

Models of a Liberal Arts Program

By Dr. David Rozema, Department of Philosophy

(for discussion by the General Studies Council and Roundtables)

The idea of a liberal education—or, more descriptively, a liberating education—goes all the way back to ancient times. Socrates, for example, says that a truly wise person would need to learn both the methods and the objects of study in arithmetic, geometry (including calculus), astronomy, harmonics, and dialectic (which includes logic, grammar, and rhetoric). Aristotle puts forth a similar curriculum, adding politics (which included ethics) and biology. Confucius and Lao Tzu especially emphasize the aspect of social justice, but not to the exclusion of any of these other subjects. Medieval universities taught the Trivium—grammar, dialectic and rhetoric; and the Quadrivium—arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. The descendant of these ideas in our time is what is often called the “Core,” or the “Liberal Arts Core” curriculum, which can be found at all Liberal Arts colleges/universities, and at many larger universities as well. (Corresponding with this core curriculum, many universities are organized in such a way as to have a College of Arts and Sciences, which is the College which offers most of these core courses.)

The goal of a Liberal Arts education is, as the name suggests, to “liberate” a student from the evils of ignorance, indifference, and mere appetite. Thus, a liberating education will aim at the discovery of truth, the appreciation of beauty, and the development of good judgment. That is, a liberal arts education should have a beneficial effect on the mind, the spirit, and the body. Ideally, every course in the university should help in at least one of these aspects, but a liberal arts core curriculum would include courses that are more comprehensive and more directly designed to aim at these ends. Strategically, this means that every course in a liberal arts core curriculum should be rigorous, challenging and formative (i.e., not merely informative); every course should be interactive, where students get practice doing something—whether it is engaging in a discussion, giving a performance, carrying out an experiment, giving a proof, writing an essay or a poem, or competing in a sport. Class sizes should be relatively small, and should be taught by full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty.

Apart from the Liberal Arts curriculum—several models of which are given below—the university should require a minimal standard of competence in writing, mathematics, and understanding a second language. There should be competency exams for each of these areas, and basic courses available for those who do not yet meet the standard. Students should not be allowed to take Liberal Arts courses in History, Literature, Politics/Ethics or Philosophy (or Intellectual History) until they have met the competency requirements for writing; they should not be allowed to take Liberal Arts courses in Mathematics, Natural Science or Social Science until they have met the competency requirements for mathematics.

So, here are several models to consider:

A. Core Model

History	2 courses (6 hours)
Literature	2 courses (6 hours)
Politics/Ethics	1 course (3 hours)
Philosophy	1 course (3 hours)
Mathematics	2 courses (6 hours)
Natural Science w/lab	2 courses (8 hours)
Social Science	1 course (3 hours)
Fine Art (Music/Art/Theater)	1 course (3 hours)
Physical Education (activity)	6 courses (3 hours)

Total of 18 courses (41 hours)

The History, Literature, Politics/Ethics, and Philosophy courses should all be writing intensive, and should focus on seminal works.

The Natural Science courses should both be in the same specific science.

The Mathematics courses should be more advanced than college algebra.

The Social Science course cannot be a History course, and should emphasize the method(s) of Social Science.

The Fine Arts course(s) should focus on the history and/or theory of the art.

The P.E. courses should all require participation in a particular sport or activity.

B. Core/Distribution Model

Core Courses

History	1 course (3 hours)
Literature	1 courses (3 hours)
Politics/Ethics	1 course (3 hours)
Philosophy	1 course (3 hours)
Mathematics	1 course (3 hours)
Natural Science w/lab	1 course (4 hours)
Social Science	1 course (3 hours)
Fine Art (Music/Art/Theater)	1 course (3 hours)
Physical Education (activity)	6 courses (3 hours)

Total of Core Courses 14 courses (28 hours)

Distribution Courses

Take 1 upper division course (3-4 hours) from each of the following areas:

Humanities (Literature, Modern Languages, Philosophy, Speech)

Natural Science & Mathematics (Biology, Chemistry, Earth Science, Mathematics, Physics)

Social Science (Criminal Justice, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology)

Fine Arts (Art, Communication, Music, Theater)

Total of Distribution courses 4 courses (12-13 hours)

Total of 18 courses (40-41 hours)

C. Interdisciplinary Model

This model has, as a core, a four semester sequence of courses in intellectual history, to be taken by all students during their freshman and sophomore years. These courses will be taught by a team of faculty, with one person from each of the following areas: History, Philosophy, Literature, Fine Arts. They would be 5 credit-hour courses.

In addition to this core sequence, there would be course requirements (as above) in Mathematics, Natural Science, Social Science and Physical Education.

Intellectual History	4 courses (20 hours)
Mathematics	2 courses (6 hours)
Natural Science w/lab	2 courses (8 hours)
Social Science	1 course (3 hours)
Physical Education (activity)	6 courses (3 hours)

Total of 18 courses (40 hours)

Many universities that have a Liberal Arts curriculum also have a designated Liberal Arts Faculty—i.e., faculty who concentrate on teaching Liberal Arts courses, although they usually also teach courses for majors and minors within their respective departments.

Many schools also require that Liberal Arts courses be taken in a certain order. (The order is more or less specified: some schools specify which courses should be taken in what year; others specify which course or set of courses are to be taken in what order.)

Of the three models above, the first two (A or B) could be implemented much more easily and quickly at UNK than the last one (C).