Criteria for Assessing the Academic Program

**Principles To Assure the Quality of the Curriculum**

*Primacy of the Whole*

The needs of the whole curriculum as guided by policies enacted at the Faculty Meeting should take precedence over those of any single academic division, department, discipline, interdisciplinary focus, or group. The baccalaureate degree is primary. Majors are emphases within a coordinated curricular whole, as are distribution requirements and other schemes which help to structure a student’s program of study.

*Primacy of Traditional Disciplines*

The disciplines at Dickinson College should include all and only the traditionally understood basic ways of organizing knowledge appropriate to a liberal arts education. This is an affirmation of the foundational importance of the traditional disciplines.

*Balance Within the Curriculum*

*Overall Goal.* A proper balance should be maintained between disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses, and between traditional and experimental programs. In addition, an adequate range of instruction in basic skills should be provided. This means that any strategy for curricular development should involve strengthening perceived weaknesses in any of these dimensions so as to achieve an effective balance among the relevant components.

*Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Courses.* The College should be committed to fostering a curriculum which grants equal status to disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses, although not equality of number. Both kinds of courses draw from a body of scholarship, the cumulative insights of which give the topic academic depth and richness.

A *disciplinary* course is a component in a field of concentrated inquiry which possesses a distinct and central subject matter, a distinct methodology, and a paradigm or language of its own.

An *interdisciplinary* course is a component in a field of integration that focuses on a broader subject matter than a discipline, and synthesizes a number of disciplinary methodologies and paradigms.

*Experimental courses.* The College should encourage the development of experimental courses and programs, particularly those that have a dimension sensitive to contemporary student and societal concerns, whether disciplinary or inter-disciplinary. These should be seen positively as a mutable curricular element, serving temporarily to refresh and reform the more traditional
curriculum.

**Basic skills instruction.** The College should be committed to providing required instruction for students in fundamental academic skills at levels adequate for successfully completing Dickinson’s liberal arts course of study and for functioning effectively as a member of society. Skills in reading, thinking, researching, analyzing, evaluating, speaking, and writing should be taught in all courses. Introductory courses should be taught as supports for the entire curriculum.

**Levels Within the Curriculum**

**Hierarchy of Importance.** Of the various ways by which single courses are collected together, some are more important than others. Majors are programs of study in academic fields, whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary, which the College sees as deserving more serious and continuous study than non-major programs. Thus the courses minimally required for an effective major should, in conjunction with ‘b’ below, be given precedence. Courses directly serving the College system of distribution requirements are of equal value to courses comprising the various majors. The minimum courses necessary to support this general education need should, in conjunction with ‘a’ above, be given precedence. Among the remaining courses offered within the curriculum, those comprising minors and certificates are, where adequately advised, most deserving of support.

**Course Levels.** Courses within a discipline should offer a cumulative experience to the student, and the nature of such an experience should transcend the sum of courses comprising that discipline. To encourage consistency regarding quality in courses at every level within and across disciplines, the following distinctions should hold:

- A beginning course should introduce students to the breadth of a subject area and/or it should provide in part a foundation (introduction to the vocabulary, elementary principles, basic formulae, etc.) upon which higher level courses will subsequently build.

- An intermediate course should provide students with the opportunity to focus attention on a particular subcomponent of a subject area. For example, the focus of study might narrow to a time period, a genre, a related set of issues, or a particular methodology. Skills acquired in such a course, however, have broad application within a discipline and possibly beyond it.

- An advanced course, usually numbered at the 300-level, should have one or more intermediate (or beginning) courses as prerequisite. It should encompass the same features as an intermediate course, but should offer a student sustained exposure to the primary literature and/or to the important relevant scholarship. For example, in science courses the student would be reading scientific journals (beyond the textbook) and in literature courses the student would be reading complete works and literary criticism about them.

- A 400-level or 500-level course should normally have one or more 300-level courses as prerequisite. It should designate a focused learning experience involving disciplined
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individual or group inquiry. A student brings to the course the broad perspective acquired at the beginning level, the variety of skills acquired at the intermediate level, and specific knowledge and concerns developed at the 300-level.

Guidelines for Administering the Curriculum

Departmental Organization

This structural arrangement is a matter of convenience, grouping together faculty in the same or similar disciplines so as to enhance the opportunity for their interaction and cooperation as teachers and as scholars. It is also a device for faculty to accomplish administrative and governance tasks in as efficient a manner as possible. The importance of a discipline or major or program is not determined by whether it is located in a single department.

Expectations for Every Program

Although there are always justifiable exceptions, the following minimal conditions seem to be necessary for the effectiveness of programs.

A major program, disciplinary or interdisciplinary, should offer a spectrum of courses adequate to the range and depth of the field but without indulging in overly repetitive or overly specified offerings. A repertoire of about 15-20 courses is typically sufficient to support a major. At least 1/3rd of the courses taught by the faculty of a department should also be able to contribute to the general education needs of the College-wide distribution system. Alternatively, 1/3rd of the student enrollments in courses taught by members of the department should be at such a level.

A faculty of three full-time equivalents is normally necessary to offer an effective disciplinary or interdisciplinary major. Three different faculty perspectives are the minimal protection against an imbalanced presentation of the field.

Course Enrollments

The College favors granting the greatest possible student choice in course selection as long as educational quality, defined in the Principles statements above, is not compromised. The following quantitative factors implement this crucial blending of freedom of choice with program quality.

The enrollment maxima in a given course should be based primarily on judgments regarding optimal conditions for education in that course and then secondarily on enrollment pressures from students. These judgments will vary from field to field and between upper and lower level offerings.

The presence of enrollment maxima means that students will not always have access to courses of their choice. The College should attempt to respond to these expressions of student interest by flexibility in implementing maxima, by helpful advice regarding alternative course/program
possibilities, and by temporary reallocations of faculty course assignments.

With respect to long-term ups and downs in student enrollment pressures on a particular curricular program, principles of curricular balance take precedence over accommodation to student interest. The College will let course maxima, major prerequisite structures, and grading practices, all of which are based on sound academic policy, regulate student choice. The College rejects solving such problems by placing arbitrary quotas on a program or major.

The College is reluctant to alter the distribution of permanent faculty positions merely on the basis of desires and societal enthusiasms which do not necessarily reflect sound education policy. Occasionally such reallocations are appropriate, however, and should be implemented in a timely manner.

A student-faculty ratio of less than 15:1 is highly desirable for achieving the quality of education which Dickinson aspires to offer. Changes in total College enrollments need to be translated directly into changes in the number of faculty requisite to ensure that this ratio be maintained. The use of part-time appointments to achieve this goal should be minimal. Full or partial released time to faculty for administrative purposes should be factored out in determining this ratio. The special demands of curricular development and other professional obligations of faculty should also be taken into consideration as appropriate.

*Academic Support Systems*

An adequate library, computer system, co-curriculum, and other forms of academic support are necessary to the effectiveness of the curriculum. Judgments regarding changes in the extent or character of these systems must be made only in the wider context of curricular quality.

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### Related Information

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### History/Revision Information

**Responsible Office/Division:**

**Effective Date:**

**Last Amended Date:**

**Next Review Date:**

**Also Found In:** Academic Handbook