

Professors protest new curriculum
By Jennifer Burk - jburk@macon.com
The Macon Telegraph
Saturday, April 12, 2008

ON THE WEB

- The USG Core Curriculum Initiative: www.strongfoundations.usg.edu
- Faculty petition: www.georgiacorecurriculum.org

More than 350 professors have signed an online petition protesting a proposed curriculum they say would diminish students' knowledge of American subject matter and complicate their ability to transfer between colleges.

University System of Georgia Chancellor Erroll Davis last year announced the revamping of the core curriculum at the state's 35 public colleges and universities as an effort to better prepare students to live in a global society.

Actual changes to the curriculum wouldn't begin to go into effect until at least 2011, but when two proposed models were posted online in February for faculty review, some professors were not pleased.

"I am concerned that transfer could turn out to be a nightmare," said Linda Hyde, a Gordon College associate professor of biology who signed the petition.

Because Gordon is a two-year school, it's important that students' core classes transfer to four-year schools, she said. Currently, that is assured. But in the proposed curriculum, it's unclear whether a class at one college would fulfill the same requirements at another, Hyde said.

"Flexibility is a very good thing until there is so much flexibility that we worry students at our college would have a hard time transferring classes to Macon State," for example, said Theresa Stanley, an associate professor of biology at Gordon who also signed the petition.

Georgia College & State University President Dorothy Leland, whom Davis chose to spearhead the curriculum changes, said some faculty members are considering the models to be finished products even though they are only preliminary.

"There is much work still to be done and much input still to be received," Leland wrote in an e-mail interview.

William Vencill, a University of Georgia professor of crop and soil sciences who participated in a retreat where the models were developed, also said faculty members should remember the proposed core requirements are still "extremely preliminary."

Leland said there is no perfect time to review and revise the core curriculum, and it's been 10 years since it was last done.

"There's an emerging national consensus among higher education leaders that public education must re-focus its expectations for student learning if our nation is to remain competitive in the technologically interconnected, global environment of the 21st century," Leland wrote in her e-mail. "Since our students spend most of their first two years of college completing the core curriculum, its academic viability - and its success in preparing students for the future - are key indicators of the educational quality provided by the University System of Georgia."

A core curriculum typically consists of general education classes that students take during their first two years of college. The system's current curriculum includes areas such as humanities and fine arts, science, mathematics, technology and social sciences.

One of the proposed curricula includes areas such as "aesthetics in cultural contexts" and "science, technology, self and society." The other includes areas such as "addressing global issues with sustainable responses" and "understanding continuity and change in the global environment."

Some faculty members say the two proposals don't have enough basis in general education.

Both Hyde and Stanley said they were concerned about what they saw as a lack of exposure to science and the scientific method. Under one of the models, it would be possible for a student to graduate with no exposure to laboratory science, Stanley said.

Rebecca Lanning, a Macon State College associate professor of music who signed the petition, said the current and proposed curricula lack focus in the arts.

"We cannot deny that the arts are an integral part of a society's health," she said. "We need to make room for students to truly express and explore that part of their development."

Without the basic foundation of general education and American subject matter, students can't begin to learn about the world around them, said George Rainbolt, professor and chairman of the philosophy department at Georgia State University. Rainbolt helped pen the petition with Walter Evans of Augusta State University and Jeremiah Alberg of the University of West Georgia.

"You can't put a roof on before you build a foundation," Rainbolt said. "You can't study the world until you know your own country. You don't have any points of reference."

However, Leland said the higher education reports that have been posted online for faculty review "make it clear that understanding of globalization entails understanding one's own nation and its role in a globally interconnected environment."

Some faculty members also say they have a lack of involvement in the process. About 45 faculty and administrators developed the models at a February retreat, but Evans, a professor of English and director of humanities who participated in the retreat, said the process was too fast and predetermined.

"The bottom line is the faculty are the ones who are talking to the students every day," Rainbolt said. "Building a core without talking to students is like building a car without talking to anybody who drives them."

Leland said all system colleges and universities have representation on the curriculum committees, and research reports are available online for faculty members to read.

"Our goal has been to stimulate campus-level conversations. But I think it is now clear that we need to take a different, more active and aggressive approach," she said.

That will include campus teams of five faculty representatives at each of the colleges and universities, as well as regional seminars and workshops to keep the faculty informed and allow them more opportunities to comment.

"The petition contains some useful insights and suggestions," Leland said. "It is helping us to identify some significant misunderstandings and to address these concerns through such things as expanded faculty involvement, workshops and informational seminars."