

**Strategic Planning Committee**  
**Academic Values Working Group**  
Hammond 314, 25 September 2014 at 3:30 PM

**Members:** Marcel Beausoleil (acting chair) , Rob Pijewski, René Reeves

**Guests:** Eric Budd, Chris Cratsley, Jane Fiske, Lisa Gim, Jeff Godin, Randall Grometstein, Chris Picone, Shari Stokes, Mike Turk, Paul Weizer

Meeting initiated with a call to continue talking about FSU's LA&S program (refer to second set of questions on summary of 9/11/2014 meeting)

**Question:** Should we be thinking of LA&S in terms of skills, competencies, or something else? For example, is critical thinking a skill? A competency? Is it something else? What about LA&S goals like civic engagement or ethical reasoning? Does it matter how we conceptualize these goals for activities like assessing curricular effectiveness?

Responses:

1. These are issues with which the Academic Values Working Group has been grappling.
2. It is possible to assess these goals even if we do not conceptualize them as skills per se. For example, we can call them dispositions if we prefer. But it is possible to separate them out and assess them. The Academic Planning Working Group has been considering the College Learning Assessment as a standardized tool to measure aspects of critical thinking. Other organizations and institutions have developed tools to measure critical thinking. Measurement can be done external to the particular educational institution, by an outside entity, or it can be done in-house. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has put together a critical thinking rubric. There are efforts to do this and they are fairly widely accepted, whether we want to characterize critical thinking as a skill or disposition.
3. The Academic Planning Working Group suggests that the LA&S program should not be considered a curriculum because overall its course requirements do not build on one another, are not sequential, and do not produce a purposefully integrated or cohesive curricular outcome.
4. The LA&S program does not connect required courses in a coherent way so that they build on one another in terms of skills. So for example, while specific LA&S courses may meet the "ethical reasoning" criteria, how many such courses do we offer during any given semester or overall? Are these enough to ensure that our students are developing sufficient ethical reasoning skills?
5. The history of the LA&S curriculum explains why it has developed this way. It is more discipline specific and doesn't focus on integrating disciplines or building skills in an interdisciplinary way. Even when it does develop some aspects of critical thinking it does not help students see larger interconnections, the big picture.

**Question:** How can we ensure interconnectedness or curricular cohesion if students fulfill their individual LA&S program one course at a time based on what's available each semester, not in

an effort to produce some integrated, unified outcome?

Responses:

1. Could we develop a more organically integrated LA&S program, where all students share certain aspects/experiences, like a Freshman year cohort, etc.? These sorts of efforts might be the first step in a more connected, integrated LA&S curriculum.
2. Could we encourage students to declare a something more general like a meta-major before they choose their discipline-specific major? Meta-major categories could be STEM, Social Science, etc. We would build a one or two year curriculum for each meta-major that would be more thoughtful and integrated. We could make sure all courses are not intro courses. The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh has organized all of its general education courses around three themes, each with a more purposefully planned and integrated curriculum. Students must select a theme. Themes are “environmental sustainability,” “creating a more multicultural world,” and “building community” (???: not sure about the last one). Could we do that here?
3. To clarify, meta-majors would not replace majors, but would be a starting point from which students would go on to declare a major. The idea, aside from creating a more purposeful and integrated curriculum, is that if students change their major within a meta-major area, they will not fall far behind because their basic general education curriculum will be the same. Moreover, each meta-major might have a specific freshman seminar that would foreshadow specific majors within the meta group to help students choose a major.
4. Recall that freshman seminars and learning communities were proposed by the last effort to reform the LA&S program, but they did not take off.
5. Many of our majors are so prescriptive that if students fail or miss a course they fall behind by a semester or even a year. Moreover, we are being asked to measure our success as an institution by how many students we graduate in four years. Would these meta-majors contribute to this problem or would they allow greater flexibility?
6. A theme-based introductory curriculum or freshman seminar might be helpful in preparing students for subsequent disciplinary requirements
7. Two challenges that should be acknowledged in major curricular reforms: 1) there may not be significant faculty support for creating a more prescriptive or integrated LA&S curriculum; 2) we’re fighting a two hundred year trend in academia toward greater disciplinary specialization. In the end we’re all going to have very different ideas about what basic skills students need.
8. Despite this trend toward greater specialization, we want our professional program graduates to be not only skilled professionals, but also well-rounded individuals who see the bigger context. In fact, this bigger context is necessary to inform their professional decision making. Maybe we need to move away from the checklist approach—can that really succeed in teaching our students ethical thinking?—but we need to preserve the broader LA&S program.
9. An 2013 AAC&U survey of employers conducted by Hart Associates echoes the sentiments expressed in item 8: employers do want graduates to be aware of the broader issues and skills, not simply narrowly trained in their profession.

**Question:** Why are faculty worried about developing less specialized curricula? We should explore why some of us resist less specialization and greater interdisciplinarity.

