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Emory's Gen Ed Changes

For years, Emory University's centralized academic advising office has been inundated with student questions about how to fulfill general education requirements. Those questions would often be brought first to a faculty adviser who couldn't come up with a conclusive answer.

Joanne Brzinski, Emory's interim senior associate dean of undergraduate education, said professors often reported being confused by rules that established which courses counted for which distribution requirements. What Brzinski described as the "off-loading of advising" became a problem for those in the central office, whose days, she said, became far too dominated by explaining the intricacies of the system.

Simplifying requirements is one of the stated goals of the university's new general education plan, which recently passed the second and final round of faculty voting. When the system goes into full effect in the fall of 2009, students will find a decrease in course hour requirements and more choices in classes that satisfy broad distribution requirements.

Supporters say the changes will allow students to spend less time worrying about which general education courses would get them most quickly to the finish line and think more about their areas of interest. But critics say students will be able to graduate without getting exposure to key areas of study.

Under the new system, students will be required to take 48 credit hours of general education courses rather than the current 76. As has been the case at many [colleges that have made such changes](#), Emory students whose fields have extensive major requirements complained that they had almost no time to take electives. That was especially true, Brzinski said, in the natural sciences.

Students cherished courses that allowed them to "double dip" — that is satisfy two distribution requirements with one class. Brzinski said those classes would often be filled with students who had little interest in the topic but were preoccupied with checking off distribution boxes.

"It's not that students were unwilling to get a broad education, but they were doing things that made sense to get them through," she said. "Some students didn't want to be there and resented taking the course, and that's not a great educational environment."

With the general education changes, students will, in most cases, not be able to count a course toward two different requirements. The idea is that with the diminished hour requirements that practice won't be necessary.

Brzinski said many students thought the old system was too rigid. They complained that there weren't enough classes that satisfied requirements, and some felt that decisions about which courses counted were made arbitrarily.

John Bugge, a professor of English who led the faculty task force that crafted the new program, said the old system had a "byzantine set of categories" from which students chose courses, some of which were rarely offered at the university. Under the new system, he said, many more courses at

the university are under consideration.

Students have been required to take two courses offered by departments in the Division of Social Sciences, as well as two courses in the humanities. The new categories are more broadly defined, including groupings such as “History, Society, Cultures” and “Humanities, Arts, Performance.”

Professors are being asked to tag each course they think would fit into general education under one of several groupings. For now, departments will have the final say over where courses fit, though an Emory educational policy committee might intervene if there’s disagreement.

Some requirements are essentially staying the same, such as freshman seminars, and science and math reasoning courses. Students still must take an introductory writing course but have more flexibility about timing. But one of the biggest changes is in the area of history. Until now, students have been required to choose from a list of courses in each of three areas: United States history, Western history and culture other than the U.S., and non-Western cultures or comparative and international studies.

The new requirements ask students to choose two courses from the “History, Society, Culture” block, which includes many social science offerings, but not necessarily one from the history department. Some faculty members have complained that students will be able to leave Emory without being required to have a firm grounding in historical study. Harvey Klehr, a professor of politics and history, is one of them.

“What bothers me is that really the one justification that was offered for the change was simplicity,” he said. “While that’s admirable, it’s not an educational philosophy. The old system, while flawed, showed what an educated person should know. The new system lacks that clarity.”

Another concern, Klehr said, is that there’s little oversight of the choices departments make in tagging classes. He worries that students will be able to jump into narrow upper-level courses before they’re ready.

“In essence, students will be able to cherry pick and avoid taking courses in areas they’re uncomfortable in,” he said.

Brzinski said the new changes are intended to be less prescriptive and give students more control over their course selections.

“It trusts a lot more in students and advisers that this will work out,” Brzinski said. “We all have to work hard to make sure we encourage students to take a broad range of courses, and encourage advisers to challenge students about what they are selecting.”

Emory is also establishing a task force to look at how to revise its academic advising system. Bugge said there’s typically a flurry of activity early in a student’s first year, but then the university can lose track of the person.

Current students can choose whether they want to be held to the new or old gen ed system. Brzinski said she hopes students will take more courses out of interest rather than need, but doesn’t want to see them feel more pressure to declare double majors.

And Brzinski said she’s confident that faculty advisers will be able to handle more of the student concerns, thus putting less stress on the central office.