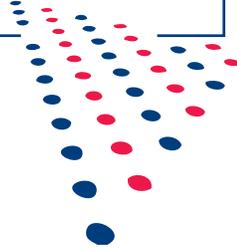


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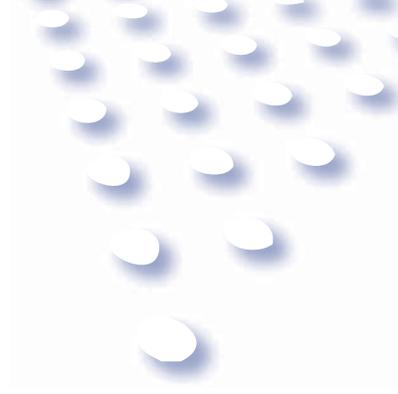


a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2011/2012 Series: **Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education**

chapter

3: Curricular Innovation in Challenging Financial Times



Curricular Innovation in Challenging Financial Times

Dr. L. Jay Lemons: President of Susquehanna University

Introduction

As institutions face the disequilibrium and uncertainty brought on by the Great Recession, the question of how to do more with less rings loudly. How do institutions move forward with curricular innovation when financial support from all sectors is dwindling? As we have learned at Susquehanna, curricular innovation in challenging financial times is possible but not easy.

Beyond the mission statement, the most critical expression of the educational aims of a college or university is the articulation of the curriculum by faculty. Historically, curricular matters have been a source of much hand wringing in the academy and beyond. Should it be any other way?

Persistent worries about curricular matters are fueled by regular diagnoses that the relevance, coherence, and meaning of the curriculum are diminishing or lost or that the emergent issues in a particular epoch must be attended. One example is found in the 1985 report of the American Association of Colleges (AAC), titled *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*, where the condition of the American collegiate system was evaluated in unequivocal terms: "As for what passes as a college curriculum, almost anything goes" (AAC, p. 2).



Developing and implementing a new curriculum is more like plying a machete and carving out a new trail."



Moreover, larger societal forces have and continue to tremendously affect curricula and the needs of students. These forces are not new, as noted higher education historian Fred Rudolph recounted the pressures compelling change present in the early part of the 19th Century:

The American colleges would therefore experience the same challenge as political parties, state constitutions, and economic institutions. They would be asked to pass a test of utility. They would have to answer to the question of whether they were serving the needs of a people whose interest in yesterday hardly existed, and whose interest in today was remarkably limited to its usefulness for getting to tomorrow. (Rudolph, 1962, p. 110-111)

It was, in fact, the reform efforts of that era that led to the establishment of the University of Virginia and the University of the City of New York (NYU), in addition to many significant reform efforts on existing campuses (Rudolph, p. 125).

The work to review, revise, reimagine, and redesign curriculum is ever present on our campuses. The work is often begun with enthusiasm, finds passion in the emergent disciplines or issues of the given era, and is delegated to earnest groups of faculty who work to produce proposals for discussion by their colleagues. Too often, this results in endless pedantic debate that is fueled by turf protection and some modest incremental change or a reaffirmation of the status quo. The result is that the pace of curricular change is often described in glacial terms.

Curricular reform at Susquehanna University

Happily, at Susquehanna University, a recent curricular reform effort led to a substantive change in the general education curriculum. Further, the work created a stronger framework for knitting together all dimensions of student learning. The faculty named the course of study the “Central Curriculum,” as an expression of the centrality of this portion of the curriculum that is shared by and is essential for all students.

The Central Curriculum at Susquehanna was redesigned following several years of work by faculty. Begun in 2005, it was the first major reform effort in more than 20 years. The timing was right given the recruitment of a new generation of faculty and the major societal changes that have formed and reformed so many disciplines and the traditional academic canon. The work began with the academic community thinking broadly and developing a set of learning goals. These learning goals are expected to drive and affect the educational experiences for all students in all dimensions of learning.

