

Bowdoin's Bold New Curriculum for Liberal Education

- Cross-disciplinary scientific inquiry and mathematical reasoning.
- Critical explorations of class, gender, ethnicity, culture.
- Hands-on knowledge of artistic process and keen aesthetic judgment.

Bowdoin College's new curriculum articulates a bold blueprint for liberal education designed to inspire students to become world citizens with acute sensitivity to differences in the social and natural worlds.

The revised curriculum, which was approved by faculty this week, is Bowdoin's first major curriculum reform in over two decades. It represents several years of intensive discussion and interchange among Bowdoin's faculty members.

"This important and timely revision represents a clear and unambiguous recommitment by our faculty and by the larger Bowdoin community to liberal learning at a time when others may have begun to question the value and application of the liberal arts in a modern world," said Bowdoin President Barry Mills. "It is consistent with our history, but also reflects today's world and the demands our students will face. It is both a mature understanding and direct statement of Bowdoin's educational mission."

At the heart of the curricular changes is a thematic, interdisciplinary reshaping of Bowdoin's distribution requirements, the core courses that define the college's liberal arts foundation. While not substantively altered in subject area—students still will be required to take courses in natural sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities and fine arts, for instance—the content of these required courses will reflect a sharpened examination of themes and issues vital to a liberal education for the 21st century. Courses also will be designed to help students hone their writing and analytical skills, deepen their aesthetic judgments, use varied forms of informational resources, and create multi-faceted solutions to complex problems.

A new distribution requirement, called **Exploring Social Differences**, will draw from courses spanning multiple disciplines, including sociology, history, Asian studies, environmental science, women's studies, and economics. The requirement is designed to expose students to courses that examine differences such as class, environmental conditions, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation—and analyze how they shape societies, global environments and history.

The data-driven nature of the 21st century has been recognized by a new distribution requirement in **Mathematical, Computational, or Statistical Reason-**

ing, in which students in courses as wide-ranging as economics, psychology, mathematics, and computer science will use mathematical and quantitative models to understand the world around them.

“Our new curriculum emphasizes ways of thinking, rather than the development of a prescribed knowledge-set,” said Bowdoin’s Dean for Academic Affairs Craig McEwen, who led the 11-member curriculum review committee. “These courses will ensure that students encounter subjects that excite their imaginations, engage them in a free exchange of ideas, and make connections between subjects. Our fundamental goal is to prepare students to continue to learn in a changing world.”

This new articulation of Bowdoin’s liberal arts mission takes place at a time when many other of the nation’s highest-ranked liberal arts colleges are similarly engaged. Harvard recently made headlines when it voted to abandon its seven-subject undergraduate core in favor of more interdisciplinary courses, although the particulars of the new course content areas are not yet defined.

Bowdoin’s curriculum-review committee spent more than a year reviewing the college’s academic goals before submitting a preliminary proposal to the faculty in March. The committee’s recommendations for a thematic, interdisciplinary approach elicited passionate, often eloquent, debate at faculty meetings about the role of liberal education in the 21st century. From these discussions and prior working groups, a new academic mission emerged that builds on the college’s 200-year tradition of “educating leaders in all walks of life,” while preparing them for a world of increasingly varied cultures, interests, resources, and power structures.

The new mission describes a liberal education that “will challenge students to appreciate and contend with diversity and the conflicts inherent in differing experiences, perspectives and values at the same time that they find ways to contribute to the common project of living together in the world.”

The revised distribution requirements also include courses in the following areas:

A **First-Year Seminar** that will give students small, intensive learning settings to support development of intellectual capabilities such as clear writing, analytic thinking, argumentation, information seeking and assessment, and oral presentation.

One course on **Inquiry in the Natural Sciences** to help students expand their scientific literacy, conduct active investigations of scientific problems, and perform work in laboratories and in the field.

A course on **International Perspectives** that will challenge students to understand societies different from their own and gain critical understanding of the processes, historical issues, and trends that shape an interdependent world.

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One course in the **Arts** to help students expand their understanding of artistic process and expression through creation, performance and analysis of artistic work in the areas of dance, film, music, theater, and visual art.

The new distribution requirements will be phased in over several years in order to review existing courses, develop new courses, and hire new faculty. The first stage of implementation will affect students matriculating in 2005, and are expected to be fully implemented by 2006.

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