

Amended March 26, 2012

The twenty-second meeting of the Committee of Six for the academic year 2011-2012 was called to order by President Martin in her office at 3:30 P.M. on Monday, March 12, 2012. Present were Professors Basu, Ferguson, Hewitt, Loinaz, Ratner, and Umphrey, Dean Call, and Assistant Dean Tobin, Recorder.

Under “Announcements from the President,” President Martin noted that the senior staff and she are preparing for the Board of Trustees retreat, which will be held in New York from March 29 through March 31. She informed the members that the retreat will focus on admissions, the make-up of the student body, and students’ experiences at Amherst. Cornell University sociologist David Harris, Senior Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell, will present national data on diversity, including a brief history of Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action, and will lead a discussion with the Board. President Martin noted that Professor Harris studies socioeconomic and racial disparities in the United States. She said that he will be joined in the discussion by Professor Ferguson, who will describe the innovations in curriculum and teaching that have occurred within the Department of Black Studies. President Martin informed the members that Amherst data will be presented on the following four aspects of diversity that Dean Harris will introduce: the changing composition of Amherst’s student body over time; academic achievement; the campus “climate” beyond the classroom; and how much Amherst students interact and what they learn in the process. How the classroom and student life outside the classroom work together will be examined and questions, including the following, will be discussed: does our evidence point to “achievement gaps” of any sort? What have we done to address variations in preparation where they are relevant? Have these programs worked? What investments would make a difference? Conversation will also focus on the co-curriculum and the question of how Amherst can take greater advantage of students’ diverse backgrounds. Initiatives at Amherst and at peer institutions that offer evidence of enriching students’ experience may be reviewed, President Martin explained.

Conversation turned to the topic of whether or not there is an “achievement gap” at Amherst and, if so, what form it takes. Is there, for example, a relationship between a student’s level of preparation when he or she arrives at Amherst and that student’s choice of major, and his or her academic success (as measured by G.P.A.)? Particular majors (chemistry and physics, for example) may attract a higher proportion of students with the highest academic reader ratings. President Martin said that she would like to explore over time whether there is any achievement gap based on race/ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status. She noted that retention and graduation rates do not shed much light on these questions, as the rates are very high for all groups. President Martin commented that G.P.A. and standardized test scores cannot account for all of the differences in performance among groups at institutions across the country. It seems clear that the experience that students have on campus can have an effect on their performance, she said. President Martin commented that, for example, some athletes at Amherst perform better than their test scores and G.P.A.s would predict, suggesting that there is something about their experience at Amherst that helps them do better than expected. Athletes’ success might be attributed to the extra support and mentoring that they receive and the expectations that are placed on them for academic success. Athletes arrive at the College with structures that are in place that guarantee them mentors/coaches and teammates/friends, and they are required to develop study/organizational skills in order to do well, so that they can participate in their sport. President Martin suggested that it might be useful to explore what kinds of support systems could be offered to students other than athletes that would enhance their overall success.

In regard to the Board retreat, President Martin explained that Dean Call would summarize for the Board the academic support programs that have been put in place at the College over the

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past three decades. While a good deal has been accomplished as a result of investments in programs on the academic front (e.g., students now persist through particular introductory courses in which they may not have been successful before support systems were put in place), there has been less attention paid to developing programs in the area of student life to support Amherst's more diverse student body. The President stressed the need for enhanced staffing in the Dean of Students Office, which she considers to be significantly under-staffed, commenting that the Dean of Students has little time for planning because he must be engaged so heavily in the day-to-day. She noted many students' sense of dissatisfaction with the sense of community at the College, according to survey data. Professor Ferguson expressed the view that integrating the curricular and the co-curricular more fully could serve as a source of comradery among students. He offered the examples of the Multicultural Center and the Center for Community Engagement as potential vehicles for connecting students with one another, the larger community, and the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways. Professor Ferguson suggested that there are two tracks/experiences at Amherst—one set of courses that are taken by the most “golden,” most accomplished, best-prepared students and another grouping of courses that are taken by less well-prepared students. The members agreed that it would be important, as part of the Board discussion, to explore how students navigate the open curriculum and to examine the paths that students take through Amherst's curriculum.

Professor Basu stressed the importance of determining where the achievement gap may lie. She suggested that less well-prepared students often take large classes, in which it is possible for them to “hide,” and select majors based on whether they feel that they can succeed, rather than based on their interests. The ability to teach more classes with smaller enrollments, perhaps through capping more courses, would be helpful in this regard, she noted. Continuing, Professor Basu explained that it often can be difficult to recognize that students are experiencing challenges in a course until they hand in their first writing assignment. Some students speak well in class but may have poor writing skills, she noted. Some students who are feeling overwhelmed by a course, or may be facing other challenges, such as emotional problems, hand their papers in late, if at all, because they are struggling. Professor Basu said that, although students may be having academic difficulty, it may not be readily apparent, because they may be receiving grades that are not reflective of their abilities. She suggested that, if there was less grade inflation at Amherst, the achievement gap would be less disguised and more pronounced. Professor Umphrey commented on the tension that exists at Amherst between grade inflation and the Faculty's desire to ensure that students are successful. President Martin thanked the Committee for its insights, which she said would be informative for the Board and for the upcoming planning process.

