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U. works to bolster its defense of open curriculum

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After three years of evaluation, Harvard University's core curriculum could undergo major restructuring if a faculty vote occurs this spring. But as Harvard and other peer institutions examine the importance of general education requirements, Dean of the College Paul Armstrong says Brown is taking steps to strengthen arguments in favor of its open curriculum.

Key among these measures is a \$100,000 grant the University received from the Teagle Foundation - a New York City-based organization that encourages "broad and intellectually stimulating curricula," according to its online mission statement - to support a working group led by Brown and composed of eight schools with open curricula of various kinds. The working group has been meeting once a month since the beginning of the academic year to produce a "white paper" that articulates the values and goals of an open curriculum. Representatives from the schools, which include Wesleyan University and Amherst College, should have the "white paper" completed by June, Armstrong said.

Armstrong said the project will also develop assessment measures to evaluate the concrete effects of an open curriculum. These will primarily examine the experiences of Brown alums.

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"Let's look at what our graduates have actually learned," he said. "Let's look at the learning outcomes that are associated with the values that we have. We say lots of things about what a Brown education does to prepare students for lives of usefulness and reputation. Let's try to formalize that knowledge, assess it and see whether in fact the claims we make are true or not."

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the University has encountered challenges from "conservative educational pundits" that argue "in favor of a core curriculum for reasons that are contrary to values that I hold as an educator and values that inform our curriculum at Brown," Armstrong said.

In April 2004, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued letter grades to 50 universities and colleges, including all eight Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges. ACTA, founded by Lynne Cheney, advocates a core curriculum - a series of general courses taken by all students - instead of distribution requirements or an open curriculum like Brown's. In the 2004 report, ACTA identified seven subjects vital to a contemporary liberal arts education, such as literature, economics and mathematics, and surveyed schools to determine if broad courses in the seven fields were required or were merely offerings within a distribution. Brown received an F. No Ivy League school received higher than a C.

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