

**GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENT:
NEW DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR A BATES EDUCATION**

Passed by faculty March 6, 2006 to begin Fall 2007 with the class of 2011

Introduction: Bates, the Liberal Arts, and General Education.

“In truth, habit [*coustume*] is a violent and treacherous schoolmistress” (Montaigne, 1580)

Montaigne’s first lines in “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law” relate the bizarre story of a peasant woman who, having begun by carrying about in her arms a newborn calf, continued to carry the animal as a pet after it had grown into a great ox. Force of ‘habit’? Strength of ‘custom’? Believe it, if you can. Then comes the essayist’s generalization on the power, even the ‘violence’ and ‘treachery’ of our particular ‘habits’ or ‘customs.’ As he explains in the rest of his essay, what we would call a ‘culture’ tends “to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances.” That, at least, is credible.

All students currently enrolled at Bates College as well as most of its faculty have been formed, if not ‘seized’ and ‘ensnared,’ by distributional models of general education in the liberal arts. Thus, for the students, it is a commonly unquestioned norm that they should be required to complete a minimum number of courses in the Humanities and History, in the Natural Sciences, and in the Social Sciences, this, for ‘breadth,’ while a major chosen from among the several departments and interdisciplinary programs guarantees ‘depth.’

There are advantages to such distributional schemes. They do ensure at least minimal student exposure to a range of disciplines and subject matter, while preserving a large measure of student choice among the various ways of satisfying the requirements. Because they do not attempt to prioritize any one part or specified parts of the curriculum, they seem to validate every professor and every course equally (interdisciplinary programs aside!)

Most of our curricular and staffing decisions have been made within the framework of requirements that have changed relatively little for a long generation; even the reforms voted in 1979, including the ill-fated ‘clusters’ in the Humanities and History, were evolutionary modifications of a pre-existing scheme that was also based on the requirement of a divisional distribution and a departmental major. That interdisciplinary programs were not included in such a scheme was one of the unfortunate consequences of its rigidity.

However, the variations in our own past degree requirements, the variety of the distributional requirements at other institutions, and the absence of such requirements at many of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges, including several NESCAC reference schools (Amherst, Hamilton, Wesleyan), should suffice to demonstrate that any degree requirements lie within a spectrum of possibilities. The members of the current Bates Education Committee have felt some of the weight of the great ox we have inherited from the past, and have tried to imagine how better to employ our woman- and man-power so as to serve specifiable liberal arts objectives, and to incorporate changes in our institutional offerings and structures:

- A first goal is to foster a comparative appreciation of how the several disciplines function and what they can teach us. We think that this entails sufficient study either of disciplines and interdisciplinary programs other than the major, or comparable study of multi-disciplinary thematic concentrations outside the major, so that the graduate has a more sophisticated perspective on how knowledge and understanding are pursued in the academy. We also think that this should go beyond a scattering of introductory courses chosen on an ad hoc basis by the undergraduate and that it justifies the requirement of four-course concentrations designed by faculty members
- A second goal is to help every graduate to meet the challenge of writing correctly and persuasively, in a manner appropriate to their major discipline or interdisciplinary program. We think that this entails collectively a more concerted attention to writing in courses across the curriculum and through the undergraduate years and justifies a graduated requirement of first-year-level, sophomore- or junior-level, and senior-level courses in which students and faculty alike attend self-consciously and substantially to writing.
- A third goal is to ensure that all of our students have had formal instruction at the college level in the methods and findings of the sciences and in quantitative analysis. We think that the significance of such skills, disciplines and knowledge in the modern world (and the reluctance of many students to elect such coursework voluntarily) justify a requirement that all of them work to develop such sophistication and to gain related knowledge in at least another three courses.

In contemplating these new requirements, it may be difficult to gauge exactly what their ultimate effects will be on our curriculum and ways of teaching, but we expect improvement over the present system. Their implementation, however, will be considered and gradual and allow for reflection and revision as we go along. In this regard, it is important to try to get away from the presupposition that the divisional structure of the institution which we have inherited corresponds in some essential way to the fundamental structures of inquiry and knowing. It is also important, in contemplating these new requirements, to try to erase the current ones from our minds: these are not *additional* things that will be asked of us and our students, extra tasks on top of what we are already doing, but things *in lieu of* present-day general education efforts that will, in fact, disappear. We should thus try to imagine not only the existence of the new but also the cessation of the old.

Our proposal for a new Bates College general education curriculum is shaped first and foremost by our mission as a liberal arts institution. The term ‘liberal arts’ has been defined so variously that it is hard not to sympathize with Louis Bénézet’s remark in his now-dated book on *General Education*, that “it seems best to use ‘liberal education’ in the baldest possible operational sense: that is, ‘that kind of education which a liberal arts college program provides.’” Of course, a self-respecting committee at Bates must now try harder. The *OED*² provides a non-controversial definition of the term ‘liberal,’ as in ‘liberal arts,’ that frees it from the ‘violence’ of our more recent habits and the ‘treachery’ of our local customs:

1. Originally, the distinctive epithet of those ‘arts’ or ‘sciences’ that were considered ‘worthy of a free man,’ opposed to *servile* or *mechanical*. In later use, . . . pertaining to or suitable to persons of superior station, ‘becoming a gentleman.’ Now, *rare*, exclusive of education, culture, etc., with a mixture of senses 3 [free from restraint] and 4 [free from narrow prejudice]. Directed to general intellectual enlargement and refinement; not narrowly restricted to the requirements of technical or professional training.