Conversation turned to student culture and the sense of community on campus. Professor Ratner noted that the number of hours that students spend studying outside of class has dropped nationally, and he wondered if there was any variance among groups in terms of time spent studying. Professor Ferguson noted that it appears that not many students do readings beyond what is required for their classes. Professor Umphrey expressed the view that many students are interested in leadership and seem to spend a good deal of time participating in co-curricular activities, organizing and running events. The Committee wondered if the intellectual style of Amherst students has changed over the past decade. Some members conjectured that students may be doing less work because of grade inflation. Professor Ferguson noted that, within Black Studies, there is less grade inflation, and rewards (grades) are aligned with effort. Students seem to feel more of a sense of accomplishment, and appear to put in more effort, as a result, he feels.

The Committee next discussed concerns about gender relations on campus and incidents of sexual assault, which are being reported with greater frequency, it appears. The members

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suggested that the cultures of residential life and some athletics teams may play a role in these incidents. President Martin expressed concern and said that she intends to get more information about procedures that are in place for addressing such assaults and the enforcement of these procedures, and also plans to explore strategies that will enhance communication with the College community about issues of sexual harassment and assault, as well as other topics.

Discussion turned to the responsibilities and possible reporting lines of the new senior position within the administration. President Martin asked first about the title, and most members preferred the title of Provost, rather than Dean of the College, as this title is frequently used elsewhere to refer to what Amherst College calls the Dean of Students. The title of Provost will convey the duties of the position and will be important for recruitment, the members agreed. President Martin said that she envisions the position as providing long-range strategic planning across offices and serving as a bridge between the academic and the co-curricular, integrating programs and managing resources across domains. The Committee discussed the relationship between the Dean of the Faculty and the Provost. President Martin explained that the Dean is the Chief Academic Officer of the College and will continue to oversee faculty hiring, development, promotion (including tenure), and department budgets. The Provost's responsibilities will encompass planning and the budget, diversity across domains, and the oversight of a number of administrative departments, some of which currently report to the Dean and/or the President. Both the Provost and the Dean will report to the President, she noted. Professor Umphrey asked what personnel will be needed in the Provost's office. Professor Basu said that, while she is in favor of adding the Provost position, she has some worry that a significant number of additional administrators may be needed to support the large portfolio of responsibilities envisioned for the Provost. President Martin said that she envisions an associate provost for diversity and special projects, as well as an administrative assistant, supporting the Provost. The need for additional staffing may emerge over time, but these are the positions that she foresees at present. Professor Ratner asked the President when she plans to discuss the Provost position with the members of the Committee on Priorities and Resources (CPR). President Martin said that would do so soon. The Committee then turned to personnel matters.

The Committee reviewed proposals for Senior Sabbatical Fellowships. The Dean noted that the review process should yield feedback when necessary. He said that his office would work with colleagues to respond to any recommendations that might be offered and to make all proposals viable for funding.

The members reviewed [the responses that Professor Dizard had provided to the Committee's questions about the proposal for the Five College Sustainability Studies Certificate Program](#). Professor Umphrey noted that the certificate will rely heavily on advisors to establish the parameters of the certificate, and she wondered whether there would be consistency in advising across the Five-College institutions. She also commented that Amherst students would have to take a large number of courses at other Five-College institutions to satisfy the requirements of the certificate. It was noted that Amherst students may not take courses at other Five-College institutions in their first semester and may take no more than two per semester thereafter. Professor Hewitt suggested that, because of the number of courses that would be required for the certificate, perhaps Sustainability could become a sub-major within Environmental Studies. President Martin noted the potential problem of students having a less diverse curriculum if they double major, a point that had been raised in recent conversations with members of the Faculty. Professor Hewitt responded that, for their majors, some departments welcome students who want to double major and purposely keep the number of courses that are required for the major on the modest side for this reason. Her own department, French, has many double majors among its majors, she commented. Dean Call said that it is his

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understanding that Amherst has roughly the same proportion of double majors as many peer institutions, including some that have distribution requirements and others that have relatively open curricula. The members noted that some students may feel encouraged to double major when they learn that, with just a few more courses in a particular area, they would complete a second major. Members of the Committee expressed a diversity of opinion about the desirability of double majors. Professor Hewitt expressed the view that students would take a less diverse curriculum if departments that have fewer required courses for the major increase the number of required courses, as students would continue to double major and would then take fewer courses outside two majors. The Committee noted that there has been some discussion about establishing minors at the College, which would have fewer required courses and might satisfy students' desires to have formal credentials in more than one field.

