The Curriculum

The Big Questions curriculum weaves transdisciplinary questions through a set of competency requirements, all of which are housed in departments and interdisciplinary programs. The objective is to build competencies in key areas, introduce students to multiple modes of inquiry, and bring context and cohesion to a student’s coursework through overarching questions. Structurally, the curriculum requires students to take courses designated with particular attributes to fulfill an aggregate requirement. This set of attributes can be divided into three components:

1. **Big Questions**: The Big Questions provide an opportunity for students to engage with pressing and enduring questions. This approach recognizes that a key element of education is learning what questions to ask and how to pose them. These questions challenge thought, shake up disciplinary boundaries, and engage students to bring their diverse perspectives to bear on enduring as well as emerging issues. Students must take two Big Questions courses.

2. **The Core Competencies & Understandings**: The Core Competencies and Understandings are the centerpiece of the curriculum. They build a foundation for student growth and provide students with what they need to ask questions and solve problems across an array of disciplines. They provide skills for lifelong learning, competencies and understandings that students will continue to draw on throughout their lives both to “produce scholarly and creative work” and to maintain an attitude of “thoughtful inquiry” to the world around them. There are twelve core competencies & understandings, with variable unit requirements attached to each; a single course may have up to two core competencies. All CC&U courses, like Big Questions courses, are housed within departments and interdisciplinary programs. Combining CC&Us in an individual course creates an integrative educational experience that foregrounds the ways both traditional disciplines and interdisciplinary scholars approach their content. The frameworks, pedagogies, and content areas of each CC&U may differ, but all share the fundamental values of intellectual exploration, knowledge creation, and creative problem solving.

3. **The First Year**: All students will take a first-year seminar to introduce them to the fundamentals of college-level writing, information literacy, and oral communication. These small courses also offer the opportunity to work closely with a faculty mentor and develop intellectual community. FYS courses should include written communication and oral communication as learning objectives, consistent with the detailed learning objectives in this proposal. First-year students must also complete a required wellness seminar. FYS and Wellness courses may not count toward any other requirement.
i. Core Competencies and Understandings (Description of Learning Outcomes in Appendix A)

- Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of courses a student must take with that CC&U. For Second Language Proficiency, we retain the definition in the current curriculum, rather than a required number of courses.
  - Artistic Expression (1)
  - Deep Reading (1)
  - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (2)
  - Experimental Reasoning (1)
  - Change Over Time (1)
  - Structured Reasoning (1)
  - Oral Communication (1)
  - Quantitative Data Literacy (1)
  - Second Language Proficiency (second language proficiency)
  - Social Inquiry (1)
  - Written Communication (2)

ii. Recommendations for implementation

This section provides GECIC recommendations for implementation of the BQ Curriculum as well as the rationale for these recommendations. If the BQ curriculum is adopted by the UR faculty, an Implementation Committee that follows will ultimately determine implementation details including rollout, course approval, and assessment. (See the formal charge for the Implementation Committee in Section V.)

The GECIC recommends there be consistent, thorough, and prudent oversight of all aspects of the BQ curriculum. To this end, the GECIC recommends the appointment of a new Director of General Education (and perhaps the establishment of an office of general education) to oversee the curriculum alongside the General Education and FYS Committees.

- Recommendation 1: We recommend the appointment of a Director of General Education, who could oversee the curriculum and interface with the General Education Committee to oversee the CC&Us and BQs. In fact, this director could be part of a new Office of General Education. The Director of General Education should come from the teaching faculty and have experience in general education and/or curriculum development. The position should carry with it course reassignment comparable to the Director of the Faculty Teaching & Learning Hub or an Associate Provost or Associate Dean position, and should report to Academic Affairs to provide appropriate oversight.

- Recommendation 2: We recommend a new Big Questions (BQ) subcommittee be formed. This committee will be in charge of selecting new and curating the existing list of big questions for the BQ curriculum, approving courses for BQ credit, and assessing existing courses already designated for BQ credit.

- Recommendation 3: We recommend a new CC&U subcommittee focus on approving courses for Core Competency & Understanding (CC&U) credit as well as assessing existing courses already designated for CC&U credit. The committee would approve courses based on instructor plans to substantively integrate the CC&U learning outcomes listed above into their course learning goals.

- Recommendation 4: We recommend the retention of the FYS committee. The committee would begin by reconsidering existing FYS courses in light of the BQ Curriculum’s updated learning
outcomes for FYS. The ongoing charge of this committee should be both to approve new courses for FYS credit and assess existing courses already designated for FYS credit.

- Rationale for these Recommendations: One of the shortcomings of our current general education curriculum is that there is no rigorous oversight of courses, in large part because the job is one that takes time and attention. Our recommended enhanced committee structure and centralized Director of General Education should allow for more effective oversight of the new BQ Curriculum both holistically and at the level of individual components.