Responses:

1. We resist because our specialization informs our teaching and allows us to teach in a way that is most engaging to our students. Our specialties are what we know best and what excite us the most and bringing this knowledge and excitement to the classroom is one of the main factors that aids our teaching. Perhaps specialization is not the impediment to more basic or broader LA&S goals that we are suggesting, and in fact, it may be that efforts to centralize our curriculum will work against engaging teaching and the effective skill-building that results.
2. So we resist curricular integration and unification because we worry that it will undermine our own unique abilities to engage students effectively? Even if that is true, we need to allow greater flexibility in our LA&S program. Do all students really have to take in interest in all the various areas of that the LA&S program requires? Might it not be better to allow students to pick more selectively among the numerous LA&S areas and then pursue greater depth in the areas they have chosen?
3. What about language? We grant a bachelor of science in History & English because students are language-averse. But shouldn't we be offering more choices for language rather than less? Some students don't take language because the language offerings they want are not available. Do we let students avoid aspects of LA&S because they really don't want to take those courses, or do we insist that they must at least familiarize themselves with all areas of LA&S?
4. Reforming LA&S by organizing the student experience around themes is not the only way to go. We could enhance student engagement by allowing students to express their interests and then try to shape the curriculum to anticipate their stated interests. For example, many students express an interest in internships or practicums, and most participate in at least one before they graduate. At least some students express a desire to learn a foreign language, although not all of these follow through. Similar case for study abroad. Community service is another area in which students express interest. In sum, could we gauge what students want in terms of curriculum and try to meet that?
5. Students do like specific aspects of the LA&S program, but even so they often try to meet the requirements as expeditiously and efficiently as possible, e.g., double-dipping whenever possible. In addition, some of the requirements do not seem that rigorous, more going through the motions than really gaining a particular skill.

**Question:** Where do we go from here? What conclusions can we draw from our discussions of the LA&S program?

Responses:

1. Do not use reform to make it overly restrictive.
2. Both professional and LA&S disciplines appear to agree on the importance of basic LA&S program.
3. Yet there is a sense that the LA&S disciplines regard the professional programs as less

rigorous or important.

4. There should be a common curricular base or core of courses for all students despite different majors, disciplines, fields. The problem is that checklist approach is not ensuring that common base very well.
5. Perhaps part of the problem is that we tend to think of courses covering specific content or material rather than engaging students in specific ways that have a big impact or build specific skills. Consider the High-Impact Educational Practices handout. If these practices are what make curricula engaging, then we might want to design courses that more purposefully integrate them.
6. The LA&S program is a good idea but it needs tweaking. For example, some courses use laboratory or roll-play exercises from a textbook but don't allow students to think independently, thus building important skills. We should consider our curricular and course objectives and then build our courses backward from those objectives. For example, we don't need to survey basic information about many fields because students have done this in high school. Instead we should think about specific, more advanced aspects—modes of inquiry—of our specialties and then build courses around them. On the other hand, some majors do need broad field surveys for their students.
7. We should create a more focused LA&S experience for students. Do they really need to sample all the LA&S areas? Wouldn't it be more useful to have them gain a deeper understanding, and greater skill fluency, in fewer areas rather than just skimming the surface of too many areas?
8. The problem is who determines which areas to focus on? Which areas will atrophy or be abandoned? The language question is relevant here. Perhaps the process of sampling is crucial for some students to determine where to focus later on, for example, in picking a major.
9. Could we create a series of core LA&S courses that perform that sampling function more efficiently or effectively? Students would take these courses and it would help them specialize later on.
10. Much of the LA&S reform we are talking about can already be accommodated within our current LA&S program using minors, Option C of the Advanced LA&S requirement, or the IDIS major.
11. Overall question remains, do we want our students to have some common experience in their time here, or do they just need to fulfill several criteria?
12. Consider Robert Zemsky's *Checklist for Change*: if we view our LA&S program as a broad buffet, that means we need to offer many options simultaneously. If we had tighter LA&S program we could run fewer LA&S classes and use our faculty resources to do things like team teach, etc.
13. We've been talking a lot about building skills as crucial to the LA&S program, but what about LA&S goals that require content knowledge? For example, with regard to ethical reasoning we might decide we could establish a core LA&S course that would develop ethical reasoning skill. But a course about civic engagement, particularly if it had a global focus, would require students to have some basic content knowledge about the world. The course Global Issues come to mind. There is no way around the continued need for content, not just skill building. Indeed, some skill building cannot happen

without sufficient content knowledge.

14. We may be trying to build skills that rely on maturation or overall cognitive development rather than successfully completing a particular course or curriculum. For example, we all want to include ethical reasoning in the LA&S program, but research shows that ethical reasoning skills will develop on their own as more basic cognitive skills are developed. So is the problem that we don't have enough courses on ethical reasoning, or that we need to focus on improving basic student cognition because that will result in higher-level ethical reasoning?
15. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an analysis of rubrics on various LA&S goals like ethical reasoning, civic engagement, aesthetic expression, problem solving, etc. all seem to reduce to critical thinking. Perhaps in the end as long as courses are building critical thinking skills, regardless of their focus, this will have a ripple effect for critical thinking in many other areas.

**NOTE:** All Strategic Planning Working Groups need to start planning for their White Papers. They are due soon!