Returning to the discussion about the certificate, Professor Ratner noted that he was not persuaded that the substance of a special topics course that evolved from an internship experience would necessarily end up being the equivalent of an advanced course. It was agreed that it would be up to the instructor to ensure that this would be the case. The Committee agreed that Professor Dizard's answers to their questions allayed their concerns, and they asked the Dean to request that Professor Dizard incorporate those responses into the Amherst catalogue language for the certificate, and provide the revised copy to the Committee for review. In addition, the Committee felt that it would be helpful to have a cover letter for the Faculty that would describe the ways in which the Amherst form of the certificate will differ, in practice, from the Five-College, more generic proposal.

Conversation turned to the need to develop college-wide learning goals for inclusion in the five-year reaccreditation report that the College will submit in January 2013 to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEAS&C). Professor Griffiths has discussed this issue with the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP). To inform the Committee of Six conversation, the members had been provided with [Professor Griffiths's report to the CEP about the learning goals project](#), as well as a [letter from the CEP](#) itself (both are appended via link here). The CEP notes in its letter to the Committee that "Amherst's institutional learning goals are, to a substantial extent, already described in the Mission Statement that the College adopted in 2006-2007. Rick Griffiths, who is coordinating the Reaccreditation Steering Committee, has proposed a modest change to the College Catalogue that would replace the current list of six advising areas with language that references the Mission Statement and that should meet the reaccreditation association's expectations concerning goals for general education." The CEP requested that the Committee of Six forward to the Faculty Professor Griffiths's proposed revision to the following College Catalogue language, which also includes the revised description of the First-Year Seminar program voted by the Faculty in 2009: (The new language is in bold face. College Catalogue 2011-2012, pp. 71-72.)

THE LIBERAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

Under a curriculum adopted in 1996, the first-year students are required to take a First-Year Seminar. These courses are planned and taught by one or more members of the Faculty as a way to introduce students to liberal studies through a range of innovative and often interdisciplinary approaches. The subject matter of the courses varies, as do the capabilities they seek to encourage. ~~These range from writing, quantitative skills, scientific reasoning, oral presentation, and argumentation, to performing, creating and contemplative learning. All seminar instructors share the goal of helping students develop an analytic approach to the course material. Through these classes, first year students are exposed to the diversity of learning that takes place at the~~

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~~College. Small groups of students work closely with professors in a collaborative atmosphere and immerse themselves deeply in the course's particular subject matter. Typically, informed discussion is a major component of a first year seminar.~~ **All courses have an enrollment limit of 15 students and provide discussion-based classes, writing-attentive instruction with frequent and varied assignments, close reading and critical interpretation of written texts, and careful attention to the analysis of argument in speech and writing.** The courses offered for 2011-12 are described on pages 78-88.

Amherst's liberal studies curriculum is based on a concept of education as a process or activity rather than a form of production. The curriculum provides a structure within which each student may confront the meaning of his or her education, and does it without imposing a particular course or subject on all students. Students are encouraged to continue to seek diversity and attempt integration through their course selection and to discuss this with their advisors. Under the curriculum, most members of the Faculty serve as academic advisors to students. Every student has a College Advisor until he or she declares a major, no later than the end of the sophomore year; thereafter each student will have a Major Advisor from the student's field of concentration.

~~As student and advisor together plan a student's program, they should discuss whether the student has selected courses that:~~

- ~~• Provide knowledge of culture and a language other than one's own and of human experience in a period before one's lifetime.~~
- ~~• Analyze one's own polity, economic, order, and culture;~~
- ~~• Employ abstract reasoning;~~
- ~~• Work within the scientific method;~~
- ~~• Engage in creative action – doing, making, and performing;~~
- ~~• Interpret, evaluate, and explore the life of the imagination."~~

As preparation for life-long learning and engagement with the world as articulated in the College's Mission Statement, and for mastery of one or more areas of knowledge or artistic creation through a major, students in consultation with their advisors should select courses that enable them to

- develop fundamental capabilities such as written and oral expression, quantitative reasoning, and proficiency in using information resources;**
- achieve breadth of understanding through study in the natural sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, languages, and the arts.**

The members expressed great thanks to Professor Griffiths for his efforts. Professor Umphrey wondered whether the minimalist approach of making modest changes to current language, rather than thinking broadly about general and institutional goals and using the reaccreditation report as an opportunity to consider the curriculum broadly, serves the College well. It was noted that logistical constraints are playing a role in the proposal to take a modest approach. The timetable for development of general and institutional learning goals and the upcoming long-range planning process are not in sync, for example. Professor Hewitt commented that departments seem to be making excellent progress on developing goals for their majors, which is promising. Dean Call noted that Professor Griffiths's proposal to modify the current Catalogue language to develop general education goals, and the mission statement as the basis of institutional goals, would enable the College to meet the requirements for the five-year report. This approach would also provide the opportunity for fuller consideration of general education and institutional goals before the decennial review in 2018 and serve as a starting point

