

Confidential Draft
University Curriculum Committee
Recommendations on General Education
February, 2000

The University Curriculum Committee (UCC), after carefully considering the recommendations of its Subcommittee on General Education, proposes the following changes in Brandeis undergraduate requirements:

- Terminate the cluster requirement for all students in the class of 2001 and thereafter. Cluster listings would continue to be maintained in the Brandeis University Bulletin.
- Terminate the current University Writing Seminar (or two-credit “writing lab”) and modify the University Seminar in Humanistic Inquiries (USEM) by assigning to each course a Teaching Assistant who will offer a fourth hour of writing instruction for no additional course credit, beginning in the fall of 2000. This experiment will be reviewed in its second year of operation.
- Continue all other general education requirements (Quantitative Reasoning, foreign language, Non-Western and Comparative studies, Writing Intensive seminar and school distribution).

The following sections provide background on the current requirements and the review process, and a rationale for the proposed changes.

Background

In 1993, the Brandeis University faculty approved legislation establishing that all students entering in August 1994 and subsequent classes be required to pass:

- three semester courses within a single Cluster to be selected from at least two different Schools of the university;
- one semester course from the University Seminar in Humanistic Inquiries program, with its accompanying Writing Lab;
- one semester course, designated as Writing Intensive;
- one semester course designated as Quantitative Reasoning;
- the third semester course in a foreign language sequence (or equivalent proficiency);
- one course from each of the four Schools of the university, one of which must be in non-Western and Comparative Studies.

The legislation also required that the faculty receive a report on the performance of the entire program by the end of academic year 1999-2000.

Among the goals of the new curriculum were: 1. to decrease the battery of requirements for first year students, and through the program in University Seminars in Humanistic Inquiries, to guarantee one small-class experience in the first year at Brandeis; 2. to encourage, through the cluster program, cross-disciplinary study of a single theme or problem; 3. to assist students in acquiring skills in writing, quantitative reasoning and foreign language; and 4. to teach our students the skills they will need to function effectively as workers, as graduate or professional students, and as citizens.

During fall 1999, a subcommittee of the University Curriculum Committee met to evaluate the current requirement structure. The subcommittee was chaired by Acting Dean of Arts and Sciences Anne Carter, and included Pamela Allara, John Burt, Peter Conrad, Jonathan Hanus, Ranjan Sen, Bryn Upton, and Elaine Wong.

Subcommittee members understood their mandate to include assessment of the current general education requirements and proposals for adjustments to the existing system. The subcommittee began by reviewing the original recommendations of the Curriculum Task Force and Educational Policy Committee, the relevant faculty legislation, the reports of numerous faculty committees charged with assessing discrete components of the curriculum, and memoranda submitted to the subcommittee by faculty and staff. In January and February of this year, the subcommittee's recommendations were reviewed and revised by the UCC.

Both bodies focused their discussions on two primary areas of the curriculum: the cluster requirement and the writing requirement. The current foreign language requirement, quantitative reasoning requirement, non-western and comparative studies requirement, and distribution requirement would remain unchanged.

Rationale for Changes in the Cluster Program

The cluster requirement was intended to provide a structure for coherent cross-disciplinary study, and an opportunity for students to discover ways in which seemingly different courses build upon on another. The cluster program was also intended to foster interactions and cooperation among participating faculty. Unfortunately, not all cluster faculty have been able "to meet together, to demonstrate awareness of what is going on in their sister courses, and to sponsor panel discussions, visiting lectures or other co-curricular activities that amplify the concerns of the cluster." Students are not always aware of the linkages of courses, and more importantly, often find it difficult to complete their clusters because of the infrequency of course offerings.

The authors of the October 1999 *Report of the Cluster Review Committee* suggested that, "...serious consideration should be given to making clusters an option like minors and programs rather than a requirement that must be completed. This would remove the burden on students and permit interested faculty to develop connected learning for students truly interested in making the connections." The UCC and its subcommittee endorse this recommendation. Clusters provide a map of the curriculum and are attractive to both new students and faculty who read the Bulletin. However, in a survey of students commissioned by the Cluster Oversight

Committee, even students who praised the cluster concept expressed their frustration with inconsistent and infrequent scheduling of too many cluster courses. The UCC did not support a subcommittee recommendation that completed clusters appear on a student's transcript in the same manner as an interdepartmental program or minor. Because a cluster consists of only three courses, it was not considered a sufficiently large commitment to merit notation on a transcript.

