Lehman College’s Response to the Pathways draft on the Required Core

Background and Context:

The Lehman College Response is the result of deliberations on the Pathways process by an Ad Hoc Gen Ed group of faculty which began addressing specific curricular issues as soon as the Pathways Steering and Working Committees began their work in August 2011. This group is led by the Lehman Senate Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, chaired by Professor Barbara Jacobson.

Other Senate committees participated as well (Governance and Academic Standards and Evaluation), and a number of faculty members interested in the curriculum and Gen Ed attended and took part in the discussions. Lehman’s members on the Pathways Steering and Working Committees have also participated in the deliberations.

Over the past months the Ad Hoc Gen Ed group has met generally every other week to discuss the Pathways project, the work of the Committees, and the ways in which the College might best respond to the Pathways draft. The Ad Hoc group shares its deliberations and its members' suggestions through a Blackboard organization open to all Lehman faculty. On November 2 the Ad Hoc group invited all faculty members to a meeting to discuss the Steering Committee Draft, and on November 9 the Ad Hoc group held an open hearing for the college at large, preceding a General Faculty Meeting.

Thus, the Lehman College Response to the Pathways draft reflects these deliberations among faculty members across the College. The final version has been formulated by the Senate Undergraduate Curriculum Committee.

Lehman College looks forward to the next phase of the Pathways Project on the Flexible Core.

Response:

Lehman College makes the following recommendations to the Common Core Draft of November 1, 2011. The rationale behind these recommendations is presented in the endnotes indicated.

I. Recommendation to add specific content to the learning objectives of the Required Common Core category C. Life and Physical Sciences, namely
   - Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and research methods of one of the following disciplines: physical anthropology, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, geography and physics.¹

II. Recommendation to revise the first learning outcome in the Flexible Common Core category D. Individual and Society to read as follows:
   - Identify and apply the scientific method to explore social and behavioral
phenomena such as the relationship between the individual and society, including, but not limited to the concepts and research methods of anthropology, computer science, philosophy, psychology, religion, and sociology.

III. Recommendation to add a fifth area to the Flexible Common Core, such that this category includes five areas of 3-credit liberal arts courses, and such that a student must take at least one course from each of the five areas and no more than one course in any discipline.

IV. Recommendation that this fifth area be:
   E. Languages and Literatures.iii Students must take at least one foreign (non-English) language (non-duplicative of previous language acquisition) or literature taught in a non-English language at the intermediate level or above, or demonstrate non-English language competence at least at the intermediate level. Or a student may take a course in English grammar, syntax, or linguistics (for which there is no pre-requisite). Language and literature study must meet three of the following learning outcomes:

   - Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and research methods of a language other than English or of linguistics and of world cultures.
   - Analyze the concept of culture and global cultural diversity and describe any given event or process from a cultural viewpoint other than English-language cultures.
   - Analyze the structure or development of a non-U.S. society.
   - Identify and discuss the role that race, ethnicity, class, gender, or belief plays in linguistic or cultural systems.
   - Speak, read, and write a language and use the conceptual skills to appreciate and respond to cultures other than one’s own.

V. Recommendation to revise the title in the Flexible Common Core category A. World Cultures to read: World Cultures and Societies.iv

VI. Recommendation to revise the learning objectives in the Flexible Common Core category A. World Cultures to read as follows:iv

   - Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and research methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring world cultures and societies, including, but not limited to, anthropology, economics, foreign languages (non-duplicative of previous language acquisition), history, sociology, philosophy, ethnic studies, geography, political science and world literature.
   - Identify and discuss the role that race, ethnicity, class, gender or belief plays in world cultures and societies.
   - Speak, read, and write a language and use the conceptual skills to appreciate and respond to cultures and societies other than one’s own.
   - Analyze the historical development of one or more non-US societies.
• Analyze the significance of one or more major movements that have shaped the world’s societies.
• Analyze the major themes of globalization from different cultural, social, economic, historical, or political perspectives.

The Life and Physical Sciences criteria do not explicitly require or specify a particular content or set of possible contents. The consequence is that some courses in the Social Sciences qualify for inclusion. For example, Experimental Psychology satisfies the criteria. The course teaches the scientific method as well as experimental and non-experimental research designs. Students also learn to formulate hypotheses, collect data and evaluate these hypotheses using quantitative methods. Psychology is not generally considered a STEM discipline but the point of this example is that exposure to STEM disciplines should encompass more than a familiarity with the scientific enterprise.

