

Reaffirming the Liberal Arts and Sciences at Brown

Summary on 2025-26 Faculty Working Group Deliberations

October 16, 2026

INTRODUCTION

In November 2025, a faculty working group at Brown University began an exploration of the centrality of liberal arts education in the context of the national debate about the fundamental purpose and value of education. The working group has been examining current issues facing undergraduate education at Brown, raising questions anchored in both the liberal arts and sciences and the principles of the Open Curriculum, with the goal of sustaining Brown's commitment to excellence in educating students for lives of meaning and purpose.

As the working group prepares to gather broader community input to inform recommendations for Brown's undergraduate education framework, this document summarizes the group's deliberations to date. This was prepared by Dean of the Faculty Leah VanWey and Dean of the College Ethan Pollock, who convened the group, as a resource for Brown faculty in advance of a series of in-person faculty discussion sessions scheduled for October, November and December 2026.

Separately, the group will seek feedback and engagement with students, understanding the evolving perspectives they bring about the significance of their education in a post-graduate landscape that continues to evolve. The views of both faculty and students will be reflected in recommendations the working group brings forward.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

FACULTY WORKING GROUP CHARGE

In President Paxson's [priorities for the 2025-26 academic year](#) in August 2025, she highlighted that there have been a variety of external forces challenging the centrality of a liberal arts education as public trust in higher education has continued to erode in recent years. At the same time, Brown has

evolved into a major research university with five professional schools, building on and expanding its global impact through discovery, innovation, and the creation of knowledge. The president charged Dean of the Faculty Leah VanWey and Dean of the College Ethan Pollock, in their respective roles working with faculty and students in a close teaching and learning community, to convene a group of faculty from across the University's divisions and schools to assess whether and how Brown's curricula, processes and structures continue to meet the needs of Brown undergraduate students.

FACULTY WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Nicolas Fawzi (Medical Science), Joe Hogan (Biostatistics, partial year), Alice Paul (Biostatistics, partial year), Daniel Ritchie (Computer Science), Melvin Rogers (Political Science), Brenda Rubenstein (Chemistry and Data Science), and Robert Self (History). Led by Ethan Pollock (Dean of the College) and Leah VanWey (Dean of the Faculty) and staffed by Beth Doherty (Office of the Provost).

FRAMEWORK AND CONSIDERATIONS

The working group began its work by reviewing the principles of the Open Curriculum and addressing the current state of higher education nationally. Guided by Brown's [mission](#), the principles of the [Open Curriculum](#) and [Statement of University Values and Voice](#), the group undertook an assessment of the objectives of a Brown undergraduate education, the role of the faculty in its facilitation, and the myriad trends in research, technology, demographics, and post-graduate employment that are impacting our student body and our faculty.

The working group reviewed the foundational principles of the "New" (now "Open") Curriculum, passed by the faculty in May 1969 (found in Section 4.III of the Faculty Rules and Regulations), which are:

1. At Brown University, the purpose of education for the undergraduate is to foster the intellectual and personal growth of the individual student.
2. The student, ultimately responsible for their own development in both of these areas, must be an active participant in framing their own education.
3. A central aspect of this development is the relationship of the student with professors, staff, and fellow students and with the material they approach together.
4. Structures, rules, and regulations of the University should facilitate these relationships and should provide the student with the maximum opportunity to formulate and achieve their educational objectives.

This set of principles in Brown's learning goals contrasts with the majority of liberal arts undergraduate programs at other schools. Those have either a set of core requirements or a menu of distribution requirements to guide students through the range of material that the faculty have determined to be essential for educated citizens in our world today. At Brown, the emphasis is placed on each student's own interest and goals. By nurturing and creating opportunities for exploration, discovery, and

risk-taking, Brown encourages students to take courses and work with faculty across a wide range of fields. Almost all do explore widely, though this is not required.

The group also discussed the role and responsibility of the faculty in the context of our view of the purpose of a Brown education. In their role governing the curriculum of the University, the faculty have the responsibility to ensure the rigor and coherence of the courses, concentrations, and other academic programs of the University. To fulfill the principle of the Open Curriculum that encourages intellectual growth in relationship with faculty and peers, faculty also hold the responsibility for advising students. As described in Section 4.11.II.D of the Faculty Rules and Regulations, “Academic advising is central to the objectives and educational values of the University, and is primarily the Faculty’s responsibility. This responsibility includes the advising of graduate students, of medical students, of undergraduate concentrators, and of freshmen and sophomores in the liberal arts and sciences.”

Trends in recent decades have impacted Brown’s model and presented challenges for today’s students and their faculty advisers, including a larger and more varied student body with evolving expectations of their education and a fluctuating and tightening post-graduation labor market. Additionally, the growth of Brown’s research enterprise along with the contraction of the academic job market in many fields has created conditions where faculty must prioritize research and may experience strain to balance research and deep engagement with undergraduate students.

FINDINGS AND INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher education is facing challenges that include economic headwinds, government policies that are not favorable to the liberal arts, alleged ideological capture of colleges and universities, affordability issues for students and families, and societal impacts of technology and artificial intelligence. Our commitment to liberal arts education, and to Brown’s signature approach to this through the Open Curriculum, is strong and enduring, despite those external pressures. We also recognize that our educational model must continue to evolve to reflect changes in our students, faculty, technology, and the challenges and opportunities our students face after graduation.

