunities, taking new courses oriented around collaborative, interdisciplinary pedagogies, or engaging in the creative frontiers of "making" that span from the humanities to entrepreneurship. Above all, these "modes of learning" experiences should highlight the hands-on nature of problem-solving and creativity that comes by integrating theory with practice.

This goal of broadening the definition of general education contributed to a number of the task force recommendations—most directly, the recommendation for the creation of service-tagged courses, but also the recommendations for greater curricular flexibility and depth in the study of other cultures and societies. It was echoed by many of the other task forces, including those focused on service and civic engagement, entrepreneurship, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, and regional studies. In addition, there was widespread support for a modes of learning framework in the feedback we received, even though, as we noted, opinion was divided about whether this should entail new requirements.

In summary, the task force recommended changes to the curriculum designed to improve the implementation of current requirements, increase flexibility, strengthen the study of social

and cultural differences, and incorporate new modes of learning. These proposals now enter the faculty's standard processes for curriculum reform.

The next step is for the Committee on the Course of Study to take up the task force's recommendations for new courses and types of courses, new requirements, and refinements to the definitions of distribution areas. General education reform is among the weightiest and most serious responsibilities of the faculty, and it demands thoughtful and sustained deliberation. We expect that the Committee on the Course of Study will consider carefully the task force's recommendations and feedback about them. The Committee's recommendations will ultimately be submitted for consideration by the full faculty.

We recognize the need to ensure that financial support is in place to support any recommendations that are ultimately approved by the faculty. Many of the resources needed to implement these reforms are already available through ordinary funding mechanisms (e.g., the 250th Curricular Innovation Funds, the McGraw Center, academic units). The exception is the modes of learning experiences, which will require a significant infusion of new resources. Fundraising to support these experiences (e.g., internships, study abroad, off-campus research opportunities) is already underway in response to the recommendations of the entrepreneurship, service and civic engagement, and regional studies task forces, as well as earlier initiatives. We will augment those efforts as needed.

Calendar reform

The task force was also charged with making recommendations about the academic calendar. Specifically, its members were asked to consider whether our educational goals would be better served by a different calendar. Their answer to this question was yes: they recommended moving the start of the fall semester earlier to end the semester before the December holidays.

They also recommended creating a flexible three-week period for educational and co-curricular programming in January, during which students could engage in a variety of learning experiences on and off campus. The task force referred to this period as a "January term" or "J Term," but we think that nomenclature is misleading. As one faculty member pointed out to us, some people mistakenly assume that anything called a "term" is an academic time unit composed chiefly of credit-bearing coursework and hence requiring additional teaching by the faculty. The taskforce, however, envisioned a more flexible January calendar interval that would support a wide range of learning activities. This could include credit-bearing courses, but there was no presumption that either faculty or students would have to be involved with traditional courses during this period. We accordingly adopt the term "January activities period" to describe this proposal.

Several other task forces, including the Task Force on the Future of the Humanities, the School of Engineering and Applied Science Strategic Planning Task Force, and the Regional Studies Task Force endorsed the recommendation for changes to the academic calendar and the establishment of a January activities period.

The task force's arguments in support of this January activities period and other calendar reforms echoed the same four themes that guided its curricular proposals:

Improving the implementation of current requirements. Appendix E of the task force report provides ample evidence of the psychological, financial, and pedagogical challenges students face as a result of the unique features of our current fall-semester calendar. We found the student survey data especially convincing. It is clear that even if we were to leave the rest of the general education requirements as is, we could improve their effectiveness and reduce students' stress levels by finishing the fall semester before the holiday break. A number of different calendar options could accomplish this goal.

Increasing flexibility. One of the major advantages cited for the creation of a January activities period is the flexibility that adding an optional three weeks to the academic calendar would provide. Though we expect that most faculty members would not teach during this period, we anticipate that some would elect to do so in exchange for additional compensation or course relief elsewhere in the calendar. Students could use that time to make up a course deficiency or lighten their spring-term load in a three-week, intensive course. They could participate in a program designed to help them choose a major, a methods boot-camp that would prepare them for independent work, or a senior thesis writing workshop. Or they could simply return to campus to work on a project or pursue an interest stimulated by a course they took the previous semester. Graduate students could participate in new teaching endeavors or devote more time to their dissertation research. Students and faculty alike say they wish they had time for these activities; these three weeks in January would provide it.

