

To: The Faculty  
From: The Executive Council  
Date: April 13, 2000  
Re: New Curricular Directions

In this document, we set out two proposals that, although presented separately, are linked to one another. At the April 17 faculty meeting, we will make a single motion that the faculty endorse both proposals.

### **I Proposal: A Working Definition**

In this part of the document, we propose a working definition for a curricular experiment in offering interested Grinnell College students the opportunity to engage in a culminating academic experience. We propose that this working definition be more fully developed as a result of our experiences over the next four years of the five-year trial period (1999-2004) currently in progress. The trial period, as you know, is in part being funded by the Fund for Excellence. Our proposal relies heavily on a document prepared by the Curriculum Committee in response to our request early last semester that the Committee review the current state of the so-called "capstone" experiment and return to us with a proposal for action on the experiment.

The Curriculum Committee initially discussed the matter over several of its meetings in the first semester. This semester, it broadened the discussion so that, campus-wide, faculty and students would consider whether Grinnell College should offer a culminating academic experience and, if so, what features this experience should have. To learn the views of the faculty, members of the Curriculum Committee met this semester with each of the academic divisions. The Committee also organized a well-attended meeting for students. Finally, it benefited from reports on the two sessions (March 3 and 10) of the open forum for faculty, organized by the Chair of the Faculty (E. Dobbs) and the Division Chairs (B. Ferguson, M. Pillado-Miller, B. Voyles). Working with the comments it heard in that broad discussion, the Curriculum Committee then drafted and endorsed a statement of proposals and sent it to the Executive Council with the request that some version of it be endorsed and taken to the faculty for a vote before the end of this semester. We thank the members of that Committee (A. Ellis, K. Gibel-Azoulay, E. Phillips, E. Dobbs; J. Aerni, J. Blue, M. Kleiber, S. Luebke; G. Adams, J. Swartz) and Associate Dean Paula Smith for their hard work. The proposal you have before you is a modified version of what the Curriculum Committee presented, and it comes with the full endorsement of the Executive Council.

We set out here the reasons a culminating academic project would be an important addition to our curriculum, the ways the proposed definition addresses real faculty and student needs, the need for a definition now, the proposed definition itself, and clarification regarding it. The second part of our document is a proposal for support of major curricular projects that would not fit under the definition.

We anticipate that we will encounter some unexpected difficulties as we conduct the curricular experiment encompassed by our proposed working definition. But we think that the educational advantages we will gain, both in the course of the experiment and in the event that a version of it would be approved by the faculty in 2004, are worth those difficulties. We are asking that the faculty endorse the proposed working definition.

### **Why Is A Culminating Academic Experience A Good Idea?**

The idea that a culminating academic experience for our students would be a good idea started with the faculty in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when we discussed the introduction of senior

seminars. That initiative never got off the ground for a variety of reasons, among which were questions about the financial support that would be available for such an initiative. In the summer of 1998, several groups of faculty got together in FFE workshops to explore the ideas of advanced seminars, which could take several forms, and other types of educational experiences. What faculty were responding to in both cases, as was evident in our discussions, was a sense that Grinnell students often “meandered” through courses in their final year or two. Earlier that summer, a faculty workshop on transcript analysis, conducted as part of our NCA accreditation process, came to some similar conclusions about what appeared to be, in the worst cases, students who graduated with a major and “a bunch of courses.” Those of us who’ve had many occasions to visit with Grinnell graduates have heard from them either that they regret not having had a major project while undergraduates here or, if they did, that such a project was a highlight of their Grinnell experience. Finally, in conversations with the consultants who were helping us redesign our *Viewbook*, faculty spoke of the value in students’ academic experiences of initiative and independence, of meeting a challenge, of carrying a project to completion, and of the self-confidence that comes with accomplishment.

In different ways, then, each of the conversations we’ve briefly summarized here pointed in the direction of our offering to interested students an opportunity to undertake an advanced academic experience that would bring together previous experience and allow them to undertake a substantial independent project. We are, in a word, hoping to change the academic experience of our students, both those who engage in such projects and those who, by learning about them, indirectly benefit from them.

### **What Needs Does the Proposal Address?**

We know, of course, that some Grinnell students already have such experiences. Many of the extended summer research projects that some science majors undertake, for instance, provide the opportunity for such an experience. Other independent research projects, some concentration senior projects, and some department seminars may also fit. However, setting aside teaching that is part of a faculty member’s five-course load, what seems to characterize much of this sort of experience is that it has been an “overload.” What also seems to characterize the current independent activities in which students can engage is that they have proliferated and that the various kinds do not necessarily share many points of similarity.