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for future conversations. Professor Loinaz noted that the CEP has endorsed the modest approach and seems to support having a broader conversation later, as the Dean described. President Martin expressed some concern that the goals, as proposed, are generic and do not reflect what Amherst is and what the College does. She argued that the goals could convey in richer and more descriptive language what is distinctive about Amherst and what distinguishes the College from other liberal art colleges. Dean Call agreed, but expressed concern that there would not be sufficient time for the Faculty to define the goals by the deadline for the five-year report. Professor Ferguson commented that designing and agreeing on goals as a collective would be challenging, and he expressed the view that articulating goals represents nothing more than an exercise to meet requirements that are being imposed on the College. President Martin noted that NEASC has conveyed to her that the College should develop goals that reflect the institution and that Amherst will find useful. Professor Umphrey agreed that articulating goals should be meaningful, while recognizing that there may be insufficient time for the type of process that would be needed to unfold. She wondered whether building from the current Catalogue language in broader and fuller ways might be possible as a compromise to the minimalist approach that is being proposed. Professor Ratner said that, if the language below is proposed, he favors removing the “and” between “natural sciences” and “mathematics” and adding a comma after “sciences” to indicate that students should achieve breadth in both the natural sciences and mathematics, among the other divisions. When tracking students course-taking, math and science should be assessed as separate categories, he noted.

- **achieve breadth of understanding through study in the natural sciences, and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, languages, and the arts.**

Professor Umphrey expressed concern that “institutional research scaffolding” might be built around the goals being proposed for the purpose of assessment, which would make them more difficult to alter going forward. She questioned whether the Faculty would want students to have these particular goals in mind when selecting courses. Dean Call said the goals, as proposed, would allow data on students’ course-taking patterns to be tracked, which would be helpful in reporting to NEASC. Professor Basu noted the challenge of putting forward learning goals for an open curriculum and favored having some ambiguity expressed in the goals. President Martin reiterated her concern about taking an approach to the goals that would be generic. President Martin and Professor Umphrey suggested that the Faculty be presented with both the proposed revision to the current language, as well as a proposal for fuller goals that are more reflective of the institution. The members wondered whether there is a requirement that the language presented to NEASC be identical to the Catalogue language, as more flexibility would be possible if the goals could be described more fully for NEASC. It was agreed that the Committee should meet with Professor Griffiths to discuss both the constraints and the possibilities.

The meeting adjourned at 6:40 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Call
Dean of the Faculty

Committee of Six Questions about the Five College Sustainability Certificate Program Proposal and responses from Professor Dizard.

1. **Would capstone projects be developed across the campuses, or would each campus work to develop capstone projects for its own students? Some members of the Committee felt that distinctions among the experiential elements of the program are not fully articulated. What are the differences between an internship and an independent research project or capstone project that “addresses a contemporary, ‘real world’ problem”?**

Initially, each campus would develop capstone projects for its own students. This would largely be a matter of an advisor working closely with an individual student. There was talk of group projects as a possibility, projects which could involve students and their faculty advisor from two or more campuses. But we thought it best to let this emerge, if it does, as interaction amongst the faculty involved develops. We assume that for some students, an independent research project would likely grow out of an internship experience and be undertaken in an advanced course or a “special topics” course (or equivalent course at our sister institutions) following the internship. For others, the independent research project could take the form of a self-designed research term paper in one of the advanced courses the student would take. The capstone presentation would be based on the research paper.

2. **Would there be any limit on the number of courses that Amherst students would be permitted to take on other campuses?**

We did not discuss this. At present, Amherst offerings are few (note that Professor Sims’s course in natural resource economics was inadvertently omitted from Amherst offerings) so our students would have to take several courses off campus. To the best of my knowledge this is not unusual nor has it presented problems in other certificate programs.

3. **Some concern was raised about the following: “An approved internship, independent research project, or upper-level course within the area of concentration may be counted toward fulfillment of the advanced course requirement.” Some members expressed the view that an experiential offering should not be substituted for a requirement for an advanced course. It is noted that students will “take at least three courses within their declared concentration area (at least one at the advanced level).” Will the advanced course mentioned above be in addition to the other required advanced course?**

This wording reflects differences between the five institutions. Some give credit for internships. We, obviously, do not, except indirectly when a student takes a special topics course that arises out of an internship. So Amherst students could not substitute an internship for an advanced course.

4. Some of the courses for the program seem quite “applied.” Will courses selected by Amherst students be vetted on a case-by-case basis, under regular procedures (a review by the Dean of the Faculty’s office and the Registrar), to ensure that they meet the College’s standards for a liberal arts course? Or, since it was noted that the courses are “approved,” would Amherst pre-approve (under regular procedures) all of the “approved courses” that

its students will be permitted to take within the certificate program? Please clarify the meaning of “approved” in this context?

