Senior Council of Wabash College

A Report to the Faculty of Wabash College on the Proposal of the Curriculum Architecture Committee

Introduction
The Senior Council of Wabash College was established by vote of the Student Senate and subsequent ratification by the Student Body on April 6, 2006, in the form of an amendment to the Constitution of the Student Body. The amendment, among other things, invested the following former authority of the Student Senate into the Senior Council:

The [Senior Council] shall serve as the intermediary body between the members of the Student Body and the faculty and administration of the College, and shall cooperate with the faculty and administration in all matters of common interest and mutual benefit.

In fulfilling this capacity, the Senior Council elected to begin evaluating the proposal of the Curriculum Architecture Committee (CAC) of the Faculty on January 23, 2006. Members of the Council were given copies of the proposal, attended a Q&A session between students and faculty members on the CAC, attended chapel talks where the proposal was discussed, and hosted Dr. Scott Feller of the CAC for a lunch discussion on March 13.

The Senior Council also devoted portions of six of its regular meetings to discussion of the CAC proposal. In its deliberations, the Council settled on ten different points of interest and/or contention that the Student Body might be the most concerned about in the proposal. The following report details the general consensus of the body on each of the ten points along with points of dissention held by members to the consensuses.

Council Membership
Membership of the Senior Council is composed of eleven voting and two non-voting members. Seven of the members hold their seats as presidents of some of the largest and most influential student organizations on campus including the Inter-Fraternity Council, Malcolm X Institute, and the Sphinx Club. Four of the members hold seats in an at-large capacity. Six of the members are currently seniors, five are currently juniors, and two are currently sophomores. The Student Body President chairs the Council.
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It is reasonable to state that Senior Council members are among the most well-connected students to their peers and are currently serving or have already served in various leadership capacities on campus. Four members have served as the president or vice president of their respective fraternities, five have served as members or officers of the Student Senate, and five hold memberships in the Sphinx Club.

Academically speaking, Council members represent nine different major departments from all three divisions. All of the members have experienced Cultures & Traditions and Freshman Tutorial and a majority of the voting members have already experienced Senior Seminar and the comprehensive examination process.

Points Addressed
At the conclusion of the Council’s formal discussion of the proposal on March 13, members were asked to respond to ten questions independently which addressed the following ten points deemed most important to students:

- Timing and Purpose of Freshman Tutorial
- Timing of the Cultures & Traditions Course
- Requirement of Interdisciplinary Courses
- Status of Minors
- Changes in the Major Requirement
- Senior “Living the Mission” Course
- Suggestions for Proposed Senior Course
- Status of Departmental Senior Seminar Courses
- Comprehensive Exam Scheduling
- Senior Study Camps

Freshman Tutorial
There is nearly unanimous support for having all Freshman Tutorials in the fall semester, even at the expense of a semester of C&T. Several members expressed the importance of Freshman Tutorial as a good first group of fellow freshmen to get to know during their first semester and a good chance early on to have some college-level writing experiences. Members who were opposed either did not feel the gain was worth the sacrifice and felt their first semester was structured enough even in absence of tutorial or were just opposed in general to any change at all.
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The idea of re-structuring the tutorial to have a common theme and syllabus like C&T was proposed and overwhelmingly rejected by Council members. Members expressed appreciation for the choice of topic in tutorial and wanted to keep it as it is. There were a couple of members who expressed a desire for some forum in which to teach and discuss Wabash history, especially in the freshman year. One idea held generally in favor was a student-led history and tradition initiative that might ask for the cooperation of the tutorials in encouraging freshmen to attend outside lectures or other opportunities like chapel talks.

Cultures & Traditions
A majority of the Council was in favor of offering Cultures & Traditions during the second semester of the sophomore year. Those who disagreed with the CAC’s proposal of C&T in the freshman year stated that they did not feel freshmen would be ready for the strong discussion atmosphere of the course. As one member stated,

> Freshman year most students are a little hesitant to speak their mind and haven’t become comfortable with the open forum style classes like C&T. Not only would the class be a little more organized with more experienced students, but most students would be more likely to argue with each other thus really producing the critical thinking skills that C&T is designed to refine.

