

April 27, 2004

Committee Urges Harvard to Expand the Reach of Its Undergraduate Curriculum

By SARA RIMER

For the first time in 30 years, Harvard University has reviewed its undergraduate curriculum, concluding that students need more room for broad exploration, a greater familiarity with the world that can only be gained from study abroad, and a deeper, hands-on understanding of science.

After 15 months of study, a committee of administrators, professors and students has recommended that the university give students more time to choose their majors and limit the requirements for those majors, encourage students to spend time abroad and increase the number of required science courses.

The committee's underlying conclusion, that students in a fast-changing world need a wider range of knowledge, is likely to have an impact on universities across the nation, many of which are also trying to modernize their curriculums. In making its recommendations, the committee was asked to address what it would "mean to be an educated man or woman in the first quarter of the 21st century."

William C. Kirby, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, said yesterday in a letter to the faculty, "As a leading American institution, Harvard College has a responsibility to educate its students — who will live and work in all corners of the globe — as citizens not only of their home country, but also of the world, with the capacity not only to understand others, but also to see themselves, and this country, as others see them."

Among the findings in its report, which was released yesterday, the committee said it was no longer sufficient to satisfy the science requirement with broad-based survey courses. Instead, students should focus on scientific principles and methods, for example, spending time in the laboratory learning the chemical structure of the genome.

"Graduates of Harvard College should be able to understand the news and expository articles in journals such as *Science* and *Nature*," the committee said.

And rather than studying, say, Chinese history without leaving Cambridge, students interested in the subject should be spending a semester at Qinhua University in Beijing.

"It is not enough to assume that in a world that appears to be increasingly Anglophone that all cultures are becoming alike," said Dr. Kirby, who directed the review and is a scholar of modern Chinese history. "At this time of American influence and growing responsibilities in the world, institutions such as Harvard bear a responsibility to educate its students to be knowledgeable and responsible as they go out in the world — to know the languages, to know the culture, the economics and the policies of the countries they will visit, to interact in a knowledgeable way."

Harvard's most recent curricular reviews, in the 1940's and 1970's, were viewed as groundbreaking, and experts in higher education said they were eager to study the university's newest recommendations.

"It's always an important event when Harvard College undertakes a review of the curriculum because where Harvard leads others follow," said James O. Freedman, president emeritus of Dartmouth College, and the author of "Liberal Education and the Public Interest" (University of Iowa Press, 2003), which the Harvard committee was required to read.

Officials at other colleges said they were encouraged by the recommendations, especially the emphasis on international study.

"I think it is an excellent idea to have every American student have some international experience," said Nancy Dye, the president of Oberlin College. "I think Harvard is doing an excellent thing."

The recommendations will be discussed by the faculty over the next year, with some changes requiring a formal vote. Dr. Kirby said he hoped any changes would be in place for students arriving in 2006.

One of the most striking recommendations is that every undergraduate at Harvard "be educated in the sciences in a manner that is as deep and broadly shared as has traditionally been the case in the humanities and the social sciences."

Harvard's president, Lawrence H. Summers, said of the emphasis on science: "An educational culture where it's an embarrassment to not know the names of five plays by Shakespeare but O.K. not to know the difference between a gene and a chromosome isn't functional."

The curricular review is among Dr. Summers's major initiatives and reflects his focus on undergraduate education.

He said the review was not intended as a signal that Harvard's current curriculum is flawed. "Every human invention should be reviewed every quarter century, especially in light of the transformations brought by science and globalization," he said in a telephone interview.

Dr. Summers noted that the last time the curriculum was reviewed, in the mid-1970's, "a trip to Russia or China or Africa was an exotic experience, and when you were there, the only information you could get was a two- or three-day-old newspaper." Today, he said, "students from all over the world are at Harvard and Harvard students go all over the world, and connections and the flow of information is instantaneous."

He said Harvard was strengthening the international component of its undergraduate education "at a moment when the United States misunderstands the world, and the world misunderstands the United States, more than anytime recently."

The report suggests that Harvard's core curriculum be modified so that students have a broader choice of courses that meet its requirements. It also recommended that Harvard emphasize smaller classes across the curriculum, beginning with a faculty-led freshman seminar. The committee said it wanted professors to have more contact with students, a recommendation that experts said might be hard to carry out at a university like Harvard where research often takes precedence over teaching.

Dr. Summers, who recently taught a freshmen seminar on globalization, said it was important "to assure that we expand what is most fundamental in education: direct personal contact between students and faculty."

Claire Hoffman contributed reporting for this article.