

Students

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Harvard Panel Proposes Requiring the Study of Religion and American History

By ROBIN WILSON

A Harvard University panel released a proposal last week to revamp the university's core undergraduate curriculum in a way that differs sharply from both the current core requirements and a set of highly criticized reforms proposed two years ago. Students would be required to study religious faith and American history, among other elements of a more broad-based curriculum.

The new proposal, by the Task Force on General Education, recommends that students take one course in each of the following areas: "reason and faith," "the ethical life," "cultural traditions and cultural change," "the United States: historical and global perspectives," "societies of the world: historical and global perspectives," "life science," and "physical science." As they do today, undergraduates would also have to take a writing course, show proficiency in a foreign language, and enroll in an analytical-reasoning course.

A proponent of more-traditional curricula lauded the proposal. The university's new report "rejected the 'anything goes' distribution requirements in place across the country in favor of a more structured, rigorous, and cohesive core curriculum," Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said in a written statement.

Ms. Neal, who has been a frequent critic of the Harvard faculty, said the preliminary report showed that Harvard had taken "big steps to develop a unified concept of general education — how to educate our students as responsible human beings and citizens."

Louis Menand, a co-chairman of the Harvard panel, said the university's current core focused on exposing students to "various disciplinary approaches to knowledge," teaching them how mathematicians, scientists, and historians, for example, evaluate questions. As a result, he said, some core courses are narrowly focused on highly specialized subjects.

The curriculum panel, which comprises six professors and two students, wanted to get away

from the more-academic approach of the current core and broaden the subject matter of classes that qualify as fulfilling general-education requirements, he said. The panel's 39-page report, called simply "Preliminary Report," echoes that theme.

"The courses are not introductions to disciplines," the report says of the core requirements it recommends. "They are exposures to major arenas of change and influence in the 21st century." General education, it says, should not be "a form of pre-professional training." Rather, it says, "our students should see how the ideas, facts, and perspectives they are learning in the college come to life in real-world scenarios."

Mr. Menand, a professor of English and American literature and language at Harvard, said the committee wanted to emphasize "interconnectivity around the world." He added: "If we're looking to help students prepare themselves to be ethical citizens for democracy and a global society — characterized by rapid change and conflicts between reason and faith and by massive social change and changes in quality of life introduced by science and technology — these are areas we want to make sure they have an understanding of."

History of Attempts

Harvard has been trying to rewrite its core curriculum, which dates to 1978, for several years. Its first attempt, which was released in 2004, abandoned the idea of a core entirely and replaced it with distribution requirements. That proposal was criticized as vague and as failing to put forward a set of courses about ideas and principles that all undergraduates should study ([The Chronicle](#), May 7, 2004).

A new draft of that report — which included similar proposals — was unveiled in March 2005 but was never adopted following criticism from professors and others outside Harvard. The latest panel was assembled in June.

The current proposal maintains a core, but in an updated fashion, Mr. Menand said. The "reason and faith" requirement, for example, may be controversial. But Mr. Menand said it would help students "think about the role, historically, faith has played. ... Twenty years ago," he said, "we might not have thought it was that important that students need to understand something about religion, but we felt that it is something secular universities may not be preparing students to deal with." A professor who has criticized both the 2004 proposal and Harvard's existing requirements praised the preliminary report.

"There does seem to be something of a soul in this, some motivating principle about what undergraduate education needs to accomplish for the good of society," Harry R. Lewis, a professor of computer science at Harvard and a former dean of Harvard College, said in an interview. He published a critical book on Harvard this year called *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (PublicAffairs).

"Academics have gotten extremely specialized, focused, and expert in narrower and narrower fields," Mr. Lewis said. "At the same time, the student body has grown much more diverse. The task force has recognized the costs to undergraduate education of the extreme specialization of academia."

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