The Central Curriculum became effective at the beginning of the 2009–10 academic year and accounts for approximately 40 percent of the graduation requirements. George Keller (1983) might describe the Central Curriculum as containing some old wine in old bottles, some old wine in new bottles, and finally some new wine in new bottles (see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the components of the Central Curriculum). It retains the qualities and elements of a traditional liberal arts curriculum, and it emphasizes essential skill development, such as those recommended by Project LEAP of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U;

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Figure 1. The components of the Central Curriculum

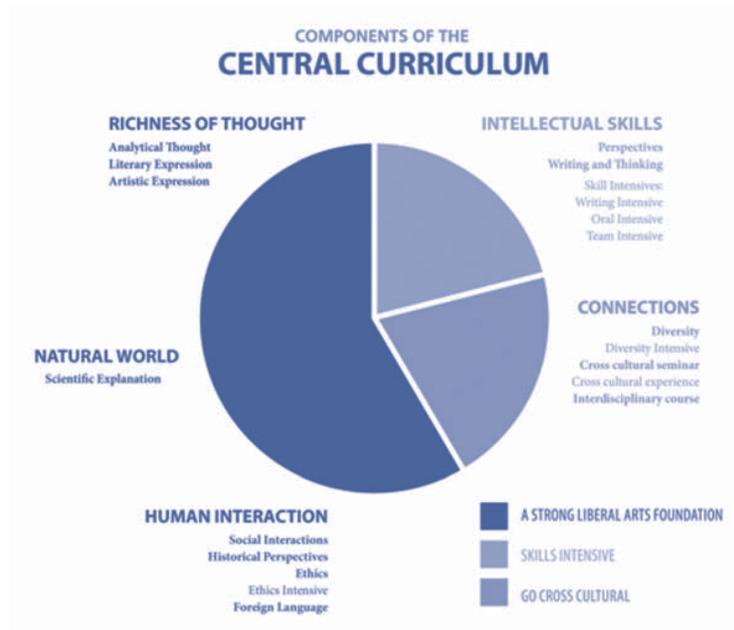
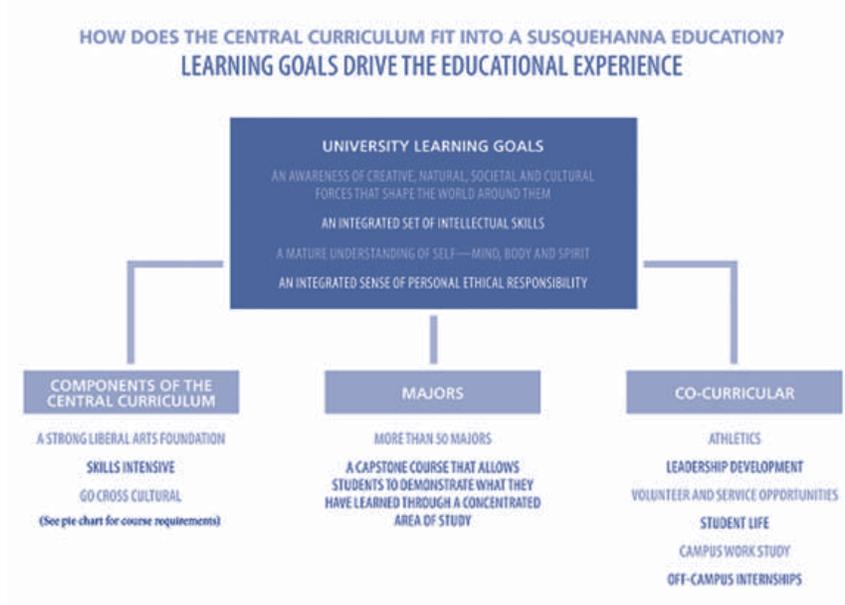


Figure 2. Contributions of the Central Curriculum to the educational experience of each student



AACU, 2011), and, more innovatively, it stresses the acquisition of cross-cultural competence. This articulation of the Central Curriculum also created a fresh prospect for describing in larger terms the broader domains that we expect to contribute to the educational experience of each student (see Figure 2). We want our students to know and understand that, in addition to their major and any possible minors, the Central Curriculum and their curricular experiences are other vital elements of the Susquehanna learning experience.

Curricular change is hard work that does not end with the conceptualization of a new schema. It is work that requires much of an academic community and becomes a major learning process for the institution as a whole. A well-established and well-known curriculum is like a well-worn path. You come to know every turn and every stone, and you come to know how the conditions change in different seasons. Developing and implementing a new curriculum is more like plying a machete and carving out a new trail. Great effort is required, and changes of plans are necessary if the path that has been cleared has not proven beneficial. Our pioneering class is made up of rising juniors in the 2011–12 academic year. We are making progress together and are excited about the peak we expect to summit with our students in the next two academic years.

Curricular reform in an era of austerity

Susquehanna's roots date back to 1858, when its founders sought new and different ways to educate clergy and leaders and broaden access to higher education. From the beginning, a reverence for the traditional liberal arts was accompanied by a stream of pragmatism in the development of educational programs. Throughout most of its history, Susquehanna has been an institution of modest means; yet, the past 25 years have been marked by a period of extraordinary change and development. There has been tremendous growth at Susquehanna in every dimension, including the enrollment, the number of faculty, their credentials, the endowment, and facilities. There has been and remains great institutional momentum.

