

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL
concerning
RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO
THE ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS AND PROGRAMS OF
COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE

Presented at the
606th Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate
May 9, 2002

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BACKGROUND

In November 1998, the Faculty Senate approved the academic requirements and programs of Commonwealth College (Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A). The requirements became effective for students entering the College in Fall 1999. Due to resource constraints, the Senate recently (Sen. Doc. No. 02-027) voted to temporarily reduce the number of required Honors courses. One of the reasons for doing this was to enable the College to mount sufficient course offerings for some of the other aspects of the Commonwealth College program that differ from the predecessor Honors Program.

It is frequently the case that the implementation of a planned program brings to light areas of difficulty or confusion not anticipated in the original plans. As the first cohort of Commonwealth College has proceeded through the program, the faculty who serve as the College's advisors and curriculum committee have worked to develop methods of implementing the philosophical bases of Commonwealth College. In the Spring of 2001, the Dean of Commonwealth College (Linda Slakey) and the chair of its curriculum committee (Prof. Daniel Gordon) presented to the Academic Matters Council the Committee's recommendations for implementation of Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A. These included four areas which modified the original proposal. These modifications were provisionally approved in 2001, and are recommended now by the Academic Matters Council for permanent adoption.

RECOMMENDED CHANGES

Foundation Requirements: The program described in Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A included three foundation requirements: writing (ENGLWP 112H or 113H or exemption by standard practices), oral communication, and computer literacy. The latter two were to be satisfied by a demonstration of skills. Monitoring this has proved quite difficult for the computer literacy requirement, but the University does have the courses and facilities to implement such a requirement. The same isn't true of oral communication. Students haven't had specific training in this area, there is no test for this skill, and the University can't provide oral communication courses for all Commonwealth College students. The College has concluded that oral communication should be regarded as a skill that develops as part of the ongoing pedagogy of the College.

Recommended change: The oral communication foundation requirement should be reframed as a critical component of an honors education involving developing such skills over the course of a student's college career. The Commonwealth College curriculum committee will develop guidelines, including which oral communication skills are considered critical, and how to develop and evaluate mastery of these skills. The guidelines will be distributed to faculty teaching Honors courses.

The AMC concurs with the College curriculum committee that this proposed change will be both more practicable and more sound pedagogically. Further implementation of this change is incorporated into the second change proposed, the Dean's Book series.

Dean's Book Course: The College curriculum committee has observed that the formal nature of the curriculum, and the opportunities for students to choose from everything the University offers, is an obstacle to students' experiencing Commonwealth College as a community to which they belong. The committee sought a concept that would provide the opportunity for some common intellectual experiences that involved large numbers of students, without adding to their requirement burden. The result is a proposal for a new

activity to replace the requirement described in Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A and in Sen. Doc. No. 02-027 as “one other interdisciplinary course or an interdisciplinary independent study” (page 4).

Recommended change: That the current requirement of “one other interdisciplinary course or an interdisciplinary independent study” [which is in addition to the specified Honors requirements in General Education] be replaced by a requirement of “the Dean’s Book series, through completion of the Dean’s Book course in three different semesters.”

The Dean’s Book series will be comprised of three one-credit seminars, which will be taken in three different semesters. Each semester, the Dean’s Book seminar will focus on one book, chosen by the College for the semester. The goals will be to enjoy the book and learn from its content; to have a common activity with other Commonwealth College students; and to increase skills in close reading, writing from more than one perspective, and oral communication. As planned, three-eighths of the College, or about 900 students, will be reading the semester’s book at any time. Discussion sections of 20 students will meet for a two-hour period once weekly for the first half of the semester. This series will provide a pedagogic setting in which the College can guarantee the explicit teaching of oral communication skills. The seminar will be offered at the 100-level for students taking it for the first time, and at the 300-level for those taking it for the second or third time.

Books will be selected through an advanced Honors course, “Dean’s Readers.” This seminar will review a series of books and select two to be those read during the following year in the Dean’s Book courses (one each semester). Books will be chosen with an eye toward their ability to trigger exploration in multiple directions. Dean’s Readers will run as a two-semester sequence. In the second semester, students will prepare background materials to be used the following year in teaching the two books chosen.

Culminating Experience: Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A stipulates: “All Commonwealth College students must complete either a research thesis, a research project, a major creative work, a capstone course, or a written report of a supervised inquiry project related to an international, public service, or internship experience” (page 4). The College curriculum committee is concerned that this diversity of options not result in a dilution of the academic rigor expected of all students who graduate with the distinction of being Commonwealth College scholars. To implement the option of “capstone course,” an effort was made to discover forms of scholarly work that are actually in use by faculty and students, whether or not they were previously identified as Honors work, that lead to the same kind of maturation of intellectual skills as does thesis or project work.

Recommended change: The language quoted above should be replaced with:
“All Commonwealth College students must complete a substantive six-credit culminating experience. This may be in the form of a research thesis, a research project, a major creative work, a capstone course or course sequence, or a supervised inquiry project related to an international, public service, or internship experience, documented by an archivable written report.”