Indeed, we appear to have what one faculty member characterized as a “Pandora’s box” of proliferating and quite different possibilities for student independent work, few of which are credited as part of a teaching workload. Our proposal tries to address both of these problems. We’re first of all trying to give a common definition to some of this independent work. Possible benefits of such definition would be that independent work might gain more visibility and that individual faculty might shift their efforts away from such a multiplicity of plus-2s, guided readings, independents, internship supervision, etc. A further benefit would be that by giving the various forms of this independent work a common definition, it becomes possible to give faculty credit for directing them. The problem of lack of credit concerned a faculty group in a FFE workshop during the summer of 1998, and it worked particularly on trying to create a system that would take a wider array of faculty teaching into account. Our proposal picks up on this idea and includes a crediting system for faculty working on these advanced academic experiences beyond their five-course load.

This proposal also expands the opportunities for advanced projects beyond what is currently done and thereby addresses another need that was expressed in some of the divisions and in the faculty forums: the lack of opportunity to do interdisciplinary work at an advanced level. Expanding the opportunities currently available to allow advanced interdisciplinary or interdepartmental seminar projects also represents the direction in which the organization of knowledge in several

disciplines has moved. The development of opportunities to do advanced interdisciplinary work might also play a part in the attraction and retention of faculty, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We recognize that the advanced interdisciplinary seminars that would provide the context for these advanced academic projects may present more difficulties in implementation than advanced research projects for individual students do, but we believe they should be actively promoted.

Finally, the proposal addresses a concern expressed in at least one division: “equity” for students. Often a relatively small group of “elite” students benefit substantially from the opportunity to do independent work, while others appear less likely to take advantage of such opportunities. We hope that our proposal, by offering definition to these opportunities, would make them more visible to students and, by broadening the kinds of activities included under the definition, would make advanced independent work available to a wider range of students.

### **Why Does The Faculty Need A Working Definition Now?**

The motivation behind the Executive Council request to the Curriculum Committee was simple, and it explains the reason the faculty needs a working definition of these culminating academic experiences now: we believe it is crucial that the faculty either take charge of the “capstone” experiment already in progress and give it definition by the end of this year or decide that it is sufficiently problematic to warrant discontinuing. Specifically, the faculty needs to move the definition of that experiment from the administration, which “jump-started” the idea last year for interested faculty, to the faculty as a whole, because the curriculum is the particular responsibility of the faculty.

### **The Mentored Advanced Project (MAP) Definition**

To replace the term “capstone,” which evoked a number of objections in the course of the campus-wide discussions, we propose returning to the term “Mentored Advanced Project” or MAP, which was coined by a group of faculty members in an FFE workshop held during summer 1998. The definition of the term has evolved as the more than one hundred “capstone” projects have taken place.

The Mentored Advanced Project (MAP) can take a variety of forms, but any form must have the following five features in order to be called a MAP:

1. The project is **advanced**.  
Evidence of this feature will be that the context in which the project occurs has one or more pre-requisites above the introductory level and carries a 300-level or 400-level course designator.
2. It is the **culmination** of a sequence of previous academic work in one or more disciplines.  
That a project is a culmination will be evidenced through a written application by the student, which would explain the relation between specific previous work and the project. Clearly, a student will need to engage in planning in order to prepare for a MAP. Such planning would be in keeping with the “Comprehensive Academic Plan” that the faculty approved and that we now require students to complete when they declare a major.
3. It is intensively **mentored** by one or more faculty members.  
Generally, mentoring will take the form of regular (e.g. weekly) face-to-face meetings, but, if necessary, frequent electronic or telephone contact could substitute for some of these meetings.

4. The student demonstrates **initiative** in shaping the project at each stage from design to completion.

The evidence of student initiative will show up initially in the written application to undertake a MAP, see 2 above, although, depending on the context in which the MAP is undertaken, the major initiative may be evidenced at a later stage.

5. It results in a **product that is shared**, very possibly with an audience broader than the instructor and other students in a course.

By design, the product (research paper, performance, portfolio, intellectual journal etc.) has the potential for outside evaluation, public presentation, and archiving, although in each case the faculty member and student will decide on the appropriate venue and evaluation for the specific project.