The most common counter-argument to C&T in the sophomore year was that a freshman course would give more continuity to the freshman year and allow students in majors that are particularly burdensome during the sophomore year to have more scheduling options. Overall, though, the Council would like to see the course continue to be held in the sophomore year.

Interdisciplinary Courses
On the subject of making interdisciplinary and team-taught courses an important focus of the curriculum, the Council is in the majority not in favor. While everyone seemed to be in agreement that team taught courses can be valuable, the greatest objections were raised against any action to either compel faculty to teach these types of courses or to compel students to take them. It was noted that team-taught courses are already available as options and should be left up to the students and faculty to decide on their own whether or not to teach them or take them, respectively.
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One member stated, “Honestly, we are only learning a tiny fraction of our major discipline and watering that down against professors’ wills will not be fruitful.” Another stated, “It puts excessive stress on the faculty and I’m not convinced that the discussions would be more productive.” Still another commented,

If two professors are easily able to co-teach a course and can agree to not cause a conflict of interests, then that would be fine. But I would not say that these types of courses are necessarily that advantageous.

Members in favor of making interdisciplinary courses a main focus of the curriculum generally commented that they believed it would promote the liberal arts. “It’s good to have our specified majors, but it’s also good to look at other subjects and get other perspectives,” commented one. Still another stated, “Interdisciplinary [coursework] is essential to [a] liberal arts education.” One member remained unsure, stating, “I don’t think I know enough about this issue.” Again, it seems that the idea of compulsion rather than the idea itself is what the Council disagrees with. It is also reasonable to infer from the comments of members that at least a majority are not enthusiastic enough to make these types of courses a central focus of the curriculum.

Minors
When put the question, “Should minors be eliminated?” the response of “no” was unanimous. Responses included

It’s just unnecessary because you may honestly like a subject matter, or only certain aspects of a subject matter, but are unwilling to take all the requirements necessary for a major. But you should be given credit for some sort of semi-detailed exploration you’ve chosen to undertake.

Having a minor allows you to study something that you find interesting but not interesting enough to major in it. Plus it forces people to study another subject.

Minors are, like it or not, an essential part of the liberal arts experience.

While members were adamant about not eliminating the minor, the consensus seemed to indicate that demoting minors to an option rather than a requirement would be acceptable.

There are positive aspects of having minors if there are multiple subjects that a student was interested in. But if a student has a deep interest in one course and
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Senior Council of Wabash College wishes to spread their course load out and not be held down by the necessity of a minor, then it would be advantageous not to require minors.

Major Requirement
The Council was fairly evenly divided on the idea of allowing additional credits in the major. While one member stated, “It makes the major more applicable and practical to be able to look at other classes through the lens of said major,” another stated, “These super-majors remove student choice and restrict them to a set curriculum that imposes a certain notion of their field.”

The importance of individual choice was emphasized on both sides of the issue. “If a student is interested in what could be perceived as an interdisciplinary subject that complements his major, he should be given the option of taking those courses. It should not be forced upon him,” stated one. Another stated, “If it’s optional and determined by the individual departments, then it seems OK.” Finally,

This decision should be left up to the student [and] not the faculty. After all it is the student’s future in grad school or the workplace that may be determined by course load. As such, it should the responsibility of the student to choose wisely.

Thus, the Council appears to be fairly receptive of new innovations by the faculty in the major requirement; however, it is of utmost importance to students that the current system be kept in place as an option.

Senior “Living the Mission” Course
On the proposal to implement an all-college “Living the Mission” course that all students would have to take in their senior year, the Council is in unanimous opposition. Again, the notion of the course as a requirement for seniors was deemed very objectionable. Some comments included

By senior year we should be looking for jobs and applying to graduate schools. Student enthusiasm for such a course would be ridiculously low.

It does not seem that the course will get the involvement and results expected by the authors of the proposal and thus is just not worth the effort to implement it.

It is hard enough to fit all the essential information into four years to add another class that is watered down.

I think seniors already have enough to deal with; and adding this will just make senior year that much more stressful.
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In principle this idea is a good one, but at the same time, after Senior Seminar the focus would just not be there.

This is an undue burden on seniors, who are given ample opportunity to demonstrate a sense of interdisciplinary study [without the requirement].

