

A DISCUSSION ON CLUSTERS—3 OCTOBER 2002

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Anne: To begin, let's start with a definition of clusters, as compared to the other options students have when supplementing their bachelor's degree: a minor, an endorsement, or a bachelor's degree with a composite.

Rhonda: All right, definitions then. On our campus we have bachelor's degrees that fall into three general types. There are the specialized bachelor degrees that are 70 credits plus the general education component. The specialized degree wouldn't have a minor or clusters. There are the integrated degrees that are 45 hours, and they require a minor or two clusters, or a minor and a cluster to bring the total to 70 hours.

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Then you have the education category. The education degrees are primarily determined by the State. Usually, if you are taking the major/minor option, it's a 30/20 split, plus the teacher education core. So an education major would have 30 credits for the major, 20 credits for a minor, and the education core, which is somewhere between 24-25 credits. Education majors can also choose a composite, which eliminates the need for a minor. This would be 45 credits, all in one field, with no education minor. Again, these are terms defined by the State. They say a composite must have 45 credits. Education majors can also earn endorsements, which the state defines as 6 to 20 hours in a specific area. For instance, if you majored in English, you could pick up an endorsement and teach journalism.

Finally, there's an emphasis. Sometimes one major needs several career pathways, but two-thirds of the career is based on a common core. Once students have the common core requirements, they can emphasize a particular area. For example, English has the common English core; and then they can emphasize literature, creative writing, or professional writing. Several departments are offering emphases. The Art Department is doing this, even with their specialized degree. In addition to completing the fifty-hour common core, students can emphasize in areas such as three-dimensional studies or graphic design.

Anne: At what point in their academic career should, or must, students declare their clusters? And how will they register their plan?

Kevin M.: Obviously, it should be as early in their career as possible. Right now, because we're just starting the system, some of our senior class members seem very frustrated, asking, "What do I have to do?" and "Am I required to do this?" But I think as we continue, people will understand the cluster system—that it's an early process where students determine what will be needed in their careers or career desires. They'll recognize that the cluster is a complement to their education. Currently, we have a form that helps the students outline what will be in their clusters. Also, this process involves not just the student. The advisor will have an important role in planning and approving clusters, as will the college dean as well. The approval process requires students to sit down with their advisors and review what their goals are, outline the best classes, and make sure this course of action makes sense for the student.

Anne: After the student's cluster has been approved, how will the cluster be reflected on the transcript?

Kevin M.: It won't necessarily be reflected on the transcript as much as on the grad report. The registrar's office will key in the student's outlined cluster-plan, and then students and advisors will be able to pull up the grad report, showing the agreed-upon cluster requirements.

Anne: Seniors are currently required to have clusters, correct?

Kevin M.: Well, in a way, yes. There will be some leniency for the average senior because the program is so new. But, for example, seniors who are earning University Studies degrees will be required to complete clusters because this is a major part of that degree.

Cheryl: So far we've only had three or four clusters submitted.

Kevin S.: That will increase dramatically as we see more integrated majors come online and when students are advised earlier about their programs.

Anne: If a student submits a cluster form and then does not complete it, can he still graduate?

Cheryl: If a student takes a cluster, that becomes part of his graduation requirements, and he must complete it for graduation unless a petition is filed and accepted.

Anne: How many students are expected to take clusters? And which departments will be the most impacted by clusters?

Rhonda: I don't think there is any way to know yet, but here's an example of how clusters may be used in some departments. The Biology Department had a specialized degree for students who wanted to go into medicine, dentistry, or other graduate programs. Now the department has opted to offer an integrated degree. Students choosing to go to grad school can pick up a cluster of chemistry and a cluster of physics. This will totally revamp the way some biology students are advised. The department will strongly encourage clusters for students intending to go to grad school, whereas before they would have said, "Just go take a specialized degree." Based on this example, it is easy to see that some programs will see a lot of clusters, while others might not see any.

Kevin S.: With the two largest majors being specialized, Elementary Education and Business, that will somewhat limit the number of clusters on campus. However, the Business Management Department is looking at a change, which may happen in this coming year's catalog. If we decide as a department to go this way, we'll still offer a specialized degree; but part of the degree requirements will include a 12-credit cluster from outside the department. Students would still specialize because they need some entry-level skills. But the outside cluster will add diversity and marketability. Maybe they'll take a cluster in International Studies or something else. We have several pre-med, pre-dentistry students in our program because they realize that practicing medicine is a business. In this case, we may work something out with them so that they may take two clusters outside the Business department. If the Business Management Department does implement this, it will add a whole bunch of clusters—nearly 1100 students with clusters in a four-year period.

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ADVISING CLUSTERS

Anne: How can an advisor effectively advise students who are looking at classes outside the advisor's field of study?