The AMC believes that this will establish a model that will better capture the spirit of Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A, although it differs slightly from the letter of that document. Under the existing language, a culminating experience can take the form of a three-credit or even a one-credit project, and the AMC does not believe that this should be sufficient.

A number of models for the culminating experience are described below. We expect that different models will be helpful in different fields; there is no expectation that any one department will use more than one or two of them. The College itself will mount some of the capstone courses, under the Honors rubric. Specific

proposals for culminating experiences beyond the traditional thesis group are reviewed and approved by the College curriculum committee before being offered to students.

(1) The first model encompasses the range of theses, projects, and creative works with which departments are familiar. Students work outside a classroom setting for the entire six credits, under the guidance of a committee chaired by a faculty member. A piece of work is proposed, carried out, documented in archivable form, and presented publicly. Students typically register for three credits of 499Y followed by three credits of 499T or 499P. [The 499Y registration allows a “Y” to be submitted in lieu of a grade at the end of the first semester, signifying that the work is year-long by nature, and will be graded at its completion.]

(2) A second model derives directly from the thesis model, but has the first semester’s work done in a classroom setting. In this model, students participate in a class which either teaches research methodology that leads to individual or group projects, or examines a set of topics in a way that leads naturally to developing one into a thesis. The thesis proposal is completed within the first semester and the faculty committee identified. The thesis is written in the following semester. In a similar vein, departments that have classes for seniors that incorporate research or project work or case studies, and that complete the work and write it up within a six-credit framework may request approval of honors versions of these undertakings to meet the culminating experience requirement.

(3) The third major model incorporates a range of experiential learning activities that are typically done off-campus, such as service learning and study abroad, as noted in Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A. In these cases, our concern is to encourage planning and intellectual preparation for the experience, and to provide for appropriate documentation of learning. Typically, students will participate in a seminar of preparation, maintain ongoing contact while away via e-mail or post, and complete a thesis on their return. Any other arrangement (e.g., research and thesis done in a laboratory abroad) must be proposed in advance, with clear agreements for maintaining contact with a UMass faculty member who assumes responsibility for guiding and evaluating the write-up of the work.

(4) A fourth model consists of two linked courses. The linked courses explore a topic from two distinct perspectives. The participating faculty work together in proposing and conducting the courses, and all participating students take both courses. The work completed must include a substantial paper or project demonstrating the understanding achieved by studying the subject from the two perspectives.

(5) Finally, faculty are encouraged to propose opportunities for seniors to participate in the work of preparing materials for new courses or refreshing the material for ongoing ones. The work faculty usually do in reading broadly, selecting readings for students, and preparing materials for presentations for entry-level courses presents many opportunities for an academic experience that is a true culmination of undergraduate study. The Dean’s Readers courses are an example of this.

All models have in common that the student must produce an archivable product, and present their work in some context. In a number of activities proposed thus far, students may or must work in small groups to complete projects. The form for approval of such a proposal requires that faculty specify how they will evaluate each individual’s accomplishments.

Graduation with Latin High Honors: In the Honors Program, students have been able to graduate with Latin High Honors (*magna* or *summa cum laude*) only if they complete a departmental or interdisciplinary Honors track in addition to the other requirements of the Honors Program. The language of Sen. Doc. No. 99-005A indicates that this wasn’t necessarily planned for Commonwealth College, as the option of Latin

High Honors is discussed in conjunction with the culminating experience, not as solely a component of a departmental or interdisciplinary Honors track. The document states, “While the culminating experience options are sufficient to receive *cum laude*, only a research thesis, research project, or major creative work must be completed for high Latin honors.”

The AMC concurs with the College curriculum committee that this restriction would be necessary if a student’s culminating experience could take the form of a project requiring significantly less than a thesis or research project. The AMC also concurs with the committee’s assessment that, insofar as all types of culminating experiences will be of the same magnitude with the acceptance of the previous recommendation, the distinction is no longer necessary.

Recommended change: The following should be stated explicitly: “Any student who graduates from the University with a cumulative GPA of 3.20 or higher will graduate *cum laude*. Students who complete the requirements of Commonwealth College and earn a cumulative GPA of 3.20 or better will graduate as Commonwealth College Scholars *cum laude*. Latin High Honors is available only to Commonwealth College Scholars who earn a grade of AB on their culminating experience and a cumulative GPA of 3.50-3.79 for graduation *magna cum laude* or A on their culminating experience and a cumulative GPA of 3.80 or higher for *summa cum laude*.”

Students who qualify for Latin High Honors through a departmental or interdisciplinary Honors track will be in the same situation under this proposal as they are now. The AMC believes that Departmental Honors and Interdisciplinary Honors should be regarded as important designations in themselves that signify accomplishment at the departmental level or in interdisciplinary pursuits, rather than as routes to Latin High Honors.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate modify the requirements of Commonwealth College, as presented
36-02 in Sen. Doc. No. 02-037A.