### Clarification

**a. Elective.** We believe that completion of a MAP should not be a graduation requirement, although it is possible that a department would decide to require a MAP for completion of a major or for honors.

**b. Timing.** Following the sentiment expressed by faculty in the second of the faculty forums, we propose that these mentored advanced projects be offered late in a student's academic career, specifically, in the senior year, the summer before senior year, or, perhaps, the junior year.

**c. Context.** We propose that MAPs may take place in a discipline or may be interdisciplinary. They may take place in the context of a course or seminar, or independently. They may take place during the academic year or during the summer.

**d. Distinctions.** We recognize that there are some "boundary issues" in distinguishing between MAPs and other kinds of work. We believe that many projects that have previously been offered as four-credit independents, four-credit summer research projects, or concentration research projects have the five features listed above. But not all of this previous work would qualify, if all five features were lacking. What we propose, then, is not simply a grand re-naming of what we have been doing for years. Questions have also been asked about whether department or concentration seminars would qualify as MAPs; we suggest that although a project in a seminar might well qualify as a MAP, the term MAP not be applied to the seminars themselves. We hope that this distinction will make clear that the seminar project would need to constitute a significant—perhaps close to half a semester's work—part of that work in order for it to be designated as a MAP.

**e. Span.** The first stage of this curricular experiment has already indicated to us that many valuable MAP experiences need to develop over a longer time than just one semester or one ten-week period in the summer. We propose, therefore, that MAPs have the potential of a span extending beyond either of these periods.

**f. Crediting.** When MAP projects are mentored as an overload to a faculty member's five course load, we recommend that some form of "credit" be given. In particular, while the option of receiving a stipend for directing a summer MAP should be retained from the current scheme, we recommend that it should alternatively be possible for faculty members to accrue teaching credit for summer MAPs by using the same formula that has recently been established for receiving credit during the academic year (six MAPs = one four-credit course). Further, given our recognition that a MAP might extend over current time boundaries, we advise that the current formula for awarding credit and stipends be revised so that the College no longer rewards faculty members more highly for directing a series of isolated four-credit MAPs than for taking on a smaller number of more extended MAP experiences. An extended MAP might be credited, for instance, at 1.5 rather than 1.

**g. Planning.** Because of the implications for department staffing, a proposal to compensate a set of summer MAPs by adjusting the academic-year teaching load must be planned well in advance

and worked out with the department and the Dean of the College. Indeed, **all** proposals to compensate MAPS with teaching credit should be worked out in advance with the department and Dean.

**h. Oversight.** If the faculty endorses our proposed working definition, we recommend that work of oversight and assessment of the MAP experiment be lodged with the Associate Deans, who will take their instruction from this document.

**i. Additional issues** to be resolved in the course of the experiment.

-Should we limit the number of MAPs a single student could undertake?

### **Role of the President and the Dean**

The President and the Dean of the College have a crucial role in the realization of this proposal. We calculate that supporting 120 MAP projects in a year requires the equivalent of four FTE faculty. We understand that we will only know exactly how many new faculty positions are needed to support an ongoing MAP program after each department has carefully examined its own curriculum to see where it can re-adjust offerings and open up space for its faculty to direct MAPs. But while a department may be able to re-adjust the existing curriculum to some extent (for example, by offering an advanced class with low enrollments every other year instead of annually), it is more than likely that some new faculty lines will be needed to support a fully-established MAP option. By acknowledging this reality, the President and the Dean could greatly help the planning process. We, therefore, ask that the President and the Dean express their clear commitment to advocate for the addition of new tenure-track faculty positions needed to support a full-fledged MAP program.

## **II Proposal: Other Major Curricular Experiments**

In the discussions of the culminating academic experience, a concern we often heard was that other valuable and important academic experiences might be overlooked, because they might not fit under the emerging guidelines. In particular, faculty members were concerned that new curricular enterprises like advanced interdisciplinary seminars that did not include MAP projects would be excluded from important support and funding. Others were concerned that projects like a division-wide program of summer research with students who are less advanced or the complete overhaul of a departmental curriculum, would be ineligible for funding or disadvantaged when support is sought from a Fund for Excellence exclusively focused on the MAP project defined above. Clearly, we need to encourage and support a wider range of major curricular experiments. Therefore, to complement his announced support for culminating projects, we ask President Osgood to reserve a portion of the Fund for Excellence to support a wide variety of major curricular experiments at all levels of the curriculum. The Executive Council and the Associate Deans will work to develop further definition of the experiments falling into this wider category.