Kevin S.: One challenge in advising clusters will be, for example, if the Recreational Leadership or Communication major wants a cluster in business and the student is told, “Go see Brother Shiley.” If I’m advising someone, and I don’t know anything about Rec. Leadership, how will I help? How will I know which business courses best complement Rec. Ed.? Suddenly I now advise the whole campus? To help with this, in the College of Business and Communication, we’ve done a smorgasbord approach to help advisors. While planning for a cluster should individualized—the student’s decision with advisor direction—the advisor needs some help on how to give that direction. If we have a bunch of pre-fab clusters, if you will, then an advisor could whip out samples of what might work and show these to the student. Together they may have to tweak the cluster if it’s not right, but at least you’re starting with some organization instead of, “Well let’s see, when you were a freshman you took this class, so let’s put this in the cluster.” So, we’re offering some organization without taking away the student’s prerogative to be able to define his or her clusters. We may not totally be within the letter of the law with some of these definitions, I’m afraid; but we don’t see any other way to manage it.

Ron: We have to be careful when talking about pre-formed clusters because the vision of clusters, as I understand it, coming from President Bednar on down, is that we are going to be different from state colleges or other places in that we’re not going to say “Okay, here’s a requirement. Just plug in, get your degree, and run.” The idea of clusters is that students will have a voice—it should be a student-initiated program. It’s not someone dictating to the student, “Okay, you need this; go take this cluster.” First of all, no one says a student *should* go the cluster route. The student and advisor will make that decision. And if it’s working ideally, the student should have a large say in what goes into that cluster, with help from advisors and college deans, perhaps even department chairs. But having said that, what Kevin says is totally true. To give a specific example, I deal with the print journalism students. Let’s say, as an advisor, I have a student whose eventual career goal is to write for an agriculture publication. He’s grown up on a farm, so he doesn’t feel like he needs a ton of agriculture background; but he would like some. This student would choose a cluster in agriculture. As an advisor, I know nothing about agriculture. To help with this problem, the university

is asking each college to provide at least a skeletal outline of what could work as a cluster. That way I could get out the list and say, “Well, over in the Agriculture department they think a cluster should have this and this. Now how does that fit with your plans? How should we modify this, or should we modify it?” We still must keep the emphasis on students making the decisions, working hand-in-hand with an advisor; but those lists are being currently compiled. I went to Academic Council last week, and they asked the college deans to put this information together.

Anne: And how will it be disseminated throughout the university?

Ron: My understanding is that copies will be made and distributed through colleges and departments, but I don’t envision them ever being put in the catalog because then it sounds too prescriptive. I don’t think they’re ever going to be distributed *en masse* to students. I think these lists would be more of a resource for the advisor.

Rhonda: A number of departments have been listing the clusters they recommend in their advising packet—not as clusters offered in their department but as clusters that students in their department might want to consider.

Ron: For example, one of the popular clusters offered in the Communication Department is Interpersonal Communication. Many people are seeing the need to help their students gain interpersonal skills, and many students like the interpersonal area. As a department we sat down and outlined 12 credits of core classes that we would recommend for non-communication majors wanting a cluster in the interpersonal area. But it’s not a one-size-fits-all kind of a deal. It will be up to the advisor and student to see if that size fits that particular student. The worry is, from my understanding and from the discussion in Academic Council, that if you create a list of clusters in the catalog, students will look at it as a required list rather than as a resource.

How then, if clusters are to be student-driven, is

Anne: A concern I’ve heard expressed by faculty is that, even when they are juniors and seniors, students don’t really know what they’ll need for their career because they are not familiar enough with their field. How then, if clusters are to be student-driven, is the student going to wisely choose which clusters are going to best fit?

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Kevin S.: As an advisor I look at skills sets, or a student's strengths and weaknesses. In our area there are so many career paths that a student can't possibly be ready for all of them. Instead, it's more a development of the right skills, so we might encourage a student to study Interpersonal Communication or maybe computer skills. Currently, we have something called enrichment, which will convert to the outside cluster I mentioned earlier, and the advisor and student might look at where strengthening is needed. It may not be focusing on a career path but rather on skills that need more development. That is one way to look at it.

Ellen: With our English Secondary Ed. students, I picture them coming in and being confused like your average freshman or sophomore. "Should I get a minor?" "Should I get a B.A., a B.S., or a B.S. composite?" It can be kind of intimidating. This might be the point at which the advisor would step in and say, "Well, if you get the English Ed. degree and pick up an endorsement for journalism, which is six credits..." and I hope that this would not be too creative "...then why not tack on a couple of sociology classes, or a couple of political science classes, which would really enrich your ability to teach. Perhaps this will even give you something to fall back on should you ever leave teaching." In a situation such as this, the journalism endorsement, combined with the sociology classes, would then be one cluster.