Seniors have already taken strenuous Senior Seminars, comps, and are in the midst of meeting pre-requisites and searching for a job/grad school and place to live. To add another responsibility on top of all of that is far too strenuous for seniors who have already “put in their time” here at Wabash.

Suggestions for Proposed Senior Course
Even though the Council opposes the idea of a required senior course, some productive discussion was had on suggestions for the course if it were to be implemented. Suggestions included making it a colloquium-type “great books” course, letting students come together to propose a course topic to the faculty, watching and discussing great films, and incorporating some kind of relevant outside lecture series.

In any case, it was generally noted that students would need to be involved somehow in determining course topics rather than having the faculty exclusively develop topics as is done with Freshman Tutorial. The problem students want to avoid is a bunch of senior course topics that students do not find interesting, thus hurting the value of the course to seniors.

Departmental Senior Seminar Courses
In the course of the Council’s discussion of the proposed senior required course, the topic of the already-existing departmental Senior Seminar courses came up. Many felt that the new senior course would just be like another Senior Seminar and it was suggested to take some of the ideas for the new course and use them to improve existing seminars rather than create an entirely new course.

If all departments required a Senior Seminar and held it during the fall semester, perhaps some effort could be made to create more of a common senior experience amongst those courses. Ideas included having different seminars meet together occasionally for relevant interdisciplinary discussions, an outside lecture series, and more focus on graduate school preparation.
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Comprehensive Exam Scheduling
Senior Council members overwhelmingly favored leaving the senior comprehensive exam schedule as it is currently. Discussion on this topic focused on the amount of preparation that comprehensives require and the difficulty of managing it in the middle of an academic semester. One member stated, “I think it can work over spring break only if the level of required preparation drops enough to allow it to happen in the middle of the semester.”

On the other hand, divorcing comps from the extended break made the proposal slightly more appealing. States one

In the time period in which comps are now placed, students have nothing in their way to distract them from studying. A two week spring break would not bother anyone; but there’s no need to make comps a part of that extended free time. Spring break is the only break during second semester, so a two week spring break would be excellent.

Still another member proposed that only oral comprehensives be held in the second week of break, leaving written comps when they currently are. Overall though, members stated they would like the timeline of comprehensive exams to remain as it is.

Senior Study Camps
Dr. Placher of the CAC first mentioned the idea of bringing back Senior Study Camps at the student-CAC Q&A session on the proposal. If comprehensives were to be held during the second week of spring break, it might allow the study camps to return and be held during the first week of break when seniors would be studying.

Senior Study Camps were started by former Wabash VP John Coulter in the 1930’s and involved seniors and faculty retreating for a few days to Turkey Run State Park to discuss material in preparation for comps in a relaxed environment. The camps ended in the early 1970’s when students began to lose interest. Dr. Placher’s idea of the possibility of the return of the camps as an incentive for moving comps to spring break was also discussed by the Council.

The reaction to the idea was generally not very positive. Some stated that seniors were old enough to not need structured study time. Another member
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lamented that the study camps would not provide the necessary time to properly prepare. He stated

   Senior Study Camps would be good, I guess, but having written comps over spring break is like saying, “OK, run a 200 meter sprint halfway through a 26 mile marathon.” The study camps would be a 30 second rest and a glass of water before the sprint.

In closing, council members seemed intrigued with the return of an old tradition like the study camps, but were not enthusiastic enough about it to move the comprehensive exams to spring break.

Conclusion
The Senior Council has prepared this document in hopes that it will serve as a valuable resource to the CAC, Academic Policy Committee, and the Faculty at-large in regard to student opinion on the various issues presented in the new curriculum proposal. The Council tried to choose the areas of debate that seemed the most contentious or interesting to students and hopes the Faculty will weigh the various opinions presented in its decision-making process.

While it is ultimately up to the Faculty in regard to how Wabash achieves its mission through the curriculum, it is important to realize that the students are the ones who will be directly impacted by the changes. As the student group charged with the purpose of working with the faculty and administration, the Senior Council will be happy to make itself available if matters that might affect students need to be discussed in the future.

Submitted this 26th Day of March, 2007, to the Faculty of Wabash College,

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