

TO: Dr. Dwaine Plaza

FROM: Leah Cogan

DATE: 1/3/2020

SUBJECT: Baccalaureate Core Listening Session Themes

In order to ensure that the Baccalaureate Core (BC) provides a well-rounded core of learning for undergraduate students at Oregon State University, listening sessions were held with faculty, staff, and students to hear feedback and suggestions for changes. This memo describes the major themes brought up at listening sessions on November 5, 8, 12, and 21, and December 5, 2019.

Recurring themes of the discussions included:

- Purpose of the BC
- Potential alignments with other university strategies
- Student choice
- Specific BC requirements
- Transfer students
- Interactions of BC with other programs
- Implications of the budget model

### **Purpose of the BC**

As a foundation for the discussions about what should be included in any potential revised BC, many participants focused on defining the purpose of the BC itself. Generally, the purpose is perceived to be giving students a well-rounded education outside of their primary discipline of study. A mix of skill-based and content-based requirements are desired. Due to concerns about incoming students' background knowledge, there is reluctance to reduce many requirements of the BC. The broad scope of the BC enables students to explore new areas of study and ways of thinking, and it serves as an introduction to possible majors for many. The BC can push students to take classes outside of their own interests and comfort zone that they might not otherwise have tried. Synthesis and interdisciplinary learning are highly valued for overcoming siloed learning, and participants wanted to strengthen and expand these elements.

Through requirements such as writing and critical thinking, the BC is seen as increasing student success in their majors as well as in their careers after graduation. Support was expressed for applied learning and career readiness, although these are not the only goals of the BC. Feedback was mixed regarding whether there is a coherent narrative surrounding the BC and whether students would be able to articulate that narrative. While some participants believe that a strong narrative needs to be formulated, others believe the narrative exists but may have become diluted through less well-thought-out additions. Although there are "playlists" of courses that may be more coherent, these are not emphasized and are difficult to find on the website. Caution was also expressed to be future-oriented, as the proposed changes will affect students who may currently only be in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, so thought should be given to what type of future these students will need to be prepared for. Being able to take courses S/U may cause some students to view them as trivial, while others may learn better without worrying about the effect on their GPA.

## **Alignment of the BC**

Several suggestions were made for aligning the BC with various university strategies. Some considered alignment with SP 4.0 a good candidate, although others pointed out that the BC should be designed to endure past the horizon of this plan. Another suggestion was to align with the university's Land, Sea, Sun, and Space Grants; however, this was not seen as broad enough to encompass all areas of the BC. The Learning Goals for Graduates were another candidate, but they are not currently linked to measurable outcomes. The "Three Healthies" (planet, people, and economy) may be viable and seem more likely to remain lasting themes.

### *Climate Change and Sustainability*

In particular, the Healthy Planet theme was brought up by several people as an area in which climate change and sustainability education could be added to the BC. Students and faculty expressed strong concern about the climate crisis and the need for robust education around the causes and consequences of climate change as well as assertion of the scientific consensus in this area. While some comments were very specific to climate, others expressed interest in incorporating sustainability from the individual to the systemic with an emphasis on how humans have and continue to affect global systems. Along with content-specific education, participants want to see a focus on information literacy, including identifying misinformation and critically evaluating information and sources.

## **Student Choice**

The topic of student choice versus more prescriptive requirements was raised several times. Some participants pointed out that students prefer having greater agency in selecting their courses and may resent a lack of options. While acknowledging this point, others do not believe incoming students have sufficient knowledge to effectively design their own BC experience if the options are overly broad. In terms of how students choose their classes, various strategies were expressed by students, faculty, and advising staff. Some students seek easy classes outside of their majors—often as expressed by word of mouth or Rate My Professor—while others want classes they see as interesting or useful for their futures. The number of credits required has financial consequences for students, and they do not appreciate wasting money. Other constraints include scheduling around family, work, and other obligations. Students may select classes on the same day to reduce commuting or choose online classes for greater flexibility.

Many participants described BC or other general education requirements that they had experienced at different universities, demonstrating a broad range of strategies used in different states and countries with varying levels of student choice. The typically American system of creating a holistic and well-rounded education was seen as a strength compared to some more narrowly focused European systems. Since many universities are currently working to update their general education requirements, participants were very interested in seeing what changes are being made and any preliminary results in order to inform their own suggestions for OSU.

