

**Council of Chairs of the College of Arts and Science (CAS) October 2006**

Response to report of Senate's Ad Hoc Committee on the

Establishment of an Honors College and a New Interdisciplinary Studies Program

In the following, Western College Program (WCP) refers to any of the possible models for a program that maintains the Western College liberal arts tradition.

**Recommendation Set One:**

1. The CAS Council of Chairs gave its strong support to a vehicle that maintained the liberal arts tradition of the current WCP, because that tradition is at the heart of the liberal arts mission of the College. There was strong support for maintaining the Western College name, legacy, and academic philosophy. Furthermore, many members of the Council took note of the intellectual benefits WCP students bring to CAS classrooms and to the university as a whole. In short, the Council felt that the University should maintain avenues for students of the type who are attracted to WCP to flourish at Miami, and to do so in a way that influences their peers across the university. However, the Council did not feel that the WCP structure proposed by the Senate's Ad Hoc Committee (SAHC) was the best way to achieve that goal. Members felt that we could do better by innovative use of the courses and programs that are already offered by the College, and by enhancing College (and other divisions') offerings by learning from the best practices of the current WCP. For example, we look forward to better integration of the living learning communities into College offerings, and to enhancing intensive faculty-student collaboration on research projects. All the divisions at Miami have much to learn from the WCP experience, and this juncture provides us the opportunity to do so.

2. The Council agreed with the SAHC that any new version of the WCP should not be part of the Honors and Scholars Program. However, it should be possible for students involved in the WCP to be in the Honors Program and it may be possible that their WCP and Honors requirements overlap (i.e., count for both programs).

**Recommendation Sets Two through Five:**

Members recognized that the SAHC considers the possibility that a future WCP become an interdisciplinary program within CAS as only *one* of three different bureaucratic configurations (recommendation set #5). Yet since that possibility appears to be the most plausible, and because the Council is a CAS unit, most of our comments refer to that scenario.

In the section of the report entitled "The Western College Program," (pp. 4-5) the SAHC proposed that the basic structure of the current WCP be maintained, but with a core two-year program with the potential to be extended. The Council felt the proposal was too close to a scaled down version of the current WCP and would only be funded at a much lower level than the current WCP. Since the current WCP is quite expensive relative to most other programs, the Council had significant concerns that the proposed program could be a financial liability for the University, and that CAS might bear the brunt of that financial burden, which could be quite substantial and constraining to other higher priorities.

Furthermore, Council worried that the scaled down WCP would be unable to recruit enough students to be viable. Members lacked confidence that 70-75 students a year could be recruited. The SAHC document says that entering classes would be limited to 70-75 students, but does not speak to recruitment, which has been a consistent problem for many years. Hence, Council is concerned that the recruitment problem will remain. Additionally, since subsequent discussions about faculty size and physical space rely heavily on the number of students, we find it difficult to go forward with the current proposal without a sense of how many students will indeed participate.

A fundamentally important question is whether CAS could better achieve its mission of providing a liberal education for Miami students by investing resources in the components of the College that achieve similar goals as the current WCP or by investing in a scaled down version of WCP. The consensus of the Council was that it was not in the University's best interest to take a chance supporting a unit that was almost identical to the current WCP program in hopes that it would somehow thrive in CAS, even though it has not done so as a separate unit of the University.

In discussing the future role of current WCP faculty, Council embraced the prospect of welcoming new colleagues into CAS departments and programs. Concern about Recommendation Set #4 rather focused on both 1) the idea of 6-8 faculty devoted to a program the size of which we do not know, and 2) establishing faculty appointments for up to 10 years. Such a long commitment does not allow for flexibility in changing assignments according to changing needs that will no doubt emerge under a newly launched program. Furthermore, a 10-year assignment in the WCP program could (but not necessarily would) hinder strong relationships between faculty and home departments or programs, and could foster excessive insularity, which is a concern expressed by many about the current WCP.

One idea that surfaced in our discussion was to allow students to self-design a major around some type of research/scholarship area that was of interest to them. That would maintain the self-designed component of the current WCP as well as the senior thesis. Quite possibly this could be linked to a living/learning opportunity. Another, not mutually exclusive, idea was to have something like a Western College co-major (or Western College self-designed co-major). The co-major would not necessarily have any required courses, but students would be asked to follow a set of guidelines as they design their educational objectives and choose courses that complement their primary major.

It was also noted by several members of the Council that it might be difficult for entering students to learn about the WCP if it requires a specific curriculum in the first two years. Hence, one idea was to have the program focus on the last two years after the student has completed the basic MP/CAS requirements. This could help maintain the viability of the program since students could learn about and plan for participation in the program during their first two years. There was also concern that the WCP self-designed major not become the equivalent of a general education major.

Regardless of the specific design, a new WCP would require that students justify the courses that would be part of their WCP major/co-major and they would need to have intensive advising by a faculty/faculty committee. It was noted that students majoring in many CAS departments already work very closely with faculty on a large number of scholarly and research projects and it is possible that such advising could continue in the context of a new WCP.

Finally, there was the suggestion that we try to make WCP a vehicle that is prestigious and sought after by the most academically-talented students. It could carry the prestigious name of The Western College Co-Major, for example. Another option to enhance its prestige would be to require applications and/or interviews for acceptance. By doing so, we could highlight the importance and innovation that the Western College Program has provided for the University. It is also more likely that strong students would be willing to take the risk of designing some or all of their major. This would probably fit well with the model that has the new WCP focused on the student's junior/senior years.