



Harvard committee recommends returning religion to curriculum

BOSTON, Massachusetts (AP) -- Harvard University, founded 370 years ago to train Puritan ministers, should again require all undergraduates to study religion, along with U.S. history and ethics, a faculty committee is recommending.

The surprisingly bold recommendations come after years of rancorous internal debate over what courses should be required of all Harvard students. The current core curriculum has been criticized for focusing on narrow academic questions rather than real-world issues students would likely confront beyond the wrought-iron gates of Harvard Square.

The report calls for Harvard to require students to take a course in "reason and faith," which could include classes on topics such as religion and democracy, Charles Darwin or a current course called "Why Americans Love God and Europeans Don't."

"Harvard is no longer an institution with a religious mission, but religion is a fact that Harvard's graduates will confront in their lives," the report says, noting 94 percent of incoming students report discussing religion and 71 percent attend services.

"As academics in a university we don't have to confront religion if we're not religious, but in the world, they will have to," Alison Simmons, a philosophy professor who co-chaired the committee, said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

The report, which has been circulated to faculty and whose contents were first reported Wednesday by The Harvard Crimson student paper, also says Harvard students also "need to have an understanding of American history, American institutions, and American values," calling for a requirement to study the United States in a comparative context with other countries.

The recommendations are the latest chapter in a lengthy, tumultuous saga over revamping the university's core curriculum, which dates to the 1970s. Former President Lawrence Summers made reform a priority in 2001, but the work of several committees bogged down and initial recommendations were criticized as weak. Summers resigned earlier this year, forced out by faculty anger at his handling of a range of matters, including the curriculum review.

Harvard's core has shied away from the "Great Books" approach to general education, focusing on "approaches to knowledge" rather than "bodies of knowledge." But the report notes few Harvard students plan to become academics, while more than half plan to attend business, law or medical school. The new recommendations are clearly geared toward rounding out the liberal arts education of those students.

In addition to ethics, "reason and faith" and the "United States and the World," students would be required to do coursework in two other areas: science and technology, and "Cultural Traditions and Cultural Change."

The recommendations also include making writing and analytical reasoning part of the general requirements, and retaining foreign language work.

The recommendations, by a six-member faculty panel, offer only general guidelines about the kinds of classes that would count. The draft may be revised and would be adopted only after passing a vote by Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

The State University of New York and George Mason University have adopted general education requirements that include mandatory American history.

In the Ivy League, Columbia University has a significant core curriculum with courses that include material on religion, and Dartmouth currently requires a course in the analysis of religion, though that will change next year, according to its Web site. But Harvard would be the only school in that group requiring students to take courses in both religion and U.S. history.

Public colleges in Colorado, along with Ohio University and Arizona State, are among the other universities currently reviewing general education requirements, said Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a generally conservative academic group that has urged universities to toughen general education requirements.

"From the looks of this new proposal, it is extremely good news," Neal said. "It appears Harvard has rejected the 'anything goes' distribution requirements in place at so many colleges in favor of a more structured, rigorous and cohesive core curriculum."

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