## **Specific BC Requirements**

There was general consensus on the importance of writing requirements given its usefulness for any major or career as well as incoming students' need to improve their proficiency. Participants also strongly supported experiential learning, which is seen as potentially transformational for students. While BC courses are intended to be broad enough that taking one will satisfy the

requirements for a certain area, participants do not want to lose quirky classes: they can be broad without being generic or watered down versions of a major class. Some students would like class syllabi or information on the class structure to be available prior to enrolling so they can make better-informed choices. Other participants expressed the benefits of technology in the classroom but were apprehensive about the financial and mental burden on students of having to purchase and learn how to use so many different systems each quarter.

### *Culture*

Support was expressed for retaining and/or expanding the cultural knowledge requirements of the BC, and there was support for the DPD requirement. Some participants questioned the value of emphasizing the “dead white man” narrative of Western civilization, while others argued for the importance of understanding the historical context, origins, and impact of Western culture while being more interrogative of these concepts. Global thinking and exposure to different ways of thinking are valued. Students and faculty brought up the importance of acknowledging indigenous cultures and supporting indigenous students. In particular, they questioned what it means to be a land grant university on stolen land.

### **Transfer Student Issues**

As the largest recipient of transfer students statewide, several participants expressed caution about the implications of any changes to the BC. The more specific and extensive the BC requirements, the less likely that students will be able to find suitable classes to cover all areas at a community college. OSU is currently not perceived as being particularly transfer-friendly, and several students described their experiences with classes not transferring properly even when they had been in contact with advisors throughout the process. Many classes ended up transferring as electives rather than fulfilling BC requirements as expected, and few students were familiar with the petitioning process to correct this. Some pointed out that it was easier to transfer study abroad credits than classes taken in another state. In addition to working on this issue to improve the current system, it was suggested that OSU should partner or coordinate with community colleges during the BC revision process in order to benefit future transfer students.

### **Interactions of BC with Other Programs**

Having a high number of credits required for the BC without allowing double-dipping, or having a class fulfill multiple requirements simultaneously, increases the financial burden on students to take more classes. Students described deciding not to double-major when they realized that they could not double-dip and would therefore have to take an unreasonable number of classes. Two specific cases of interactions with other programs (and their credit requirements) that were frequently mentioned were the CLA core requirements and engineering.

### *CLA Core*

Although separate from the BC itself, the CLA core requirements were a source of concern for students who felt they had to take an excessive number of credits in order to avoid double-dipping. Some ended up taking a lower division course in an area in which they had already passed several upper division courses, which was a frustrating waste of time and money. The high number of credits needed to complete both the BC and the CLA core are seen as preventing some CLA students from deepening expertise in their majors. At the same time, some pointed out that permitting double dipping and taking additional courses in the major field defeats the

purpose of the BC to educate students on topics outside of their major. In general, any changes to the CLA core should be coordinated with the BC update process to ensure better congruence in the future.

### *Engineering*

The other program frequently brought up in this context was engineering. Due to the already high number of credits required for the major, students are currently allowed to double-dip on some requirements. Participants cautioned that adding any additional BC requirements would increase the strain on engineering students whose schedules are already crunched under the current system.

### **Implications of the Budget Model**

Multiple faculty members expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the negative effects of the current budget model. A system that emphasizes how much money students in different categories bring to the department (majors, non-majors, etc.) was seen as detracting from the educational experience and limiting students' freedom of learning. Although the BC update process was intended to be separate from any discussion of revisions to the budget model, this topic was frequently brought up. Some participants believed it was disingenuous to suggest that the discussions could truly be separated because the budget model profoundly influences the number and variety of BC courses offered by departments and can create perverse incentives that do not necessarily benefit students. Some participants liked the idea of collaborative, interdisciplinary team-taught classes but were concerned about how this would work financially. Others voiced concern over the ramifications on their departments of changing BC requirements, particularly for those who teach many BC classes. While updating the requirements was seen as an opportunity for positive change, it may cause hardships for some departments and some faculty were concerned about their or their colleagues' jobs.

### *Workload and Staffing*

Related to this topic, several people discussed the process for course review and approval for the BC and the tremendous workload of the committee in charge of these activities. Comments were mixed between those who thought the process was too onerous and those who believed it was a valuable exercise in thinking about the purpose, Learning Outcomes, and components of each course suggested. In general, the committee appears to be overloaded with work and does not have enough volunteers. Several people suggested that having a director and staffing specifically for the BC would be beneficial. This would allow for more coherence, give the program a champion, and potentially enable better data collection and analysis on student experiences and outcomes. Faculty also expressed concern that any work they would need to undertake to design or redesign courses for a revised BC would end up being additional unpaid labor, and they believe funding should be provided (or course releases to give them time to work on these projects).

**Attachments:** Notes from listening sessions