Research also initiated by the Cluster Oversight Committee provides evidence of rising student interest in inter- and multi-disciplinary study.

Percentage of Graduates Completing Multiple Concentrations, Minors, Programs

year	# grads	% >1 conc	% conc + int'd'l prog	% >1 conc + prog	% conc + minor	% conc + 2 minor/ prog	% 1 conc only
99	804	27.4	25.0	4.9	25.9	10.4	33.2
98	718	21.3	23.2	3.8	25.9	7.8	38.6
97	658	17.5	21.3	2.1	22.8	7.3	44.5
96	693	20.0	17.6	0.1	19.2	6.2	48.8
95	704	19.7	16.8	0.7	20.7	5.3	47.0
94	636	15.6	21.0	2.2	21.4	6.8	48.6
93	704	15.6	13.6	0.9	20.3	3.3	52.8
92	733	16.1	12.1	1.5	14.7	2.1	60.1
91	752	15.2	9.4	0.4	13.8	1.6	63.0

Note: Percentages total greater than 100 due to overlap of categories.

The UCC subcommittee believes that interdepartmental programs provide an excellent means of accomplishing the goals of connected learning, and has endorsed efforts to strengthen and support interdepartmental programs and concentrations.

Rationale for Changes in the Writing and University Seminar in Humanistic Inquiries Programs

Perhaps the most successful element of the new curriculum has been the University Seminar program, which has accomplished its goal of ensuring that every first year student experiences a small class taught by a faculty member. Currently, USEMs are linked to "writing labs," a two-credit or half course enrolling the same students as the USEM. The goal of this linked structure was to ensure "connected learning" and to tie the study of basic texts with intensive work on writing skills. In addition, students are required to take one Writing Intensive course.

The UCC subcommittee proposed eliminating the writing labs as currently constituted, and replacing them with a new first year writing program with three options: a writing seminar utilizing three common readings, one of which would be the convocation reading; honors sections of the seminar for more advanced writers; and, on a pilot basis, a writing-intensive University Seminar, offered for no additional credit, and assisted by a teaching assistant who

would meet with the class for a fourth hour of writing instruction each week. A more detailed exposition of the subcommittee's proposal is provided in the Appendix.

Changes were proposed to the writing program because of general student dissatisfaction with the execution of the requirement. Students complained about a lack of connection between USEMs and writing labs and the uneven quality of writing instruction. Some members of the Brandeis community believe that student disdain for the writing lab is caused by its unequal relationship to the USEM; USEMs are full credit courses taught by "real" faculty members, and writing labs are half credit courses taught by graduate students. Students have argued that the amount of work required for writing labs is worthy of full credit. Some faculty believe that required first year composition courses are inevitably unpopular.

In discussing the virtues and disadvantages of the subcommittee's three options, UCC members worried that a return to a freestanding composition course would again crowd the first year curriculum with required courses, one of which would be a full credit course taught by a graduate student. Granting full credit for the writing seminar might relieve the pressure and awkwardness caused by requiring students to take 4.5 courses in one of their first terms, but it might also prevent some students, especially those initially pursuing a premedical curriculum, from taking courses related to their potential majors. The proposed writing seminars would be more uniform than the writing labs because of their three common readings, which would provide a common experience for first year students, somewhat disrupted by the pilot USEM program. Committee members disagreed on answers to the question: is writing best taught in a substantive or disciplinary context or as its own subject? The subcommittee's recommendations reflect a compromise that would enable the university to experiment with different models, but some UCC members found the proposal needlessly complicated and feared that the three options would fragment administrative and academic resources.