Strengthening the study of social and cultural differences. Another advantage cited for the creation of flexible time in January is the opportunity it would open up for many students to go abroad. As the task force report notes: "Our existing international programs often require students to make difficult choices about how to balance independent work with international study, or how to reconcile the competing priorities of international travel and meaningful, paid summer internships." The January interval would offer students another opportunity to have these important experiences, so that over the course of their time at Princeton they could go abroad, do their independent work, *and* take that meaningful, paid summer internship. Moreover, for students who want to spend a full semester studying abroad, the flexibility to start a spring semester abroad in January would be a welcome change.

Augmenting ways of knowing with modes of learning. Perhaps the biggest advantage of the January period is the time it would provide for students to engage in alternative modes of learning. Again, to quote the task force report:

We envision a term that would ... offer students a range of learning opportunities intended to promote the exploration, reflection, and hands-on learning that is often out of reach for students during the relentless pace of the fall and spring terms. This program would prioritize innovative pedagogies that are best suited to the intensive, short time frame of a three-

week period, and that highlight modes of learning that transcend the traditional walls of a classroom. Likewise, course meeting time might be spent soldering a rocket, choreographing a dance piece, visiting an art museum, or engaging with other students in applied projects either on or off campus.

This aspect of the task force's vision was shared not only by the Task Force on Service and Civic Engagement, but also by the Princeton Entrepreneurship Council, and the Lewis Center for the Arts, all of which have suggested desirable learning opportunities for a three-week January activities period.

We received a great deal of feedback from faculty, students, and alumni about the task force's recommended changes to the academic calendar. This feedback revealed considerable support for the suggested changes to the fall-semester calendar, comparable to the survey results presented in the task force report (Appendix E). A sizable majority of faculty and a larger majority of students favored an academic calendar that completes the fall semester before the December holidays.

In addition, the faculty expressed a strong preference to begin the fall semester after Labor Day. There was divided opinion on what should happen after New Year. Some respondents endorsed the creation of a January activities period; some preferred to begin the spring semester in mid-January and have a longer summer; and many were uncertain of their preferences and wanted to learn more about the various options.

The task force did not attempt to sort out all of these details: its recommendations were intended in a more conceptual vein, and the specific calendar that it laid out was designed to be a starting point for discussion rather than a conclusion to it. The appropriate next step, therefore, is to launch a process that informs and engages the campus community in a continuation of the discussions of calendar reform initiated by the task force.

No standing committee exists with a charge appropriate to this task, so we will appoint an ad hoc committee of faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and administrators to hammer out the details of a new calendar that has widespread support. The University's academic calendar is laid out in Chapter I of *Rules and Procedures of the Faculty*, so ultimately, any change to the calendar will be decided by a vote of the faculty. As with curriculum reform, it is important to allow for the deliberation on calendar reform that will produce a thoughtful and constructive outcome. We will make sure that the Ad Hoc Committee on Calendar Reform has the time it needs to do its work well.

Should the faculty adopt a calendar that makes room for a flexible activities period in January, we will commit to providing the resources necessary to compensate the faculty and staff and support the facilities and programs needed to offer students a robust set of learning opportunities. We recognize that the required investment will be substantial; at the same time, we believe that flexible programming in January has great potential to enhance the education we provide to our students. We will make it a fundraising priority, if the community embraces it.

Conclusion

We thank the task force, once again, for a well-researched, well-reasoned, and well-written report. We look forward to the deliberations and discussions that lie ahead. As the task force wisely reminds us:

Above all, the history of general education requirements at Princeton, especially in recent decades, illuminates a few important features of the current process: revision of the current requirements will inevitably face resistance. At the same time, just as changes in academic disciplines and demographics led to a new set of requirements at mid-century, the further evolution of higher education—with regard to technology, globalization, and social issues—will ... demand further adaptation in determining what every educated person should know.