The earliest cited usage dates from ca. 1375, although medieval educators looked further back to classical antiquity, and Cicero used the term “*artes liberales*” in a way that implies its currency at Rome before the time of Christ (*De inventione* 1.35). Of course, there is the word and the thing, and these words cannot have meant the same thing for him and his contemporaries that they would for the Schoolmen, for Bénézet, or for us. It is at least curious from the present perspective that the medieval trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) concerned language, while their quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) concerned mathematical and scientific subjects.

Thus, it may not be too much to claim for our proposals for new ‘W’ (Writing) and ‘L,S, and Q’ (Laboratory, Scientific Reasoning and Quantitative Literacy) requirements that, in principle, they are consistent with the most venerable academic habits and customs. We are self-consciously more innovative in proposing the general education concentrations, but here, too, we think that we are remaining true to the old ideals of “general intellectual enlargement and refinement” and to the old suspicion of anything “narrowly restricted to the requirements of technical or professional training.” Things do change, even locally, ideals among them. Since 1979, those changes at Bates include a new valuation of both interdisciplinary studies and service learning, neither of which has any place in the present distributional scheme. Our concentrations attempt to recognize the new significance of both, while also challenging members of the faculty as well as students to reach beyond the divisions and departments that have defined our requirements and perhaps also confined our thinking.

To return to Montaigne, with whom we began...

Another essay of his, “*On the Education of Children*”, was written to a friend, pregnant with her first child and seeking some advice. Montaigne’s typically generous and meandering response spoke at length on both the content and form of the best education for her child. It is, in effect, not unlike the discussions and ruminations that have persisted concerning the optimal form and content of a liberal arts education for and of its time. In the end, however, his aim was one that seems both timeless and universal, that of liberation:

For it seems to me that the first lessons in which we should steep his mind must be those that regulate his behavior and his sense, that will teach him to know himself and to die well and live well. Among the liberal arts, let us begin with the art that liberates us.

One of the aims of our proposal, as well, is to educate students in a way that makes them knowledgeable of themselves and free in the world—an understanding of the world that is not merely personal and self-interested, but that connects us to a larger community: “let *us* begin with the art that liberates *us*” [“commençons par l’art qui *nous* fait libres”]. Montaigne

switches his rhetorical strain out of the master-pupil dichotomy and suggests an inclusiveness, a collective enterprise wherein he, the expectant mother and the soon to be born child all share in a goal of communal liberation.

Montaigne manages to speak across centuries in a way that relates quite keenly to a noble ideal of the liberal arts that Bates has embraced throughout its history. Who better than Benjamin Mays, educated at Bates and educator thereafter to Martin Luther King, Jr., to recall the mission of our specific community of scholars:

Bates College did not “emancipate” me; it did the far greater service of making it possible for me to emancipate myself, to accept with dignity my own worth as a free man.

Over the years, Bates has developed a faculty and a program of studies that open students up to the ever-expanding variety of approaches to living freely and responsibly in the world. We encourage students to seek out the full potential of breadth that the College offers: to draw, dance, quantify, calculate, travel, serve, dissect; to gather data through observations, interviews and surveys; to test hypotheses through quantitative and qualitative analysis; to know and experience the world through literature, across languages and cultures, on stage and on camera, in labs and in the community. Students navigating the array of the College’s offerings, both in classes and in non-course-based experiences, come to a knowledge of the world from multiple perspectives.

We have a long history of linking academic life with the larger community and are recognized for our longstanding commitment to civic engagement. Our students conduct and present studies to help shape public policy in Lewiston, collect oral histories, intern with local farms and government agencies, teach in area schools, and participate in community research projects while studying abroad. Under the aegis of the more recently established entities such as Maine Campus Compact, the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships and its predecessor, the Center for Service Learning, these opportunities have been extended, expanded and indeed given an intellectual home in which to flourish.

It is our hope that within the structures provided by the new Bates Education program, more faculty and students will be inspired to incorporate non-course-based learning throughout the curriculum.

The freedom and multiplicity of choice that characterize this curriculum are made more significant by direction and guidance; breadth can be enhanced by coherence and focus. The recognition of the need for such a balance is nothing new. As we reflect on the sentiments of Mays, we remark a coincidence not only in rhetoric, but in practice. Candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in his day were remanded to complete a “Major subject” in one “arrangement of studies” (what we would currently identify as a “Division”, qualified in 1920 as “Language,” “Philosophy” and “Science”), and then go on to complete a “Minor subject” in each of the other two arrangements. Nearly one hundred years later, it remains for us to frame our own version of such a balancing act in our own times and context.