This has been an issue that predates the establishment of the Environmental Studies major, but it has become more recurrent as ENST majors have been attracted by courses in the departments of environmental conservation, soil sciences, and landscape design and regional planning at the university. There has also been rising interest in architecture, especially “green architecture.” Thus far, courses have been approved by the Dean and Registrar on a case-by-case basis, largely turning on a letter from the student’s advisor detailing how a particular course fits within the legitimate liberal arts program the student is pursuing. Thus far, this has involved one or two students seeking approval of courses in professional programs in any given year. Anecdotally, I know that some student requests have not been supported by their advisor and, thus, have been denied. I do not know how to estimate the number of our students who will seek the certificate. If it proves “popular,” the Registrar, CEP, the Committee of Six, and, ultimately, the Faculty will have to codify a policy but, for now, I think the path to “approved” is unproblematic.

- 5. Some members of the Committee felt that more details should be provided about the administration of the internship portion of the certificate.**

We were deliberately vague on this because practices vary widely across the campuses. Amherst is alone in administering internships through our CCE. The CCE has a quite extensive list of approved internships (internships that have been vetted for the quality of supervision, etc.), many of which are directly relevant to students interested in sustainability issues. Amherst students in the certificate program will work through the CCE to secure appropriate internships (in consultation, needless to say, with their advisor).

- 6. It was noted that there is a typo on page five of the proposal. It says “...please see Appendix A,” but should say Appendix B.**

Noted. There’s also a typo in Appendix A, p. 8. Professor Sims is listed as “Associate Professor of Economics.” She is an assistant professor. These corrections will be made when the proposal is forwarded to the Faculty for their consideration.

February 28, 2012

To: The CEP
From: Rick Griffiths
Re: College learning goals

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[Appendix 1](#): Most common liberal arts learning goals

[Appendix 2](#): Phrasing options for learning goals

[Appendix 3](#): Learning goals at peer institutions

1) What do we need?

We should answer the question, *What should an Amherst graduate know and be able to do?*, by articulating learning goals that are understandable and credible in themselves, few enough to be discussed in advising, and concrete enough to be assessed. We need to emphasize not what Amherst offers but what students take away from the experience (“outcomes”).

Since December departments have been formulating and posting the [learning goals for their majors](#). The Faculty must decide about learning goals on two higher levels:

- *general education*, that is, what students should take away from academic work outside of the major;
- *students' overall experience*, that is, what students should have gained not just intellectually but also in terms of personal growth, social interaction, commitment to the greater good, and the capacity and inclination for lifelong learning (= “institutional goals”).

These two areas overlap, and some schools adopt a single set of goals that covers both (see [Appendix 3](#)). Amherst has largely handled them separately. I use “college learning goals” to cover both categories.

2) General education: What needs fixing?

Since 1977, with a revision in 1993, we have had – and increasingly ignored – an advisory in the course catalogue under “The Liberal Studies Curriculum”:

As student and advisor together plan a student’s program, they should discuss whether the student has selected courses that:

- Provide knowledge of culture and a language other than one’s own and of human experience in a period before one’s lifetime.
- Analyze one’s own polity, economic, order, and culture;
- Employ abstract reasoning;
- Work within the scientific method;
- Engage in creative action – doing, making, and performing;
- Interpret, evaluate, and explore the life of the imagination.

Other than on p. 72 of the 2011-2012 catalogue, this statement is invisible to the outside world and little used in advising. Thus phrased, it cannot serve to inform or map the course choices of a cosmopolitan student body that now has dozens of “own” cultures, languages, and polities. We also have trouble pinning down which courses do not “employ abstract reasoning” or exclude “the life of the imagination.”

Because of these deficiencies, the CEP has been developing a keyword matrix for advising (currently with ten items) to compensate for the above list’s vagueness and its omissions, such as “writing attentive,” “speaking attentive,” and “quantitative reasoning.” Somewhat differently, the Learning Portfolio asks new students to rank fourteen goals (“Understand concepts and principles,” et al.). These two useful but partial lists of descriptors do not convey our educational priorities and cannot serve as a basis for evaluating how well our students learn.

In advising, then, we use something like general education goals but without any collective decision on what they currently are. To our credit, we have articulated the overall aims of the Amherst education in our [Mission Statement](#) (2007) and defined the goals of the First Year Seminars (2009). But it is rare for any school to let its general education learning goals fall out of use to the degree that Amherst has, as our accreditors have noted with increasing impatience over the last fifteen years. In the 10-year review of 1998, NEASC asked us to adopt and assess workable learning goals by 2003. In the [review of 2008](#) they asked in stronger language for results by January of 2013. Moreover, as of 2011 all NEASC schools face more stringent reporting standards for learning goals on all levels (institutional, general education, and now departments; see NEASC's [Student Achievement E-series](#)).

