

THE COMMON CURRICULUM: PROPOSAL TO ELIMINATE CLUSTERS [rev. 30 April 2013]

[This proposal was moved, seconded, and approved by the General Faculty of Union College on 28 May 2013 and came into effect on 1 July 2013. The Common Curriculum cluster requirement has been eliminated for all students graduating from Union College after 1 July 2013.]

PROPOSAL. The eligible members of the Gen Ed Board unanimously voted on 31 January 2013 to propose the elimination of the cluster requirement, with immediate effect for all current and future students. Per our obligations under the governance system, we have forwarded this policy recommendation and the following ballot language for review by the AAC.

MOTION/BALLOT LANGUAGE: *'The existing Common Curriculum cluster requirement shall be eliminated for all students graduating after 1 July 2013.'* YES / NO

(See below for implementation; revised 30 April, 2013)

EXPLANATION. In March 2012 the General Education Board surveyed the faculty about the cluster program and conducted a follow-up open meeting for additional feedback in April 2012. Fifty-five faculty members responded to the survey and twelve faculty members attended the follow-up meeting. The Gen Ed Board conducted this investigation because of long-standing and widespread disaffection with clusters among students and faculty. We also conducted this investigation because of the charge we received from the AAC in November 2011 to develop a workable assessment plan for the Common Curriculum that included clusters.

In its March 2012 faculty survey the Gen Ed Board asked if clusters provided students with interdisciplinary experiences in a deliberate, systematic, and connected fashion. Our investigations have led us to the conclusion that the answer must be 'no' for the vast majority of Union students. In our roles as stewards of the Common Curriculum, we take very seriously the importance of fostering interdisciplinarity and the apparent failure of clusters. The 2012 survey revealed such broad and extensive faculty dissatisfaction about the fundamental basis of clusters that the Gen Ed Board concluded it was essential to give the General Faculty the opportunity to affirm or reject the current system. Below we identify and explain the most troubling failures of clusters.

The Failure of Deliberateness. We inform students that we value clusters as a key part of making deliberate connections across boundaries and require them to complete a cluster so that they experience such connections across disciplines. If students complete the requirement without getting out of it the stated goal, then we have done them and our program a disservice, one that can undermine the value of interdisciplinary study and leave students with a false understanding of interdisciplinarity itself.

We found many failures of deliberateness, particularly in the purposeful combination of different disciplines to produce a greater analytical whole than just the sum of its individual parts. The cluster system includes very broadly themed clusters with dozens of courses, courses that count for multiple clusters, and the almost wholesale absence of required foundation courses or sequencing of courses. The interdisciplinary content in individual courses is highly variable and no regular standards of interdisciplinarity have ever been stated or enforced for courses seeking inclusion in clusters. As one faculty member noted, 'the majority of students take three classes with limited overlap of subjects and hence little chance of cross-disciplinary perspective' and 'it is highly unlikely that any subject was discussed in more than one of the three courses.'

The greatest failure of deliberateness may be among students themselves. Many complete some (sometimes all) courses in a cluster without ever thinking about or 'declaring' a cluster despite efforts to encourage best practices in advising among first- and second-year students. In constructing the new Common Curriculum assessment, we compiled a mock assessment sample of twenty-eight students from the class of 2013. We found evidence of these failures at work. In the course of completing one three-course cluster, eighteen of the students in our sample began more than ten different clusters while four of them began between fifteen and twenty clusters. At the start of winter term, seven seniors had already completed a cluster and still never declared it. While we have tried to encourage students to see clusters as a way to coordinate the completion of their 'distribution requirements' in the Common Curriculum, this does not seem to have been foremost in their minds; further, we do not view this informal thematic distribution requirement, however well-intended, as a way to foster, achieve, or educate students in interdisciplinarity. Seven years after their introduction, clusters have become the 'accidental requirement' par excellence for many of our students

