

TASK FORCE ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Summary of Recommendations

LIBERAL EDUCATION

Promote a culture of responsible and integrative learning

1. The Task Force recommends that the College Curriculum Council develop a revised set of principles and goals for liberal learning at Brown. These principles should clarify the meaning of breadth in the context of an open curriculum and acknowledge the critical importance of real-world experience and civic engagement in shaping lives of “usefulness and reputation.” The principles should also articulate the areas of intellectual inquiry—and the modes of thought—that students are expected to engage when developing and building their own core curricula. Such areas include the ability to communicate effectively in more than one language; the capacity to understand histories and differences among cultures; the knowledge of scientific methods together with the quantitative skills necessary to imagine and solve complex problems; and the appreciation of forms of representation in many kinds of expressive media. Profiles of individual students should be provided to suggest the kinds of educational programs undergraduates have designed for themselves. We recommend, moreover, that departments create a number of regular undergraduate offerings that introduce the spirit of their disciplines, thus encouraging students to explore the curriculum in the broadest possible way—not just in the first two years, but during all four years of study.

2. The Task Force calls for a full examination of Brown’s concentration programs to ensure integrity and consistency across the curriculum. To that end, we recommend that each concentration complete a self-study that will offer a clearly stated rationale for the concentration’s required courses and learning outcomes. The statement would explain not only how the program’s required courses fulfill the expectations of a given discipline, but also how they serve to fulfill the broader learning goals of a liberal education. Concentration programs must identify a number of meaningful and connective intellectual experiences (“capstone” experiences) that would be available to all concentrators. Departments are urged, in addition, to develop periodic, systematic plans for assessing students’ success in fulfilling concentration outcomes.

In connection with this general review, the Task Force recommends that the College Curriculum Council take special care to review student enrollments and faculty resources in each concentration. In cases where the CCC sees that a program lacks sufficient interest or resources, it may decide to close down the concentration. In cases where interest is high, but resources are slim, the Dean of the College should work closely with the Provost and the Dean of the Faculty to provide what is necessary to ensure the program’s academic integrity.

3. The Task Force urges the College to work closely with the Office of International Affairs to make Brown a leader in innovative global education. We recommend that the University create new opportunities for in-depth international study connected to the concentrations, including flexible short-term study experiences, new international fellowships, and internships. In conjunction with the overall review of concentrations, departments are encouraged to consider designing an international track within their own concentration programs, with the appropriate language expectation.

4. We propose that the College develop an e-portfolio system to aid both students and faculty advisors in evaluating the shape and direction of a student's liberal education. Students would be asked to write about their educational goals and development at key points in their Brown careers: before they matriculate, during their first year of study, prior to choosing a concentration, and during their senior year. These self-assessments would demonstrate students' success in meeting concentration outcomes and Brown's liberal learning objectives. E-portfolios could also serve as a component of the departmental assessment plans recommended above.

5. The Task Force recommends that Brown's existing expectation for writing competency be strengthened. We advise the College to undertake an external review of Brown's various writing programs and support services with the aim of enhancing opportunities for students to fulfill this expectation. The College should develop a clear statement about writing proficiency along with methods for assessing students' writing abilities prior to matriculation, during their first two years of study, and upon completion of the concentration. The e-portfolio recommended above would allow students to demonstrate growth in their writing abilities over time and thus could enable the College to provide direct evidence that students have met the writing requirement.

ADVISING

Improve advising and mentoring beyond the classroom and across the years

6. The Task Force recommends that the College work with the Office of Student Life to create an enhanced Faculty Advising Fellows Program that would provide more intensive and broader advising support than can be expected from Brown's regular contingent of academic advisors. Faculty Advising Fellows would work in teams with existing Fellows in Residence to help students connect their academic experiences to their lives outside the classroom. The Advising Fellows would organize and attend events at Fellow houses, provide enhanced advising for sophomores, reach out to students in academic difficulty, and offer training and support for other advisors. Additional resources are needed for staff who would work with Fellows and students to help plan events and facilitate communication.

7. The Task Force endorses the recommendation of the Undergraduate Science Education Committee that the University establish a resource center on campus to enhance the advising and mentoring of students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines. Ideally, this center would bring together, under one roof, Brown's many departmentally based peer-advising and tutoring networks in math and science, while also enhancing opportunities for students to work with faculty on research projects and community outreach activities.