For colleges with open curricula, the new emphasis on learning assessment brings both bad news and some good news. It is seriously bad news to have neither a structured “curriculum” (core courses or distributionals) nor a “living” set of general education goals. We are left trying to assess students’ attainment of learning goals that we never actually convey to them – or convey only implicitly, confusingly, and in part. As far as I can tell, Amherst is the only college among our peers in this position. Our open-curriculum peers in NEASC have appointed blue-ribbon committees that have formulated learning goals: [Wesleyan in 2005](#), [Smith in 2007](#), and [Brown in 2008](#). In other regions, [Hamilton](#) and [Grinnell](#) also foreground their learning goals. See [Appendix 3](#). These statements make an obvious point: *We don’t have requirements, but our general education program has goals and direction that we achieve by other means.* Given the distrust of the open curriculum, this is doubtless a point worth making. For all schools, the shift away from “inputs,” including what they *require*, to what students *learn* in effect levels the playing field and lets us make the case – if we can – that students do indeed learn uniquely well in the open curriculum.

NEASC prescribes what learning goals should be assessed in ways that closely coincide both with our 1977 list of *areas of knowledge* and with our current focus on *capabilities* (such as writing and quantitative skills). *The areas / capabilities* distinction is useful, so I mark it in brackets in this paragraph from NEASC’s 2011 [Standards for Accreditation](#):

4.19 {Capabilities:} Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. {Areas of knowledge:} They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind.

In terms of compliance with NEASC, we would need only to find workable phrasing for our six goals and to add written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, and information literacy in some form (see [Appendix 1](#)). About information literacy, NEASC is particularly insistent:

4.6 The institution ensures that students use information resources and information technology as an integral part of their education. The institution provides appropriate orientation and training for use of these resources, as well as instruction and support in information literacy and information technology appropriate to the degree level and field of study.

If one broadens this area to include research skills and the ethical use of intellectual property, it describes one of Amherst's current educational priorities. The most problematic area may be "critical analysis and logical thinking" (§4.19), because of its vagueness (cf. our current "abstract reasoning") and redundancy.

In sum, with just tightened phrasing of the *areas* and a few additional *capabilities* we may catch our goals list up to our current practices and to NEASC's expectations. A possible solution is proposed below (p. 6). We may, of course, want something fresher and more poetic. Before addressing that question it will be helpful to consider whether we have to add any big-picture goals to a revision of the 1977 list.

3) Institutional goals: what needs fixing?

In educating the whole person, we also have aspirations for students' personal growth, social development, real-world engagement, commitment to cultural diversity, and capacity for life-long learning. Many schools combine general education and institutional goals to create lists that stretch from 10 to often 10-20 and even 200+ items (see the lists in [Appendix 3](#)). Where the general education goals correspond to a map of knowledge that is marked out by departments and disciplines and that stays much the

same from college to college and from decade to decade, schools vary wildly in how they articulate their big-picture, whole-person goals (see the phrasing options listed in [Appendix 2](#)). The comprehensive lists are often organized around broad categories such as “Intellectual and Practical Skills” and “Integrative and Applied Learning,” with the *areas of knowledge* often playing a relatively minor role (e.g., lumped together under “Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World”). These categories derive from the influential [“Essential Learning Outcomes”](#) of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The NEASC *Standards* indicate no expectation of a structure this elaborate. Capturing these aspirations in words might well need an intensive year(s)-long conversation among faculty, students, staff, and alumni – a worthy project, though one that we have reasons to postpone until we know more about how to assess student learning and have more institutional capacity to focus on the conversation.

Here I believe that we have the option to declare victory and go home, at least for the time being. That is, we can argue that our institutional goals do not need fixing, since we had a broadly inclusive conversation in 2006-2007 in adopting a mission statement that spells out our aspirations about what students will take away from Amherst:

Terras irradiant
“Let them give light to the world.”
1821

Amherst College educates men and women of exceptional potential from all backgrounds so that they may seek, value, and advance knowledge, engage the world around them, and lead principled lives of consequence.

Amherst brings together the most promising students, whatever their financial need, in order to promote diversity of experience and ideas within a purposefully small residential community. Working with faculty, staff, and administrators dedicated to intellectual freedom and the highest standards of instruction in the liberal arts, Amherst undergraduates assume substantial responsibility for undertaking inquiry and for shaping their education within and beyond the curriculum.

Amherst College is committed to learning through close colloquy and to expanding the realm of knowledge through scholarly research and artistic creation at the highest level. Its graduates link learning with leadership—in service to the College, to their communities, and to the world beyond.

Our Mission Statement has significant operational language:

- “Seek, value, advance knowledge”
- “Engage the world”
- “Lead principled lives of consequence”
- Experience “diversity of experience and ideas”
- Expand “the realm of knowledge through scholarly research and artistic creation”
- Take responsibility for “for undertaking inquiry and for shaping their education within and beyond the curriculum.”

