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The Impact of Clusters on PSU's Academic and Administrative Structure, Gen Ed, and First Year Seminars

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Office of the President

The Impact of Clusters on PSU's Academic and Administrative Structure, Gen Ed, and First Year Seminars

September 12th, 2016 by Don Birx

One of the points that came out of the University Days' discussions and questions involved the academic and administrative structure that would be built around clusters. As several have remarked, academically clusters are different from traditional academic structures in that programs and faculty, while anchored to a cluster for administrative purposes, will overlap and engage with different clusters. Part of the idea of clusters is to not have the administrative paradigm set up walls for collaboration the way colleges and departments have done in the past. This means communication and collaborative engagement can naturally occur across disciplines. We can't break away from this entirely because of the budgeting process. But we can create a structure that is more conducive to integrating knowledge across disciplines and pursuing the issues that our general education and first year seminar programs were set up to address when first created (and modified over the years).

So how does this organizational approach affect general education and first year seminars?

I think most would agree that a thematic approach to general education could provide a critical mass of related coursework that better enables a student to understand the connections between their discipline or area of study and the broader knowledge base required to understand, grow, and function in a team-based, multidisciplinary environment. It not only would enrich a student's understanding of the world and their role in it, but it would facilitate critical thinking skills. This is clearly very difficult even if picking courses from a portfolio of predefined buckets. The problem is not the portfolio or the design of the courses. It is the coherence and relatedness that often does not emerge naturally or organically or that falls prey to course scheduling challenges in the major.

A cluster-based approach to general education suggests that students take enough coursework in an area to gain a competency at a certificated level (2-4 courses) and to understand the relationship between those courses and the discipline or area they are studying. These families of courses could span a cluster or multiple clusters. They could be flexible and students could have input into the themes. If we did this judiciously, students could graduate with 4-6 certificates and a major field of study. If a student changed majors or is undecided and later on decides on a major (or interdisciplinary studies), very little is lost because this approach provides a way to explore broad areas of study in a coherent way and narrows focus through an evolutionary process. Building a themed general education program of study can start with the courses we have today with some changes in our policies. Over time we can evolve the program in ways that will become apparent as we build up our themed course sequences.

First year seminars could then be an introduction to this integrated and engaged approach to inquiry and understanding the world around us and incorporate interdisciplinary projects and an introduction to clusters and cluster-based learning. All this would be prompted by a challenge question – or a set of questions built around a challenge -which would start each course and be picked by the students from a set of challenge questions designed by the faculty and course leaders with student input. This may even provide a way to engage college students with high school students in summer programs that mirror the first year seminars. As a bookend to this, seniors would take a similarly organized capstone course, giving us a simple and integrated set of metrics to demonstrate student outcomes. These capstones would address outcomes for both majors and general education requirements, evaluating the use of discipline-based knowledge in team-based settings to synthesizing knowledge across disciplines to solve transdisciplinary challenges and demonstrate critical thinking skills. (I'd much rather do this, which is now a requirement for our accreditation, than teach to outcomes or have to make up a bunch of metrics

independently).

I hope you see how this integrates well with much of what we are already doing. While what we are creating here will be revolutionary, we are building on what we have already done well and developing a solid basis of research and practice. The revolutionary part is pulling it all together and reintegrating the liberal arts (and yes that includes science related (STEM etc.) and business as well as the arts and humanities).

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