The working group moved quickly both to reaffirm the value of a liberal arts education and to agree that the Open Curriculum continues to be the right framework for Brown students. Acquiring critical thinking skills, creativity, and independence; pursuing an education that combines breadth of exploration with depth in a concentration; and having the opportunity to develop the habits necessary for lifelong learning and growth — all are still essential components of “preparing students to discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation,” as Brown’s mission states. A Brown education “foster[s] the intellectual and personal growth of the individual student” through supporting them in discovery, struggle, resilience, and finding their own passions. The working group found that the principles of the Open Curriculum ask a lot from individual students while also giving them a high level of individual autonomy.

Expanding the Principles of the Open Curriculum

The group evaluated the role of community, highlighted in the University's [mission and values](#), against the focus on the individual that underpins the original principles of the Open Curriculum. The group determined that after leaving Brown, students cannot live lives of usefulness and reputation without engagement with and service to broader communities. In addition to these principles, the working group discussed how the Open Curriculum came about in an era in which social movements and community creation were unquestionably at the center of campus life. The focus on individual growth and development in the original principles must be read in that context, but the role of community must now be made more explicit.

It is the view of the working group that, while we should reaffirm the four principles articulated in the 1969 faculty vote, we should also seek feedback from faculty and students about adding a fifth principle focused on citizenship and community.

Further Exploration of Learning Goals

The working group agreed that, in the absence of requirements, it continues to be the responsibility of the faculty to define learning goals to make more concrete the ways that students can achieve the purpose of education at Brown. These serve as a guide for advisers and as signposts for students. They should not be prescriptive — no one is required to meet all the learning goals, nor is there a prescribed order or hierarchy among them. They should, however, represent what we as the faculty believe constitute the foundation of a liberal arts education.

Our current learning goals were developed almost two decades ago. They cut across different domains, with some representing competencies, some describing types of knowledge, and some representing normative goals for becoming a good citizen of a community. They are:

- work on your speaking and writing
- understand differences among cultures
- analyze how power shapes human behavior
- learn what it means to study the past
- experience scientific inquiry
- develop a facility with symbolic languages
- expand your reading skills
- enhance your aesthetic sensibility
- embrace diversity
- collaborate fully
- engage with your communities

While the working group affirmed the importance of having an architecture to help both students and faculty support students' ability to "frame their own education," there remain a range of possibilities on the details. We could maintain the current list (mixing types of goals). We could organize the list by the types of goals, making small adjustments to the specific goals. Or we could replace the list completely with a new set of learning goals tailored to today's learning challenges. **The working group recommends wider consultation with the faculty and students before making any specific proposals about redefining the liberal learning goals.** As a prompt for discussions and feedback, we organized possible learning goals into the types of goals and possible objectives within each type. The final framework could include all or some of the following:

- Domain-specific knowledge: Examples might include "experience scientific inquiry", "explore what it means to be human", and "study the past."
- Domain-independent skills: Examples might include learn "how to ask a compelling question", "how to collect and analyze evidence", "how to present a persuasive argument (in art, writing, speech, equations, fabrication, or any other form)", and "how to use AI in concert with human expertise and judgment."
- Sensibilities, or approaches to life: Examples might include learning "how to take risks", "how to be resilient in the face of setbacks", "how to engage in constructive debates with people who disagree with you", and "how to develop your aesthetic sensibility."
- Normative goals: Examples might include "embrace diversity", and "find and engage with your communities"

Exploring Enhanced Approaches to Advising

The working group affirmed the central importance of faculty advising and its role in guiding students within the flexibility of the Open Curriculum and the need to actively support exploration and risk-taking by today's students. We discussed ways in which our current advising system can better support the goals of student development and faculty-student collaboration in defining educational goals. Two areas that the working group highlighted to improve the advising process to support students in the current moment are (1) increasing the time and intellectual energy that faculty can spend talking with students about intellectual exploration and personal development, and (2) ensuring advising continuity over the full career of students at Brown.

To support the first of these two areas, the working group considered a combination of administrative changes and the suggested revision of the learning goals. We recommend changes to the advising system or staffing to limit the faculty effort required to support tasks like registration or verifying completion of requirements. Beyond that, revising or redefining goals should support faculty as advisers, preserving time and energy for conversations about the larger purpose of education and the student's goals during their time at Brown. Too often, advising conversations focus on prerequisites or

courses that fit into a schedule. Revisions to the learning goals will help focus the discussion on where students are, what they are seeking, and how they can explore, grow, and develop over the course of their college career and beyond.

Finally, the working group concluded that the current advising structure can bifurcate the college years into exploration and then concentration. This does not reflect the way that many students navigate curricular decisions or the nature of advice they seek from faculty. Continuity in advising could be provided by advisers who follow students through their entire time at Brown, a model that works on a small scale for the Presidential Scholars Program. Alternatively, continuity could be provided with a more intentional and robust handoff from the exploratory adviser to the concentration adviser, combined with an expectation that concentration advisers also work with students to meet their broad learning goals while concentrating in a given field. **The working group recommends collecting input from faculty on how to focus their time in the most productive way and from faculty and students on models of advising that would align with the needs of today's students.**

NEXT STEPS

Throughout the remainder of the fall semester, the faculty working group will create opportunities to share its findings with the community and invite students and faculty to offer their experiences and perspectives. This will include a series of in-person faculty discussion sessions scheduled for October, November and December 2026.

This inclusive process is essential to shaping the working group's final recommendations, which may inform decisions about the future of undergraduate education at Brown, provide material for inclusion in the University's self-study for our decennial reaccreditation, and shape changes to be endorsed by the full faculty, as appropriate.