

I only want what's best for their future.



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## Kentucky Rethinks Gen Ed

It was time, explains Kumble R. Subbaswamy, provost of the University of Kentucky. Faculty and administrators there hadn't considered major changes to the [general education curriculum](#) for nearly two decades.

Several years after a review of Kentucky's current program began, the campus earlier this month received something tangible to discuss. A [faculty committee](#) released its [general education reform proposal](#) and called it a "radical departure" from what's now in place, a common requirement that students choose from among a list of survey courses.

Much of the new program would be specially designed mini-courses taught in five-week segments during students' freshman year. The courses would emphasize how professors approach major issues in their fields. But some faculty see the proposed changes as only complicating the curriculum and adding more work for them.

The committee offers a harsh assessment of Kentucky's current general education package, saying it "is often described as an arbitrary collection of unrelated courses. The curriculum is not blended into a coherent, well-integrated program; it instead appears to be fragmented."

Communication and quantitative reasoning are taught through courses set apart from those that satisfy disciplinary requirements, and there is a "deep divide" between general skills courses and those taught within the major, the report says as part of its broader argument that this makes general education courses appear to be unimportant and separate from those taught within majors.

The committee says its proposal, which provides alternatives to broad survey courses, will give students a better background in analytical thinking and help them understand "the commonalities as well as the differences among disciplines, and allow [them] to see the courses mesh into a coherent whole."

Under the new model, which the committee says is preliminary, students would take roughly half of their general education credits in the first year, and then finish the remainder over the rest of their semesters at Kentucky.

The first-year requirements are largely intended to help students transition into college. The "Foundations of Inquiry" courses, a series of five-week "modules" to be completed over the first two semesters, address how scholars think about questions of the humanities, social sciences and the natural sciences, according to the proposal. Faculty would be asked to create these courses from scratch and address a problem or issue that is of central interest to them. (On example given is a course called "Eyewitness Testimony" that, according to the description, would provide a broad, general introduction to psychological aspects of eyewitness testimony.)

The proposal says these courses represent "a move toward an appreciation for inquiry itself" and a shift away from the broad survey courses, which the committee criticizes as often being too focused on fact-dumping. And the idea is to expose students to more topics than they would cover in a traditional 16-week course. The report adds that the vast majority of disciplinary courses are taught by faculty from a few colleges, and this approach

The curriculum would likely also include a four-credit-hour writing course (already added by the university) as well an advanced writing seminar to be completed before graduation. On top of that, students would take courses in statistical reasoning and one called first-year orientation that serves as an introduction to college.

A capstone experience, described as a culmination of a student's education, would amount to a senior project that demonstrates critical analysis. In most cases, students would not be able to use "pre-major" or major credit to satisfy general education requirements. The proposal says by keeping the requirements to 30 credit hours — the minimum required by Kentucky's accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools — students would not be kept longer in order to complete their major.

Many of the 100-level courses currently offered will continue to serve as prerequisites for many programs, but Subbaswamy expect enrollments in these courses to decline.

The committee said its report is part of — and also a response to — a national conversation about how changes to general education requirements can help students be better prepared. It cites two studies that influenced its thinking about the importance of spurring analytical thinking: the report "[College Learning for the New Global Century](#)" and Harvard President Derek Bok's book [Our Underachieving Colleges](#).

At Kentucky, faculty members last week had their chance to speak out on the proposal before it returns to the steering committee and eventually goes up for a University Senate vote, which could come as early as December.

Subbaswamy, who helped appoint the committee, said he is pleased thus far with the conversation since the recommendations went public.

"There's been a strong desire for more coherence," he said. "We're concerned about whether we've become too menu-driven and whether we are helping students develop the skills needed for critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning."

Subbaswamy said he understands the concern that students, particularly those in highly structured programs, would face difficulties fulfilling the new first-year general education requirements on top of major requirements. But the report says no students should experience a longer path to graduation as a consequence of the proposed program.

For the faculty, Kentucky would provide summer training on how to come up with the new five-week courses. Multiple instructors could work together determining the curriculum, Subbaswamy said. And once the transition occurs, he said there shouldn't be a large increase in the effort or time involved for professors. Faculty assigned to teach a Foundations of Inquiry course would be required to teach their "module" twice (for a total of 10 weeks) in a given 16-week semester, the report says.

"This will require that the faculty buy in," he said.

But some have not. Jonathan Glixon, a musicology professor who teaches in Kentucky's honors program, said he hasn't seen any evidence that anything is wrong with the current system.

"The idea here seems to be moving away from content and toward methodology," he said. "You're saying methodology is all that's important? This also implies that the other way people weren't getting methodology."

And Glixon doesn't see how asking faculty to develop new courses on their own promotes cohesiveness. "This is more fragmentation than there was before, and it's no more focused."

Small departments are also stretched thin, Glixon said, and devoting resources to developing and staffing new courses would mean that current courses would likely go by the wayside. While some professors could be asked to teach the shorter courses instead of full-length ones, Glixon said there's no assurance that faculty in some departments could afford to skip teaching core courses and still meet students' needs.

Kaveh Tagavi, chair of the Senate Council and a professor of mechanical engineering, said there is considerable faculty concern about the proposal. He's heard critics say it's a dumbing down of the general education curriculum, and that the process is moving too fast.

When the steering committee went to each college's curriculum committee for response before the report went public, some faculty not involved in the process were upset that they couldn't see the proposal. "In an academic setting, that doesn't sit well," he said.

Tagavi said he has mostly heard from critics, but is confident many faculty are pleased with the process thus far. While he's holding out content judgments until a more finished proposal is released, Tagavi has formed a clear opinion on one aspect of the process.

"Curriculum reform should happen every five or so years," he said. "It was time to reevaluate this."

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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