WHY CURRICULAR CHANGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAINT MARY?

Overall Context

Although important curricular changes occurred throughout the 90s, the leadership and faculty understood in the spring of 2001 that in light of a number of converging circumstances, we needed to take a dramatic step in curricular change. A changed world, global and diverse, and significant financial and social challenges in higher education demanded that we make bold and **comprehensive** changes in our undergraduate curriculum.

One of the assumptions we have worked with since the beginning of the initiative is that our curriculum is and will continue to be derived from the mission of the college/university. (*Might show our In Pursuit of Excellence..Circle of On-Going Improvement here, which clearly shows the central role of mission)*

Why Did We Do It?

Extensive research evidenced the need for ambitious aims: systemic and systematic, deep and pervasive, inclusive of all aspects of curriculum and delivery, encompassing the way we think about teaching and learning. <u>We could not escape certain facts:</u>

- We are and will continue to be in a highly competitive market that extends beyond the KC area to growing markets worldwide, the include public, for-profit, and non-profit institutions and agencies;
- Our competitors may also be or become our collaborators;
- Higher education is undergoing a revolution of "place" i.e. our MAT distance learning program enrolls students from multiple states and countries;
- There are rising and divergent expectations from our constituencies, including preparation, ethnicity, age, experience of students; and perceptions among prospective students, the public, employers, policymakers, and even our faculty, and there is meager general support and awareness by the public and popular culture as to the aims and benefits of liberal education;
    - Employers have an expanding appreciation of the applied and pragmatic side of liberal arts competencies;
    - The public views higher education as "**getting in, getting out, and getting a job;"**
    - "Those who care about the liberal arts better figure out what's wrong with our approach and our message before we are completely **marginalized and irrelevant**" (*Trusteeship*, September, October 1999)
    - "A liberal education that prepares students effectively for the 21st century must be both conceptually **rigorous and pragmatic**." (Association of American Colleges and Universities, August 2001);

- On the question of learning styles, we have expanded access in this nation well beyond the minority of our high school graduates who learn effectively in an abstract conceptual framework to include those who learn most effectively in an **applied context.** Clearly, our pedagogy in collegiate settings has not kept up with this change." *(Trusteeship*, 1999)

- Seminal research and writing **on learning** are remarkably consistent in the picture they paint for institutional change and the nature of learning;
- "Learning Communities" provide a structure for teaching and learning that increase student retention and engagement, that allow for curricular coherence among disciplines, and facilitate active and collaborative learning;
- There is evidence and compelling argument that the fragmentation, and specialization in tradition curriculum, <u>especially in general education curriculum</u>, does not serve the highest levels of learning. Therefore,
  - Students must be able to demonstrate a variety of critical skills within a variety of disciplines, and to think in **"interdisciplinary**" ways.
  - Students must be prepared to live and work in a **diverse, global society.**

What Are The Results?

In response to research, and to our history, mission, and the current environment, we are an "**Applied Liberal Arts University**." As such, we believe that a critical intelligence, depth and breadth of learning, and liberating aspects of the humanities and sciences are more important than ever in the diverse, interdependent, global society of the 21st century. Thus, Saint Mary's concept of ***applied liberal arts*** embraces the rich history and meaning of the liberal arts while intentionally connecting learning to the real world in concrete and practical ways. In this way, the liberal arts combine with active, experiential learning and career preparation so that students may use talents, knowledge, competencies, and energies to make a positive contribution in the world.

We established new **Learning Goals for the 21st Century Liberal Education** and new **University Learning Outcomes.** These goals and outcomes and areas of investigation derive from faculty work and adaptation of an ongoing initiative sponsored through the American Association of Colleges and Universities, are aligned with best practices now advocated by accrediting agencies and national professional organizations, and validate the work of Saint Mary faculty in identifying similar outcomes.

We implemented **Foundation Courses/Requirements** in the areas of writing, math, technology, and speech.

We implemented **Freshman Learning Communities (LC),** which provide an academic place for students to "hang their hats." Freshmen enroll in one of a variety of

interdisciplinary LC, team-taught by two full-time faculty members. Each LC emphasizes writing and speaking skills, experiential, active learning. Evaluations from the first year of implementation (2002-03) give evidence of high student and faculty satisfaction. Faculty continue to design formal assessments for a longitudinal evaluation of LC goals.

We are implementing during this academic year fourteen **Idea Seminars** as a critical piece of our general education. These seminars are designated courses across a variety of disciplines, each giving intentional emphasis to the concept of global interdependence and common themes of interconnectedness, diversity, and change. Writing is also emphasized in the Idea Seminars.

We will implement a **Senior Capstone Experience** that will include a service learning requirement and integrative reflection, in addition to practical experience in writing a resume and interviewing.

At the Center for Graduate and Continuing Studies, we have changed general education requirements to include two six-credit hour team-taught **Interdisciplinary Seminars** to ensure that transfer students are oriented to the mission of USM, have a theology and writing experience and other foci such as philosophy, fine arts, and history with USM fauclty.

In addition to these aspects of the curricular initiative, we have implemented a new major in **Global Studies and a Global Studies Institute (GSI).** Generally, our students our too insular, and this major and institute offer additional emphasis on the need for a more global education. The Global Studies Institute, though very new, is off to a good start, sponsoring debates and brown-bag lunch, under the leadership of Dr. Nicholas Riegg, a former diplomat with the US Department of State. Dr. Riegg is actively pursuing funding to support the GSI. Rationale for the GSI follows:

- Invests in an activity with <u>academic</u> focus
- Addresses a <u>critical emerging academic learning outcome</u> in higher education, defined by forces and factors of a global 21st century society, advocating global awareness and experience as an essential learning outcome for educated citizenry. Vehicle for addressing insularity of our students
- Connects with essential aspects of cutting edge curricular initiative
    - relates to implementation of Globalization Learning Community
    - relates to interdisciplinary emphasis in LC, Idea Seminars, and Senior Capstone Seminar,
    - relates to Global Interdependence emphases in Idea Seminars;
    - relates to emphasis on active learning strategies
    - relates to "applied" liberal arts, connecting liberal studies with real world experiences
- Provides potential <u>for high visibility and recognition</u> far outside immediate area and increased <u>engagement</u> of USM in greater KC area

- Serves both immediate and strategic purposes
- Complements timing with change to university
- Provides interdisciplinary focus inclusive of broad range of academic departments
- Provides for increased intellectual vitality across campus through conferences, speakers, panels, Global Issues Journal
- Provides potential for multiple collaborations, KC area and beyond, to international collaborations
- Serves as a recruitment tool for Global Studies major
- Provides potential for impact in marketing university
- Answers requirement for time, energy, commitment to "jump start" Institute outside of heavy faculty loads
- Provides exciting potential to grow language program with innovative "applied" approach
- Provides opportunity for faculty and student international exchanges through Institute
- Provides opportunity to develop graduate certificate programs in areas of international affairs
- Addresses NCA accreditation standards in terms of currency of curricular experiences, gaining skills and knowledge necessary to function in diverse local, national, and global societies
- Involves intentional focus for funding and fund raising outside of regular IA funding sources
- Seizes opportunity to bring to USM a director retiring in this area with exceptional academic credentials and international experience and access to national and international contacts

Why Is This a Good Thing?

The curricular initiative has revitalized the faculty and the university as a whole. We are positioned to meet the challenges we have. We are serving students. We are addressing circumstances and needs of the greater world. We are engaged in our mission. We still have much work to do.