A [2008 survey](#) of member institutions of the American Association of Colleges and Universities provides the terms of art for categorizing such aspirations. Our final sentence (“Its graduates link learning with leadership—in service to the College, to their communities, and to the world beyond.”) invokes: *civic engagement*, *application of learning*, *skills for lifelong learning*, and (along with the earlier “principled lives of consequence”) *ethical reasoning*. In the second paragraph, the phrase “diversity of experience and ideas within a purposefully small residential community” entails *intercultural skills*. The phrase “responsibility for undertaking inquiry” and the inclusion of students in “expanding the realm of knowledge through scholarly research and artistic creation” imply *research skills* as well as *working independently*. We may want to expand on these goals or clarify them in some other list of declared learning goals, but in terms of reaccreditation we are under no immediate obligation to do so.

4) A possible solution

If we assume that the institutional learning goals are adequately articulated by the Mission Statement, we need only cite it to the section on “The Liberal Studies Curriculum” in the catalogue. In that section we need to revise our expectation for breadth in *areas of knowledge* with greater clarity and inclusiveness (e.g., no more “one’s own [US American] polity”) and in ways that can be used to map the curriculum. To this end, it may be clearest and briefest simply to cite the conventional academic areas (natural sciences, humanities, et al.). We certainly must add *capabilities* such as written and oral expression and quantitative reasoning, which, as noted are prescribed by NEASC and have been under vigorous development at Amherst since the Special Committee on the Amherst Education (SCAE) of 2002-2003. All that is missing is the equally self-evident, if awkwardly named, *capability*, “information literacy” in *Standards* ¶ 4.19 and ¶4.6 (both above). Thus revised, the general education goals, in tandem with

the Mission Statement, would cover NEASC's expectations and put us in line with peer institutions (see the chart in [Appendix 1](#)). We'll probably be safe in arguing that the vacuous "critical thinking" is already built in everywhere.

The resulting statement of general education goals is clear, if not poetic, and compact enough to allow discussion by advisors and advisees. The language on First-Year Seminars also needs to be updated with the [language voted by the Faculty in 2009](#). The new language is in bold face. College Catalogue 2011-2012, [pp. 71-72](#).

THE LIBERAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

Under a curriculum adopted in 1996, the first-year students are required to take a First-Year Seminar. These courses are planned and taught by one or more members of the Faculty as a way to introduce students to liberal studies through a range of innovative and often interdisciplinary approaches. The subject matter of the courses varies, as do the capabilities they seek to encourage. ~~These range from writing, quantitative skills, scientific reasoning, oral presentation, and argumentation, to performing, creating and contemplative learning. All seminar instructors share the goal of helping students develop an analytic approach to the course material. Through these classes, first-year students are exposed to the diversity of learning that takes place at the College. Small groups of students work closely with professors in a collaborative atmosphere and immerse themselves deeply in the course's particular subject matter. Typically, informed discussion is a major component of a first-year seminar.~~ **All courses have an enrollment limit of 15 students and provide discussion-based classes, writing-attentive instruction with frequent and varied assignments, close reading and critical interpretation of written texts, and careful attention to the analysis of argument in speech and writing.** The courses offered for 2011-12 are described on pages 78-88.

Amherst's liberal studies curriculum is based on a concept of education as a process or activity rather than a form of production. The curriculum provides a structure within which each student may confront the meaning of his or her education, and does it without imposing a particular course or subject on all students. Students are encouraged to continue to seek diversity and attempt integration through their course selection and to discuss this with their advisors. Under the curriculum, most members of the Faculty serve as academic advisors to students. Every student has a College Advisor until he or she declares a major, no later than the end of the sophomore year; thereafter each student will have a Major Advisor from the student's field of concentration.

~~As student and advisor together plan a student's program, they should discuss whether the student has selected courses that:~~

- ~~• Provide knowledge of culture and a language other than one's own and of human experience in a period before one's lifetime.~~
- ~~• Analyze one's own polity, economic, order, and culture;~~
- ~~• Employ abstract reasoning;~~
- ~~• Work within the scientific method;~~
- ~~• Engage in creative action—doing, making, and performing;~~

- ~~Interpret, evaluate, and explore the life of the imagination.”~~

As preparation for life-long learning and engagement with the world as articulated in the College’s Mission Statement, and for mastery of one or more areas of knowledge or artistic creation through a major, students in consultation with their advisors should select courses that enable them to

- **develop fundamental capabilities such as written and oral expression, quantitative reasoning, and proficiency in using information resources;**
- **achieve breadth of understanding through study in the natural sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, languages, and the arts.**

THE MAJOR REQUIREMENT

Liberal education seeks to develop the student’s awareness and understanding of the individual and of the world’s physical and social environments. If one essential object in the design of education at Amherst is breadth of understanding, another purpose, equally important, is mastery of one or more areas of knowledge in depth. Upperclassmen are required to concentrate their studies— to select and pursue a major—in order to deepen their understanding: to gain specific knowledge of a field and its special concerns, and to master and appreciate the skills needed in that disciplined effort. A major normally consists of at least eight courses pursued [etc.]

