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Beyond Box Checking

Colleges share how they made their general education programs more than a laundry list of distribution requirements.

By [Colleen Flaherty](#)

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WASHINGTON -- The road to general education curricula is paved with good intentions, namely to round out students' educations and maybe even help them lead more meaningful lives. But over time those intentions are forgotten and programs become stale. Often, students don't know why they're required to take certain courses beyond their majors, and professors aren't sure, either.

Such was the case at Goucher and Ripon Colleges and the College of William & Mary, until the campuses revamped their general education programs to be more than laundry-style lists of distribution requirements. Representatives of all three institutions shared ideas and lessons learned from their experiences Friday at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, during a panel called "From Content to Inquiry: How Three Liberal Arts Colleges Radically Reimagined General Education."

"We're not making students go through a bunch of classes to get to the cool upper-division electives where they get to the interesting stuff. We're front-loading the interesting stuff," said panelist Robin Heralds Cresiski, an associate professor of biology at Goucher and director of its Center for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching.

"You're going to start doing data analysis with community partners today," she added. "You're going to start investigating why Zika is investigated differently by different countries -- what's behind that, today, instead of having to take four different science classes before you get to talk about it. We're front-loading the inquiry and the play and the awe of it, and that's really what we set out to do."

Cresiski referred to the college's new curriculum, the [Goucher Commons \(http://www.goucher.edu/learn/curriculum/\)](#), adopted in 2017. It seeks to give even -- and perhaps especially -- first-year students the opportunity to deal with real-world questions through an interdisciplinary lens. Goucher doesn't have distribution requirements but asks that undergraduates take four seminars, one each year. Students also must take at least three "center pair exploration" courses during their first three years, to build on the first seminar experience.

Exploration courses include one Cresiski teaches on disease and discrimination, which discusses both the pathology and


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politics of disease. Other examples are those on Shakespeare and difference, and life in Baltimore since 1968. Students complete each of these courses with a signature project.

All students study abroad as another curriculum requirement related to language and culture. Common inquiry areas are justice, both among people and in the natural world, and many courses center on those ideas. Writing is also a key focus area, since Goucher believes that all its students will have to learn to write well to succeed, regardless of field. General education ends with a capstone experience in the final year, and students share their work at a symposium.

Goucher Commons courses total about 40, of 120 required for graduation.

'Intelligent Redesign'

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has long advocated for what President Emerita Carol Geary Schneider once called "an intelligent redesign of curricular pathways" that "break free entirely of the old 'breadth first, depth second' model for college learning, which is underperforming and badly outdated."

Elaborating on that idea in a 2014 [column \(https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/toward-second-century-making-liberal-education-inclusive\)](https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/toward-second-century-making-liberal-education-inclusive) in AAC&U's *Liberal Education*, Schneider wrote that "we need to create what may best be described as guided pathways to integrative and adaptive learning." And the core design principle, she said, "should be to ensure that students are given opportunities to tackle complex questions at every step of the way, from first to final year."

Such principles underpin Goucher's redesign, as well as Ripon's and William & Mary's.

Ripon's [Catalyst curriculum \(https://www.ripon.edu/catalyst/\)](https://www.ripon.edu/catalyst/), launched in 2016, represents 20 credits out of 124 required for graduation. It consists of five seminars, two each in the first and second years and an applied innovation seminar in the third year. The first two seminars encourage information literacy, collaboration and critical thinking with a focus on writing, and critical thinking, oral communication, information literacy and writing with a focus on quantitative reasoning, respectively. The next two required seminars build on those skills but focus on intercultural competence and interdisciplinary integration. Sample first-year writing-centered courses include Beyoncé, black feminism and pop culture and reforming U.S. schools. In quantitative reasoning, Catalyst courses include how numbers persuade the public.

Graduates who complete the curriculum earn a concentration in applied innovation, documenting their proficiency in oral communication, writing, critical thinking, collaboration, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, integration and intercultural competence.

Panelist Ed Wingenbach, Ripon's vice president and dean of the faculty, described something of a backward design concept for Catalyst, in which faculty members thought of the skills students needed to do 15 weeks of independent research in the third-year seminar "and not be a disaster." Then they built the curriculum around that.

At a retreat and regular meetings in the year leading up to Catalyst, professors and administrators regularly asked themselves, "What do we want students to be able to do?" and "Does our current curriculum do any of those things?" Wingenbach said. What faculty members thought students needed to learn was nearly identical to AAC&U's data on what employers want from graduates, he noted, calling it a total, if not fortuitous, coincidence.

William & Mary's [College Curriculum \(https://www.wm.edu/as/facultyresources/committees/educationalpolicy/coll-curriculum/index.php\)](https://www.wm.edu/as/facultyresources/committees/educationalpolicy/coll-curriculum/index.php), adopted in 2013, also is based on a series of seminars. The first-year experience consists of two courses, the first of which focuses on "big questions" and group work, while the second – what panelist John Donahue, dean of educational policy and professor of classical studies, called a "holdover" from the old curriculum – focuses on writing, specifically an academic research paper.

Students must take four College Curriculum courses in the second year, one or more each in the following domains: the natural world and quantitative reasoning; culture, society and the individual; and arts, letters and values. (William & Mary requires that all these courses be at least partially outward-looking to other domains.) In the third year, students must apply what they've learned thus far to the world beyond campus – what Donahue called "theory to practice" in a study abroad or similar program. A thematic on-campus visiting scholar series is available for students who may not travel. The fourth-year course is for a capstone project involving original research and persuasive communication.

Faculty members may apply to be fellows on two-year terms at the campus's [Center for the Liberal Arts \(https://www.wm.edu/as/center-liberal-arts/\)](https://www.wm.edu/as/center-liberal-arts/), which advances the new curriculum through course design, faculty

outreach and other means.

Lessons Learned

Donahue said that getting the program together over 18 months, through 2013, was hard work that has paid off in the form of a more integrated, cohesive approach to liberal arts education. Another positive by-product of William & Mary's plan is that individual departments now no longer "own" certain topics, he added. "It's breaking down the silo effect."

Wingenbach, at Ripon, said his college was able to accomplish a new curriculum in a year by keeping to firm deadlines and adding what could not be accomplished or decided in regular meetings to a retreat agenda. Much of the work also was done by what he called "self-destructing working groups." Faculty members understand the curriculum continues to be a work in progress, he said, adding that there is "not a discrete difference between planning, designing and implementing." Yet the college has already heard that the new curriculum has made it a "distinguisher" in terms of student opinion, he said.

One major challenge is that Ripon continues to run its old general education curriculum alongside its new one, until students who started studying under the former one graduate. The process has been helped somewhat by an \$800,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop more than 100 new courses.

Panelist Leslie Lewis, Goucher's provost and vice president for faculty affairs, said that her college's redesign involved fundamental shifts for the faculty -- the change to four-credit courses from three-credit ones and longer teaching periods, and to 12 disciplinary "centers" from 23 departments.

That led to some faculty anxiety, she said, but "at the same time, we're seeing that faculty members are very interested in teaching these new courses."

Cresiski echoed that sentiment, saying, "Key successes to this were that faculty were already interested in changing things up. The math faculty were already starting to play with this idea of data analytics instead of traditional math -- this is an area of interest for them that we then help them support."

Read more by [Colleen Flaherty](#)



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