

November 17, 2014

Members of the Commission on Undergraduate Studies and Policies:

After carefully reviewing the most recent draft of the Pathways general education curriculum (dated November 17, 2014), the active membership of the Student Government Association, on behalf of the undergraduate student body, would like to **formally support the proposed changes**. Throughout our discussions, students commented on several aspects of the proposal and its potential implementation, discussed below.

“Hands-On, Minds-On” is not just an advertising slogan to students. Students are hungry to have their current perspectives challenged. They value interaction, relevance, flexibility, intentionality, innovation, and the educational potential of outside-of-the-classroom experiences. They believe that breadth and depth of general education is essential to students becoming better citizens, understanding the world, and fulfilling their goals of serving others. They genuinely value general education, and are asking to be engaged in topics and discussions that complement or vastly differ from their core areas of study.

Students face common barriers to achieving the aforementioned goals. Many first-year students continue a habit learned in high school: to choose the path of least resistance. The tendency to choose the easiest class available is often broken after a student has their first transformative classroom experience. After which, they struggle with determining which courses are transformative, innovative, and collaborative, and end up taking at least one course that steers them away from enrolling in electives in a particular subject or outside of their in-major requirements. Whether they wanted more relevance, more discussion, or more engagement out of their courses, these are lost learning opportunities that affect the current and future Virginia Tech community.

Initially, the student representatives to the UCCE created a survey for students to anonymously give feedback about the draft and received few entries. We soon realized that our peers were not ignoring our request due to apathy, but rather they were too intimidated and confused by the proposal to believe that they could contribute to the discussion. Much of the proposal is difficult to grasp because it contains language, jargon, and formatting used exclusively by higher education professionals and academics. We found that only students who have the experiences and ability to read through the lens of an educator or academic could comprehend it. The lack of understanding is troubling because if students do not understand how Pathways works, they will not take the opportunities that it provides and the current state of general education at Virginia Tech will continue in perpetuity.

Changing the structure of the general education curriculum provides a unique opportunity to improve the quality and availability of courses offered to help the Pathways curriculum reach its full potential. Students appreciate the proposal's focus on depth rather than breadth, but are concerned about the availability of upper-level courses because they are restricted to specific majors. There is also a great demand for more science courses designed to teach non-science majors how to analyze science-related issues in public policy, current events, and their everyday lives. If more general education courses were designed to challenge non-majors in an unfamiliar topic without the threat of significantly lowering their GPA or taking control of their course load, students would happily leave behind the tradition of "the path of least resistance" and step outside of their comfort zone.

By far, students' favorite parts about the proposed changes are the different Pathways to complete their general education requirements. Students learn and gain fulfillment in countless ways, and the three options outline clear and precise goals while allowing them to ultimately decide the composition and direction of their education. Students in certain programs already have alternative ways of gaining academic credit through capstones, internships, and minors automatically granted by nature of completing in-major curriculum, and the three pathways make these valuable opportunities available to students across the university.

The Pathways Minors received the most positive feedback of any aspect of the proposal. Students described them as incredible opportunities to utilize their general education requirements to achieve depth and intentionality in their education while graduating with something meaningful and concrete on their transcript and resume. We anticipate an enormous demand for enrollment in Pathways Minors if they are implemented as described in the proposal.

Students are also very much in favor of the Alternative Pathway, but have concerns due to its ambiguity. They like how it adds flexibility to the curriculum. They also value the opportunity to earn academic credit for outside-of-the-classroom experiences. However, there is confusion regarding the approval and assessment of alternative experiences to ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes. Additionally, to receive academic credit for an internship, study abroad, or student leadership experience, students must pay tuition during the semester that they earn the credit. While it is understood that this requirement is necessary for accreditation, it may limit the opportunities for students to take advantage Alternative Pathways because of the additional cost.

Students stress the necessity of implementing the Pathways curriculum with the same objectives and enthusiasm that exists in the proposal. They understand that it is difficult to include every detail for assessment, implementation, and resource allocation in the proposal, especially considering the constant changes that the university will encounter throughout the implementation of Pathways. However, when making decisions regarding the implementation of the curriculum, great care should be taken in making sure that the decisions connect to the original goals in the proposal in a way that benefits students. It is also important that students who have completed a portion of their general education requirements under the Curriculum for Liberal Education will not need to drop a major, minor, or delay graduation because of the transition to the Pathways curriculum.

In summation, the undergraduate student body of Virginia Tech values the purpose of general education and desires opportunities to challenge their current perspectives in a safe, educational environment. However, it is often difficult for students to find challenging and diverse general education courses, especially when the current structure of the Curriculum for Liberal Education does not support or encourage such opportunities. The focus on flexibility, intentionality, and depth over breadth of subjects are the aspects of the proposed Pathways curriculum that will benefit students the most. The increased integration, relevance, and diversity of the Pathways curriculum will vastly improve the quality of education at Virginia Tech, which will support well-rounded graduates and create successful professionals who will serve their communities throughout and beyond their undergraduate experience.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our perspective. We look forward to our continued collaboration with faculty, staff, and administrators to achieve our shared goal of inventing the future of general education.

Sincerely,

Kylie Gilbert
Treasurer, Student Government Association
Class of 2015
Undergraduate Representative to the UCCLE

Stephen Hensell
Speaker of the House, Student Government Association
Class of 2016
Undergraduate Representative to the UCCLE