The Director of General Education together with the BQ, GE, and FYS committees will be important resources needed for the new curriculum to thrive at UR. The GECIC also recommends resources in the form of stipends and professional development for individual faculty interested in developing and adapting courses for the BQ curriculum.

- Recommendation 1: We recommend that stipends be made available for faculty who are interested in developing and teaching courses for the BQ curriculum. This could also involve an agreement by faculty members to offer the corresponding course a certain number of times.
- Recommendation 2: Professional development opportunities should also be available for faculty interested in developing courses. These could take the form of workshops dedicated to individual CC&Us and to pedagogy to support them. These workshops could be hosted by external consultants or experts from within the faculty. These workshops should be encouraged, and perhaps required where no other expertise in an area can be demonstrated but not required. They could be offered in coordination with the UR Faculty HUB.
- Rationale for these Recommendations: Adapting and designing courses requires an immense amount of work, and faculty need support in this work. These faculty resources will enrich our curriculum, promote a greater number of course offerings, and engage faculty in important discussions around best practices.

Many of the details of approving courses for various BQ curriculum attributes would be determined by an Implementation committee in conjunction with campus stakeholders. Here, the GECIC offers guidelines for course approval processes and policies. Other Logistics

- Recommendation 1: We recommend that BQ and CC&U courses can be taken within a student’s major. This should be entirely up to individual departments/programs, yet the GECIC hopes that various elements of the BQ curriculum could either count for the major or could be taken in the major.
- Recommendation 2: We recommend that a single course count for no more than two CC&Us. Attributes should be driven by the appropriate pedagogy and content area focus of the course. Some important exceptions: an FYS course should only count for FYS and no additional general education requirements, and courses cannot count for more than one BQ.
- Recommendation 3: We recommend that AP courses continue to be the responsibility of individual departments with the responsibility to offer credit for particular courses.
- Recommendation 4: We recommend study abroad courses could count for any element of the BQ curriculum in UR-based study abroad programs as long as they meet the learning outcomes.
- Recommendation 5: For multi-section courses, such as ECON 101, we recommend all sections must carry the same set of CC&U attributes. However, the Big Question attribute could come at the instructor level.
- Rationale for these Recommendations: These recommendations are offered as a way to balance feasibility of the curriculum from the point of view of students and flexibility for individual faculty in terms of what they teach.
Major structural differences relative to current curriculum:

1. The proposed curriculum is built primarily around Core Competencies and Understandings, rather than Fields of Study, with the addition of several new competencies
2. Inclusion of Big Questions courses
3. Reduction of the First-Year Seminar to a single unit
4. UR100 to replace Wellness 085 and 090 requirements

Motivation

a. The General Education Curriculum Review Committee (GECRC) emphasized the need to bring a clear identity to the general education curriculum, one that is coherent and purposeful. Furthermore, they found that the current Fields of Study (FOS) do not effectively capture the “breadth and scope” of general education, and recommended an examination of FOS definitions and boundaries. Therefore, we have built the proposed curriculum around a set of Core Competencies and Understandings (CC&Us) that reflect essential foundations of learning. These CC&Us also help to avoid the formation of silos around specific elements of the curriculum and create opportunities for a variety of disciplines in the general education curriculum. In addition to CC&Us, the Big Questions reinforce the transdisciplinarity of general education, emphasizing the roles of different disciplines and approaches to problem-solving. The Big Questions also serve to create a shared experience in the curriculum for faculty, staff, and students.

b. Among the shortcoming of the current general education curriculum, the GECRC identified particular weaknesses in writing, numeracy and wellness. The proposed curriculum reduces the First-Year Seminar (FYS) requirement, the primary vehicle for writing in the current curriculum, from 2 units to 1 unit and instead includes written communication as a CC&U that students must satisfy twice beyond FYS, thus providing opportunities for iterated instruction and skills development in this important area. We retain a single FYS course as an introduction to academic inquiry and reinforce it with more specific learning objectives for writing and oral communication. Similarly, the proposed curriculum includes a CC&U in quantitative data literacy to address numeracy and data analysis. Finally, a parallel committee has created and piloted UR100, “a 14-week course around issues intended to facilitate a positive, healthy start for all incoming first-year students”. The committee supports this as an effective approach to wellness. We recommend that future work in implementing a revised curriculum be reconnected with the UR100 program.

c. The GECRC suggested a requirement that addresses Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI). Numerous faculty and student voices, particularly in response to the current socio-political landscape and events on campus and in the city of Richmond, echoed this sentiment. Moreover, DEI is a cornerstone of the University Mission and Value Statements. Still, the current general education curriculum lacks any explicit recognition of DEI. The proposed curriculum, therefore, features DEI as a core competency.