The above revision would allow advisor and advisee to get down to business and, in using well-understood terms, would lend itself to assessment. For example, the distribution of student course-taking in the natural sciences, arts, and other areas is something we can already track. The statement does not interfere with the useful aspects of the keyword matrix and might accommodate additions (e.g., about using information resources). We may amend and elaborate the statement at any time, or completely replace it. But, as mentioned, there are good reasons to see how this modest re-description of our current practice works in advising students and in assessing their learning before we undertake sweeping rethinking of our educational model.

It may be helpful to think of this statement as an executive summary of our goals. We are free to use more elaborate explanations of these core values elsewhere to guide the advising process or to inform prospective or new students. Most important is that we use these goals in advising and give them prominence on our website and in our catalogue.

5) What next?

Once the Faculty has decided about our revised general education goals and, if needed, about institutional goals other than in the Mission Statement, the following burdens and benefits can be anticipated:

For the administration:

The [Reaccreditation Steering Committee](#) must in the 5-year report (January of 2013) explain to NEASC how we can build up to a full assessment plan for our general education and institutional goals by the time of the 10-year review in 2018. In terms of indirect evidence, we already have a rich set of instruments: surveys of current students and alumni, tracking of post-graduate study and employment, and transcript analysis. More difficult for all schools is the direct evidence of student achievement in essays, art works, tests, and performances. The Committee is pursuing two pilot projects. One is a test of students' skills in using information resources, which Amherst is developing with four other schools. A second project will follow a cohort of current students by means of interviews and an analysis of portfolios. The College needs to propose a year-by-year roll-out of an assessment plan with benchmarks, as well as with some institutional structure, such as a (sub)committee to oversee and to connect the results to planning and budgeting. We will need to demonstrate that students and advisors make active use of our declared learning goals and that we use the results of learning assessment to improve our educational program.

For the Faculty:

The Faculty's responsibilities will chiefly involve advising, but this is not a new issue. The Ad Hoc Committee on Advising co-chaired by Pat O'Hara and Austin Sarat will report at the end of the spring semester on ways to enhance our advising system and enable discussion of whatever learning goals the Faculty decides on.

Departments will not – and cannot – do the heavy lifting in assessing college learning goals, since the evidence is too widespread and assessment is too complicated. Nor in the college-wide evaluation of writing or quantitative capabilities or of

individuals' breadth of study will the performance of particular departments or instructors come into question.

Departments will need to report, probably only briefly, on what they are finding out about the strengths and weaknesses of their graduating majors and on how they act on that information. How hard NEASC will push us on this issue remains unclear. But, as we have discussed, a well-running system of self-monitoring and regular course direction – which Amherst departments generally have – is the best defense against bureaucratic pressures.

For the College:

There is an obvious benefit in being less evasive about the aims of the open curriculum and, once we have some measures of learning, in being candid with students about the strengths and weaknesses of what they take away from this curriculum.

For forty years we have been casting about for evidence to answer the question – from parents, alumni, foundations, government agencies, and accreditors – *How do you know that this curriculum is working?* In the last decade we have made large, if not sustained, efforts to formulate answers: the SCAE (2002-2003), the five academic-area working groups (2003-2005), and the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP) (2005-2006). Now NEASC is asking us to devise mechanisms that are systematic and sustainable – and sustainable because they claim less faculty time than these ambitious committees.



AMHERST COLLEGE

Department of Computer Science

March 5, 2012

The Committee of Six
Amherst College

Dear Colleagues:

In preparation for the five-year reaccreditation report that Amherst College will submit in January 2013, the Committee on Educational Policy has been examining the issue of learning goals for our general education program.

Amherst's institutional learning goals are, to a substantial extent, already described in the Mission Statement that the College adopted in 2006-2007. Rick Griffiths, who is coordinating the Reaccreditation Steering Committee, has proposed a modest change to the College Catalogue that would replace the current list of six advising areas with language that references the Mission Statement and that should meet the reaccreditation association's expectations concerning goals for general education.

The proposal is explained in the attached report. The CEP asks that a motion be brought to the Faculty to modify the Catalogue as shown on pages 6 and 7 of the report. We believe that the proposed language describes the College's learning goals accurately and elegantly. We appreciate Rick's work preparing the report and guiding the College through reaccreditation.

Best regards,

Lyle A. McGeoch

On behalf of the Committee on Educational Policy

CEP Members:

Anthony Bishop

Gregory Call, *ex officio*

Carol Clark

Javier Corrales

Matthew DeButts '14

Rick Lopez

Lyle A. McGeoch, chair

Jacob Ong '14

Elizabeth Scott '13