Arguably, if we compare the skills acquired by a student who did well in experimental psych with a student who had completed introductory biology, the experimental psych student would have a better idea as to why randomized clinical trials provide much stronger evidence than descriptive or epidemiological studies in bio-medical research. Of course, the experimental psych student would not have a clue as to the structure of cells or what controls basic biological processes. The learning objectives, as presently defined, do not indicate that this issue matters. They do not require anything with regard to content in the fields of physical anthropology, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, geography and physics.

As it stands, the Common Core perpetuates the myth that "science" is exclusively associated with certain disciplines and that other subject areas do not need to be informed by this process. Criteria having to do with the scientific method are housed, for the most part, within the Life and Physical sciences. In contrast, the flexible component includes four areas that are defined in terms of certain knowledge or content related to issues within these general domains. These definitions do not include any mention of the scientific method even though this is the approach taken by many social sciences to the issues associated with these areas.

This limitation is problematic for several reasons. First, it conflates the scientific method with particular content areas and this conflation is inconsistent with the aims and goals of a number of disciplines. Second, the current description may produce students with a passing knowledge of the four main content areas but it does not guarantee any familiarity with the approaches or epistemologies of the social sciences. It is currently possible for a student to complete the core without having taken a single social science course. Therefore, we recommend that the role of the scientific method be included in one or more of the Flexible Core categories. We suggest the emendation presented here. Excluding it, as is presently the case, leaves out the science component in the social sciences. The learning outcome presently found only in the Life and Physical Sciences also fits the social sciences: only two words need to be changed.

The Common Core draft requires no Foreign Language. The Lehman General Education program requires proficiency in a foreign language at the intermediate level (3-9 credits). By eliminating a foreign language requirement the Common Core removes an important pathway to excellence for Lehman students. Foreign languages are an essential component of most general education programs throughout the country and for good reason. In addition to preparing
students for graduate school they also provide widely acknowledged benefits in cognitive and skill developments.

Additionally, if we think of our students as “global citizens,” we will be ignoring a major element of “global culture” by excluding and de-emphasizing the value of language. Imagine the global consequences if educational systems around the world decided language was not an essential component of an educated person and English was not studied outside of the “Anglophone” world. By telling CUNY students they do not need a foreign language and making it difficult to shoehorn into a degree, even in an international discipline, CUNY is devaluing a crucial element of a degree and creating a linguistic narrowness that belies the claim that our students are and will be prepared for the global world.

Some Task Force members have suggested that a 3 credit language course could be included in a “World Culture” bucket. Since any number of courses will be included in that bucket, the importance of a foreign language is clearly diminished. Indeed, even more students could end up graduating from CUNY with no foreign language on their transcripts. Such a probability is increased when we consider that the languages offered can be at the intermediate level only if a course with no prerequisites is also included in the bucket. Foreign language is not incompatible with other disciplines; in fact, it is complementary. It should not go without notice that colleagues in many disciplines are speaking out in support of the inclusion of language in the CUNY curriculum.

iv The “World Cultures” bucket and its learning outcomes reflect a consistent micro focus on only one concept integral to global transformations, that of “culture.” Students are asked to “identify and apply the fundamental concepts….exploring world cultures,” “analyze the concept of culture and global cultural diversity,” “analyze and discuss the role that race, ethnicity….plays in cultural systems,” “speak, read, and write a language….to respond to cultures other than one’s own.”

Our “world,” however, consists of macro as well as micro trends and these societal processes require more than the concept of “culture” to explain them. Indeed, macro studies are required in order to understand the micro events (cultural and individual) which are embedded within them. Industrialization, urbanization, climate change and environmental pollution, globalization, demographic shifts, deforestation, the rise of the middle class, of nation states and modern warfare, changes in world economies and politics as well as transformations in other institutions such as education, the economy and politics—all of these changes are excluded from the “world cultures” bucket. Yet, they are critical to students’ comprehension of and appreciation for the complexity of global events and how they impact on their lives as citizens of the world. They are also backed by a robust and impressive interdisciplinary literature.

Only two of the learning outcomes in the “world cultures” bucket reference these macro global events. One asks the student “to analyze the historical development of a non-US society” and the other to “analyze the significance of a major movement that has shaped the world’s societies.” But even here the outcomes are too limiting in focus: global transformations often reference more than one society and frequently require an analysis of more than one major movement. Moreover, even if a globalization course could compact some of these macro trends into these two learning outcomes as presently stated, it still would be excluded from this bucket since the rules state that a course in this area must meet at least three of the learning outcomes.