The new Central Curriculum and its distinctive features, such as the expectation that all of our students should experience “team” intensive courses, an increased expectation for foreign language competence, courses on ethics, diversity, and the innovative Global Opportunities program, a cross-cultural experience that is required of all students, are reflections of this momentum. As well, they reflect a belief that this academic community has something important and valuable to contribute to our students and the broader higher education community.

Momentum is a valuable asset. It is, however, no match for the deepest recession our country has experienced in the past 80 years. The effects of the recession have been deep for all of our colleges and universities, with the struggle and retrenchment at our wealthiest and best-endowed institutions having been well documented. For the more tuition-dependent colleges and universities, like Susquehanna, the effects of declining family income, loss of equity in real estate, and sustained high rates of unemployment have created great challenges for our students' families leading to increases in financial aid and reductions in operating funds.

In the face of such turmoil and the attendant fear that accompanies it, the most common response is retreat. Thankfully, Susquehanna's Board of Trustees recognized that the institution's momentum, bolstered by the strength and muscle developed during the past 25 years, might allow the institution to approach this new era differently.



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In the same week of September 2008 when the credit markets froze, Susquehanna finalized a debt issue that provided a portion of the resources necessary to construct a new science building, renovate another major academic facility, and build new residence halls. These capital improvements were a part of a strategy that ultimately supports the new curriculum but also might have been deferred. Yet our trustees resolved to stay the course.

We were also confronted with the decision about whether we would proceed with 13 planned faculty searches. These faculty positions were critical in fulfilling the requirements of the Central Curriculum. Again, the board determined that we should persist in our plan. Moreover, the board believed this to be an opportunistic time to search for faculty, with a large number of institutions having frozen all faculty hiring. That belief proved accurate.

In addition to playing offense, there are many ways that we are also playing defense. The need to find ways of reducing administrative and general operating costs continues. Sacrifices have been required of every unit of the institution including the academic and student life programs. We are seeking greater efficiencies in all University processes. We are working to lower energy costs, and there is renewed discipline to the review all open positions.

We remain focused and committed to the investment necessary to implement the Central Curriculum. Nevertheless, we have our work cut out for us. The challenges of providing for the increased costs of the Global Opportunities program and the other investments associated with the Central Curriculum are financial stressors for Susquehanna. Finding ways to support the Central Curriculum is a high priority, because it is the keystone for providing transformational learning experiences for our students.

Conclusion

The challenges facing our colleges and universities are formidable. Nonetheless, our focus must remain on students and their learning. This begins with the collective wisdom of the assembled faculty members on each of our campuses and their articulation of essential learning goals for the development of citizen leaders. This important work can only be accomplished through curricular examination and periodic reform, with a commitment to doing the hard work of implementation.

The dynamic work of curricular reform has been part of the fabric of higher education for most of our history. Fred Rudolph observed that the much-celebrated and widely remembered Yale Report of 1828 did not contain an original idea (Rudolph, 1962). Yet the contribution of Yale's Committee of the Corporation and the Academic Faculty (1828) that "the two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the *discipline* and the *furniture* of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge" (p. 7) is an enduring and vital goal for all of our institutions. Finding ways of supporting faculty in curricular reform in this period of diminished resources is an important objective for all presidents.

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Dr. L. Jay Lemons assumed the presidency of Susquehanna University in 2001. Prior to that, he served as Chancellor for The University of Virginia's College at Wise from 1992 to 2001.

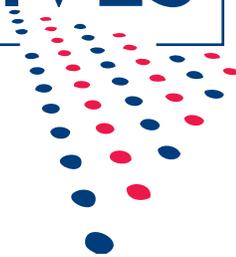
His leadership in higher education has been significant, with service that includes Board Chair of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Campus Compact, and the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) Council of Presidents. He currently chairs the board of the LECNA (Lutheran Educational Conference in North America). In addition, he is a former Board Member of the Council of Independent Colleges and an Executive

Committee Member of the Associated New American Colleges. A Committee Member for the Commission on Leadership and Institutional Effectiveness of the American Council of Education, he also served as a member of the Committee on Student Aid of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Dr. Lemons earned a B.A. in philosophy and a B.S. in physical education and health education from Nebraska Wesleyan University and a M.Ed. in educational psychology and college student development from the University of Nebraska. He received his Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Virginia.

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