8. The Task Force urges the Dean of the College Office to develop more nuanced measures to track student progress and to assure student success in Brown's open academic environment. In keeping with Brown's mission of diversity, we especially encourage the College to implement new advising strategies responsive to evolving student demographics. Careful attention should be paid to the needs of students from historically underrepresented minority groups, students from under-resourced or under-performing secondary schools, students with high financial need, first-generation students, and international students. We encourage new programs that would initiate the advising dialogue before students arrive on campus and strengthen advising support throughout the academic year.

9. The Dean of the College Office should develop additional measures to enhance the continuity of the advising experience over a student's four years. We recommend developing a more reliable means for retaining pre-concentration advisors for two-year intervals, and also recognizing them for their work. We suggest piloting the use of Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) for sophomore registration to ensure timely conversations between students and their advisors. And we recommend that the Dean of the College develop a simple online mechanism for advisors and advisees to communicate with each other about how the partnership is working.

We believe the student e-portfolio mentioned above should help facilitate conversation between sophomore advisors and concentration advisors, as students complete the concentration declaration. But we feel strongly that advising norms for concentrations must be clarified across the curriculum. In that spirit, the Task Force recommends that every concentration be required to foster an active Departmental Undergraduate Group (DUG). Concentration advisors and DUG leaders should work together to ensure continuity from year to year, and to sponsor a reasonable number of events per semester, one of which should be a spring meeting involving new concentrators.

10. From a broader perspective, the Task Force urges the College to assess the full range of student advising needs, especially toward the end of students' time at Brown. To prepare for life after college, all undergraduates should be advised about meaningful work experiences in the course of their undergraduate programs. We encourage the College to develop more internships and placement opportunities for students seeking employment in both the private and the public sector, along with strengthened advising programs to help students plan for post-baccalaureate fellowships and professional degrees.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Support curricular development, independent and peer-directed learning, and effective teaching

11. To encourage the continued growth of the open curriculum, the Task Force recommends that the College increase annual funding for new and innovative courses. We especially support the Undergraduate Science Committee's proposal that a pool of resources be created to support curricular innovation in the sciences. We also recommend that opportunities for team-teaching be expanded. By fostering conversations across departments, team-teaching can promote a greater sense of community among faculty while also developing a student's awareness of the pluralism and even dissonance of knowledge production.

12. The Task Force recommends that the College increase funding for independent learning experiences, including undergraduate research opportunities and internships. Special efforts should be made to support more international Undergraduate Teaching and Research Awards (UTRAs) and internships. The Task Force also encourages the College to assess its peer-directed learning programs (e.g. the Meiklejohn Peer Advising program, undergraduate teaching assistant programs, and peer tutoring programs in the sciences) with the double aim of expanding the programs where appropriate and ensuring that all undergraduate teaching assistants and tutors receive the support and training they need.

13. In order to assess teaching and learning more effectively, the University is encouraged to develop a flexible, on-line course evaluation tool that would be made available to all departments. The online instrument could be modified by departments and would encourage students to provide more extensive feedback on their learning experiences. The Task Force also encourages faculty to solicit

some form of midterm feedback from students in their courses. Such feedback allows faculty to assess their initial effectiveness in working toward course goals and to modify their approach if necessary.

14. To help graduate student teaching assistants acclimate to Brown, the Task Force recommends that they be provided with opportunities to learn about Brown's educational philosophy before entering the classroom. The Graduate School should continue monitoring the state of graduate teacher-training in individual departments, identifying best practices and helping departments implement appropriate methods for preparing students to become effective teachers.

15. New and junior faculty should also be provided with structured opportunities to learn about Brown's educational philosophy and distinctive student culture. We recommend that new faculty members work with departmental mentors of their own choosing who can help them learn more about Brown and about teaching in the discipline. Finally, in keeping with Brown's longstanding commitment to excellence in teaching, academic departments should develop clear plans to support, assess, and improve the teaching of all faculty. The development of improved course evaluation tools described above should be an integral part of such plans. But departments should also explore other forms of peer evaluation to improve departmental dialogues about teaching and ensure that faculty have what they need to achieve excellence.