Inefficiency. Collectively faculty, students, and staff spend many, many person-hours in their different roles administering, navigating, and figuring out clusters and the cluster system. One faculty member summed up the advising side of the problem very well and many of these observations are borne out by our experiences working with students, the Registrar, and faculty. The faculty member wrote: 'I spend perhaps a quarter of the time I spend advising students figuring out how they can complete their cluster. This is partly because Datatel's records on cluster credits are so incomplete that many students have cluster credits they and I don't know about, so we spend time finding solutions to problems that don't actually exist. It is partly because students find it easier to try to argue that a class they already took "should" be in a cluster than to take a listed course, and the college (correctly) finds it easier to make exceptions than to enforce the rules. It is partly just that the concept is intrinsically unwieldy. There are other reasons too. But the bottom line is that I spend a lot of time trying to figure out how my advisees can jump through hoops. Again, I wouldn't object to that if I thought something of value was coming from it that justified it, but I don't.' Complaints about wasted time abound in our investigations.

A Discredited System. In our experience, few faculty members and students have expressed positive views of clusters. The pervasive negativity suggests a system that is irreparably discredited. For example, some faculty in March 2012 lamented the lack of deliberateness. By contrast, others attacked the complications of the clusters and opposed the kind of coordination and prescription that would be necessary to overcome the same problem. When asked to respond to the idea of a set of Global Issues Modules (made up of 'purpose-built

courses tightly coordinated and rigorously interdisciplinary in content), one faculty member wrote: 'Are you kidding? This is even more rigid than what we have now.... My advice is: get rid of clusters and don't replace it with anything.' Faculty further questioned whether resources or support would ever be forthcoming for a more rigorous requirement or even a 'beefed-up' interdisciplinary program requirement given the precedent of clusters.

Significantly, we found that none of the possible replacement options for clusters offered in the March 2012 survey received majority support except to allow students multiple avenues by which to complete a cluster and a decided preference for the Student-Organized Cluster (STOC) as the best option.* There are several ways to interpret these results, but at least one of them in the context of the broader survey data would be that the STOC allows us to eliminate the current cluster system and throw the responsibility for the requirement on to students and advisers; that might not be a bad thing, but the results are the closest thing we have to a ballot advocating an end to the current cluster system.

CONCLUSION. We wholeheartedly support the college's commitment to interdisciplinary studies as reflected in the 2013 draft of the strategic plan, but the cluster system neither fosters nor achieves it. Nor do we believe it can do so. As such, it undermines the mission of the Common Curriculum and the college generally. For those reasons we strongly believe that the greatest service we can do is ask the General Faculty to eliminate clusters. Subsequently, **IF** the academic community chooses to design, implement, and support a more successful interdisciplinary requirement as part of the Common Curriculum, it can begin anew on clear ground.

IMPLEMENTATION: If the General Faculty approve this proposal, **the cluster requirement will definitively end on 1 July 2013.** Clusters are not recorded on student transcripts, so this proposal will not affect what appears on any current student's transcript. We will maintain the webapps for clusters through the 2013-2014 academic year for students in the classes of 2014, 2015, and 2016 that have made sufficient progress on a cluster and have an interest in completing it. Students will do so on a purely voluntary basis. Cluster declarations, course approvals for clusters, and other administrative functions of the requirement will end on 1 July 2013. At the end of the 2013-2014 academic year, the cluster webapps will be deactivated and cluster information archived at the Common Curriculum website.

On Behalf of the General Education Board,

*John Cramsie; Director of General Education and Division 2 Representative
30 April 2013*

* The possible replacement options were: 1) complete three courses in any ID program; 2) have students complete a specified number of approved 'Interdisciplinary' courses ala the WAC requirement; 3) complete a student-organized cluster (STOC); 4) have students complete a department-specific interdisciplinary requirement as part of completing the major; 5) allow students to complete the interdisciplinary requirement with a service-learning/practicum requirement; 6) create a small set of interdisciplinary global studies modules and require students to complete one.