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# The Cool Curriculum

University of Dayton

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## NEWS

*Thursday April 2, 2015*

### The Cool Curriculum

As a sophomore, Nichole Henger '14 was looking to add something different. She was majoring in environmental biology, the field in which she holds her bachelor's degree. "I was working with blowflies," she said. "But I was also interested in how people interacted with the environment."

She learned of a relatively new minor called Sustainability, Energy and the Environment (SEE). "It sounded cool."

"Cool" is an appropriate description of SEE, which along with other curricular initiatives, such as the Common Academic Program (CAP), the University's new undergraduate general education program, are transforming a UD education.

"The spirit of CAP is that it forces students — and faculty members — to wrestle with ideas from different perspectives," said Bob Brecha, SEE coordinator and professor of physics.

That can be as traditional as first-year students comparing Aquinas and Aristotle, as contemporary as looking at Bob Dylan's lyrics through the lens of gender studies or as personal as a psych major taking an art course that makes him look at things differently — so his rap group can really make a difference.

During the program's development, administrators half-joked that they should change the name to "Uncommon" Academic Program for the way it integrates disciplines and Marianist-inspired learning

outcomes in a way that is uniquely UD. CAP draws from *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*, a document that lays out the purposes of a Marianist education and delineates specific outcomes. CAP is the means of delivering those learning outcomes.

"CAP makes more explicit what had been implicit — outcomes, connections between disciplines, pedagogy, ways of knowing," said Juan Santamarina, chair of the history department and chair of the Common Academic Program committee.

Those Marianist-inspired CAP outcomes include scholarship, faith traditions, diversity, community, practical wisdom, critical evaluation of our times and vocation. (See related article for descriptions of each.) Some of the requirements sound familiar — history, religious studies, philosophy, English, math, social science, arts and natural science. "Crossing boundaries" or "diversity and social justice" may be less familiar, along with requirements for advanced study and a capstone.

"Advanced courses build on the previous ones," English professor R. Alan Kimbrough said of CAP. "It is a developmental model, consistent with the Marianist ideal of educating the whole person. It pays attention to diversity, social justice and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition."

The "critical evaluation of our times" outcome is rooted in the admonition of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, the founder of the Society of Mary, to read the signs of the times. To help accomplish that, Kimbrough said, "CAP gets people to make connections among the things they are studying."

Making connections runs through the SEE minor, too. Most SEE courses fulfill CAP requirements for science, ethics and diversity as well as advanced philosophy, advanced religious studies and advanced history. Students pursuing the SEE minor can even fulfill their CAP arts requirement by taking English 342, Literature and the Environment.

With CAP, those connections start happening as soon as first-year students embark on their academic careers. Learning-living communities where students interact in and out of the classroom help them connect history, religion, philosophy and writing. Some learning-living communities are designed for specific majors such as teacher education, social science, and science and engineering (for women students in those two areas). SEE, Building Communities for Social Justice, Business and Marianist Values, Writing and the Arts and Core: Human Values in a Pluralistic Culture are open to all majors.

Core stresses interdisciplinary connections as it analyzes human values in a pluralistic culture. Like all the learning-living communities, the first year of Core is "a CAP delivery system," according director and history professor Bill Trollinger, because all Core courses fulfill CAP requirements.

Core's two introductory courses integrate English, history, philosophy and religious studies. Through those two courses, students earn credit for 100-level history, religious studies and philosophy as well as 200-level English and advanced historical study. All told, that's 15 hours toward CAP requirements.

These curricular developments change students and change faculty members, too. Trollinger has experienced that change. "When I started teaching, I was rigorous," he said. "I still am."

But there is a difference. "Then I thought in terms of a bell curve," he said, on fitting grades for each class into a standard distribution. Now the emphasis is on student learning. If a student masters the material, Trollinger believes that earns an "A." "Grade distribution hasn't changed much," he said, "but it's a different way of teaching. If we would have educated citizens at the end of their college days who could and would learn on their own, I'd love that."

The "crossing boundaries" requirements may sound new. But whether it's called crossing boundaries, interdisciplinary studies, learning at the intersections — the concept has been at UD in the past, if not as explicit as it is now.

Crossing Boundaries–Inquiry requires students to take courses outside their division. Santamarina explained that these courses "have been designed for the non-major with CAP outcomes in mind." So students outside of the School of Business Administration might satisfy the requirement by taking Introduction to Entrepreneurship.

Crossing boundaries is also how Bob Dylan makes it into academia.

English professor John McCombe studied British literature in grad school. He teaches a survey course on it at UD. But he also teaches a class on Bob Dylan.

"I've read every book on him," McCombe said. "Many of them are by academics — in literature, theology, communications, gender studies — so I thought a course on academic writing on his work would work."

His course is a great fit for CAP, with its emphasis on learning how to see something from the perspectives of several disciplines.

"Born a Jew, Dylan converted to Christianity in the late 1970s, moving from being a counter-cultural icon to fundamentalism. And his early songs have numerous biblical references. So religious studies scholars were interested in him," McCombe said. "Dylan's connection to the civil rights movement of the 1960s interests social scientists. Songs with misogynist lyrics interest those in gender studies. In

English, he's not technically a poet, but his lyrics have meaning to people in the same way that poetry does.

"I was crossing boundaries before I knew the term."

Like the new class on Dylan, a SEE course in sustainability research also fulfills the Crossing Boundaries–Integrative requirement. Doing the research, working with a group, preparing a presentation — "It's like a minor thesis. It gets you ready for graduate school," said Henger, who is now in Syracuse, New York, in the Forestry and Natural Resource Management Program at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science.

Electronic waste was the subject of Henger's UD research group: "Everybody has a phone. What happens when you're done with it?"

They found out. And it wasn't pretty: Third World children sorting electronic waste in toxic dumps. So, "we tried to change behavior," she said. For Sustainability Week, they educated others on the hazards of electronic waste and publicized the electronic waste bins on campus.

Nearing the end of her first year of graduate school, Henger is thinking of what her master's thesis might be.

She also is thinking of the future beyond that. Her program is normally two years, but she's looking at combining her science degree with a master's in public administration. By connecting disciplines and looking at the world from different perspectives while at UD, she said, "I realized the role politics played in dealing with the environment. It was often more than research."

A University of Dayton education gets one ready for more than grad school.