

The Bradley Core Experience: A Synthesis from the Bradley University Campus-wide Conversation Series

For the last 16 months, the Bradley community has participated in the Bradley University Campus-wide Conversation Series (BUCCS). A goal of these conversations was to discuss topics of importance relative to the purposes, possibilities, problems, and pragmatics of providing our students a quality core learning experience. This paper summarizes those areas of broad agreement among the faculty, staff and administration in attendance, and issues identified for further deliberation.

Areas of Substantial Agreement, and Issues for Further Consideration

The conversations revealed areas of substantial agreement and issues needing further deliberation. From BUCCS 1, we identified a list of attributes we would like our graduates to exhibit:

- ✓ **Knowledge and Practice:** Expectation that our students will obtain better than average basic knowledge, content knowledge and competency in their respective disciplines; also that they will acquire critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, the ability to apply technologies, communication skills (oral, written, visual* and other languages), knowledge of mathematics, and ethical thinking and practices.
- ✓ **Citizenship:** Expectation that our students will obtain the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to engage effectively in collaborative work, that they will actively participate in their communities, and that they will understand and act upon their responsibilities as global citizens.
- ✓ **Character and Professional Development:** Expectation that our students will construct a personal and professional identity that includes leadership skills, ethics, respect, deliberateness, balance, time management, as well as the humility and the desire to engage in lifelong learning.

*visual was added in BUCCS 6

Although this list was not fully vetted, we believe that it captures the sense of the group as to defining outcomes for Bradley graduates. The list was used as a starting point for the remaining conversations and it provides the basis for many of the questions that follow. The approach we take in this white paper is to present additional areas of agreement and unresolved questions that will require further discussion as the review of the general education program proceeds. The order in which the areas of agreement are presented is not indicative of prioritization.

1. The development of graduates' preferred attributes should be a combination of University-wide (core) requirements for all students and those pertaining to program expectations.

- What is the appropriate mix of general education requirements and studies within the major to accomplish the core curriculum's objectives?
- What are minimum core competencies that should be expected regardless of a students' major?
- What are the skills and ways of thinking that disciplines have in common but which look different in differing disciplines?
- Is there a body of content knowledge that all students should know?
- How much of the core should focus on content knowledge as specific areas of literacy versus ways of thinking and becoming a life-long learner? To what degree can or should these be separated?
- Should the core be focused early in a student's time at Bradley or spread out through their four years?
- How will the general education requirements develop students' knowledge related to the human experience?
- How do changes, if any, made in the approach to general education relate to the University's strategic plan?
- What requirements for students and faculty should be in place to continue to build on general education experiences and to translate the knowledge and skills developed within core curriculum to the students' majors? What institutional support is needed so faculty and students can meet these requirements?

2. The general education program should be an integral part of an environment based on student engagement and active learning that promotes a positive disposition toward life-long learning.

- How do first experiences at Bradley begin to develop this attitude through engaging, active learning opportunities?
- After arriving at Bradley and having been provided initial motivation related to this attitude, how do we continue to build with our students the idea that student engagement and active learning are central to learning?

3. Many members of our campus community do not value sufficiently the general education experience.

- Does the institution truly value general education?
- How can administration support and promote the on-going quality of the general education program?
- What are the tangible and intangible rewards for faculty, staff and students with regard to general education?
- How does one frame the general education experience so its purposes are seen as important both to the current lives of our students and to their aspirations for the future? Similar question for faculty with the added caveat related to how we do this in an on-going manner?

4. Multidisciplinary and cross-curricular approaches are powerful approaches that should be considered in program design.

- Which skills should be taught as separate skills in independent courses (e.g., ENG 101) versus integrated across multiple courses?
- How do faculty come together to develop and deliver integrated courses? How can we facilitate those interactions?

5. An assessment system is needed to be able to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of our general education program at the university level.

- How effective is our current approach to providing a core or general education? Are we doing what we promise to do in the core?
- How do we define the desired attributes for our graduates as measurable outcomes? Have we already done so in our current description of the purposes for general education?
- What system do we need to develop so that there is a cycle of data collection and analysis? This system guides decisions at all levels regarding the general education program's desired outcomes and design, the way the approach is implemented, and effects on Bradley students and graduates?
- What aspects of the Bradley Experience that we value cannot be realistically assessed?

6. Addressing the expansion of technology requires expanded knowledge and skills for students and requires similar growth by faculty.

- How do we bring all members of the campus community forward in their uses of technology?
- Since technology is more than a set of tools, how do we develop through students' entire program of study technology awareness as it impacts us as individuals and a society?

7. The characteristics of today's students are different from entering freshmen in the recent past.

- How is today's student different from the students who came to Bradley in the past?
- What adjustments, if any, does this require in curriculum, instructional approaches and other aspects of the Bradley Experience?
- What areas of literacy need increasing attention? How do we respond to increasing needs to develop student's competencies?
- How do we maintain rigor as we adjust to the academic realities of today's students?

8. Graduates should have a capstone experience.

- How do we make room for capstone experiences in programs' courses of study?
- Should capstone experiences be within the major, the core curriculum or both? Is the goal to make connections within the major, the general education studies or in some manner bringing both together?

- What is the outcome or final product of a capstone experience?

9. There is value in providing freshmen a common experience as they begin their studies at Bradley.

- Is this an adaptation of EHS 120, a more intellectual experience, or is there a need for both?
- How is this designed to help students cross the bridge from high school to college:
 - respond to heterogeneity of entering student body?
 - support rest of college experience?
 - one semester or both?
- In what ways would a freshman experience be linked to experiences in subsequent years as a Bradley student?
- How might contemporary issues and events be used as a context for a freshman experience?

10. Service learning can be an effective mechanism to enhance student learning.

- Should the Bradley Experience necessarily include service learning?
- Is it appropriate as a core requirement or should it be left to courses/programs to choose where it fits?
- How do you prepare faculty for appropriate engagement in service learning?

11. Many of the tag lines that Bradley currently uses or should claim as our strengths have clear connections to the general education experiences.

- How do we integrate these strengths within and between general education studies and professional studies?
- Should our approach to general education be a part of making the Bradley Experience distinctive? If so, what should those areas of distinction be?

12. To reach our goals for the general education program we must address many implementation issues. This topic assumes the need for the fiscal resources to support realization of our goals. Some of the questions that relate to this topic have been included above.

- What are the professional development areas that should be addressed for successful implementation of a quality general education experience?
- How do we staff general education courses so that they have the right size enrollments (to be decided)?
- Should graduate students be involved in the delivery of the general education program?
- What is the role of advisors?
- How does the faculty reward structure respond to teaching in the general education program?
- How do we manage transfer students?
- How does the general education program connect to a broader, university supported learning community?
- What actions must take place now and in the future related to policy and resource support for the general education program to maintain quality and to continue to improve?

13. Careful attention must be given to develop and maintain an infrastructure for the general education program to be distinctive, effective and contribute to students' desire to learn?

- How do we prioritize resource demands while maintaining a quality general education program?
- What organizational structures, such as centralized assessment and faculty development, must be in place to maintain quality?

Throughout the BUCCS meetings, various models for a core experience were discussed and analyzed. No clear consensus was reached as to the best approach for Bradley to meet the desired outcomes for our graduates.