After extended discussions about the subcommittee's proposed writing program and other variations, the UCC now proposes that all students complete the USEM option (assisted by a Teaching Assistant who provides a fourth hour of writing instruction) in the first year and then complete one Writing Intensive course. Teaching assistants would serve as writing tutors, working directly with faculty members teaching USEMs to offer writing instruction directly linked to the rest of the course. They would attend USEM class meetings and use the additional hour per week for discussions on writing topics, peer review, and individual conferences. Optional "Rhetoric" or "University Writing Seminar" courses taught by graduate students would also be available to all undergraduates. The review of this experiment would commence at the beginning of the second year of operation so that a full evaluation of the program could be considered by the faculty in the spring of 2002.

Regarding the Writing Intensive (WI) requirement, the UCC endorses subcommittee recommendations that the university provide increased funding and training for Writing Intensive teaching assistants and faculty involved in Writing Intensive courses. Ideally, Writing Intensive courses offer not only frequent writing assignments and opportunities for revision, but writing instruction provided through extensive comments on papers, focusing not only on the substance of the papers, but also on the quality of the writing. In addition to current WI courses, Writing Intensive Seminars taught by advanced graduate students, chosen on the basis of their

course proposals (much as the instructors for University Prize instructorships are chosen), would also be offered each year, to the greatest extent allowable by financial considerations. This would increase the number of writing-oriented classes available to the upper division students, and also give graduate students another opportunity to design and teach their own courses. A subcommittee recommendation that all departments be required to offer at least one Writing Intensive course each year was not accepted.

The success of this or any plan depends, to a great extent, on the preparation of the writing instructors. Subcommittee members believe that all students at every level of proficiency can improve their writing and benefit from writing instruction, and that there is less protest about a requirement if there are no exemptions.

Refining and improving the general education curriculum is never without controversy. Only through the generosity, good will, and efforts of the faculty will the university continue to improve the learning experiences of its undergraduates. Members of the University Curriculum Committee and its subcommittee thank all of the faculty and graduate students who have taught courses for the new curriculum, reviewed components of the curriculum, or served on oversight committees supervising the curriculum. Your contributions are greatly valued.

All members of the Brandeis community are invited to an open meeting to review and discuss these proposed changes on Thursday March 9, from 4:00-5:30 p.m. in Schwartz Auditorium.

Appendix
UCC Subcommittee on General Education
First Year Writing Proposal

The subcommittee proposed a writing program with three optional components. The first year writing option most students were expected to employ would be a course tentatively entitled the “University Writing Seminar.” Neither its curriculum nor its enrollment would be tied to the USEM. Students would be allowed to take the course concurrently with USEM, but would be discouraged from doing so. This one semester, four-credit, independent course would be taught by advanced graduate student teachers, not all from the English Department, who would take a training seminar in the teaching of rhetoric and composition in the semester before they begin teaching.

The seminar would meet for two 50-minute sessions or one 100-minute session per week. All sections of the course would read, discuss, and write about at least three common texts, one of which would be the “convocation” reading distributed to all first-year students over the summer. The other common readings would be drawn primarily from works by Brandeis faculty, or other distinguished writers who could be brought to campus to address the students in the class. Each course would have other readings and writing assignments of the instructor’s choice. The aims of the course would include topic development, organization, rhetorical principles, analysis, argumentation, essay exams, revision, critical reading, diction, syntax, grammar, documentation and bibliography, and introduction to methods of library research. Writing assignments would be frequent with opportunities for revision, peer response, and tutorial instruction.

University Writing Seminars would also have “honors” sections for students whose SAT and/or AP scores indicate an advanced level of ability. Students in these courses would also attend the three lectures by visiting authors, but would be assigned more ambitious writing assignments. Student who take either version of the University Writing Seminar course would subsequently be required to take one Writing Intensive course.

On a pilot basis, to be evaluated in three years, a new type of USEM, perhaps called a writing-intensive USEM, would also be offered. About six sections of students from each entering class, chosen at random, would be given the opportunity to satisfy the writing requirement in this way. These courses would offer an additional hour of instruction with a writing teaching-assistant who would work directly with the faculty member teaching the USEM to offer writing instruction directly linked to the rest of the course. Students taking a Writing-USEM would also be required, during their Brandeis careers, to take two Writing Intensive courses.

For students who need extra training and support in writing skills, the “Basic Composition” course would be retained in its current form, as a prerequisite to the new writing program course.