Ron: The success of this program, I believe, will depend on the quality of advising the students will get. I think we are realistic enough to know that for some students, curriculum and ideology take a second place to expediency: "What is the quickest way to get out of here?" "How can I use this class that I transferred from UVSC?" Students might focus fitting classes into a cluster with little regard to how those classes will help them in the future. That is the advisor's role. Let's consider Steven R. Covey's concept of "let's begin with the end in mind." The advisor can ask what the student's direction is and where he or she wants to go from there. I do not believe that we should automatically rule out including a class in a cluster just because it was a transfer class, but the advisor can help the student see how that class fits into the cluster's structure. To answer the question "are students really ready to make these kinds of decisions," in many cases, of course they are not. That is why they have an academic advisor.

COMPOSITES AND OTHER OPTIONS OF STUDY

Anne: What suggestions would you give to faculty for answering the student's question, "Should I choose clusters, or a major/minor combination, or perhaps a composite or endorsements in the case of education majors?"

David: In Secondary Education we have an interesting department. We have three former administrators and two social-studies-composite folks. If you talk to our administrators, they are very much in favor of a major/minor combination rather than a composite. They are looking at the student as a prospective employer would, thinking, "When someone applies for a teaching position, I would like to see breadth. I would like to see someone who could teach both math and English." Others in the department look at the composite as a way of *clustering*, gaining a little more depth in one area in order to be more effective in that area. It is interesting to me that much of the advice faculty give depends on their own career paths—"a composite worked well for me, so it should work well for the students." I think in order to make this work, there are three options to consider when advising students. One is that we prescribe things like the State Education Board does. Our composite is driven by what the State says; therefore, the students will take these classes and build a composite, so they can receive certification. The next option is on the opposite end of the spectrum. We have students come to us with a list of classes and an explanation of what they want their educational experience to be. We can then organize them, so they get what they want. Finally, the middle ground, in my opinion, looks a lot like the agency model, where we educate the students' decisions, where we allow choice within a framework of education. I think the key here is that we must become educators of this agency. To be honest, I don't think I am there yet. I'm not sure I know where to draw the line between allowing the student to go where he or she wants and where I should include my input. That is where I would put our emphasis as faculty—educating ourselves so that we can advise the students.

Ellen: And to do that, I think advising faculty need more resources. As the average advisor, I often think, "I never know this stuff." I always have to look things up. I don't even know my own program, no matter how hard I try. What I would love is to have a link on the website for advisors only, where I could

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look up how clusters are supposed to work, see what the ideal is, and what are a few options. Advisors should be cautioned to be careful, to be flexible, and to work with these kids; with information such as this, then I could be a good advisor, I think.

Ron: In going back to the original question of an advisor feeling inadequate—which is probably true of all of us—we should remember that clusters are only one option. We don't have any sort of predictions on numbers, but certainly a student could go through here and take an integrated major with a minor, graduate, and be happy, with the student never cluttering his mind with clusters. The same is true for the advisor. We can't use the words "required" and "cluster" in the same sentence. This is an option that may be very helpful to some students. It might promote some careers a little better than the traditional approach. I don't know that anyone should feel threatened by clusters. We don't know a lot of answers, but we do have resources and people you can call. We have an advising center at the college level; we have an advising center for the whole university; and certainly the deans and associate deans are supposed to be in tune with what is going on with these things. As advisors, we should use clusters as a tool rather than be directed by them.

IMPACT OF NON-MAJORS IN MAJOR COURSES

Anne: How do you foresee departments across campus handling the demand clusters may create with non-majors coming into major classes? How will departments accommodate the sheer demand for certain courses?

Kevin S.: Well, that's another reason why I appreciate recommended cluster lists. This allows departments to think about prerequisites and say, "Ok, these are the upper-division classes where we can accommodate non-majors without diminishing the experience of our majors." But perhaps there are other classes where we may have to say "Sorry, we cannot include you; otherwise we will totally ruin it for the majors." Perhaps, if we let non-majors in, the student will be lost. Working with a cluster list, we can try to prevent some of this. Also, we could forecast which courses are likely to be stressed, and we could better develop contingency plans—hiring adjunct or something.

Anne: Will prerequisites still be required for a student wanting a particular class for a cluster?

Kevin S.: I think prerequisites are still there, but I've had pressure from other areas saying that we should allow these students into certain classes because the course is on the list. I know in the Art Department this is a primary concern: "You must let me in because it's on my cluster list."

Ron: That is a major problem with a published cluster list.

Kevin S.: But at least if the faculty have some sort of list, certain departments will be able to give input as to which classes should or should not be on the list. They could at least try to control this problem.

Ron: The question brings up a larger question across the whole university: to what extent do we service our own students? And to what extent are we a service component for the entire university? In Communication, I'm sure we service as many non-majors as majors. Public Speaking is a popular option, for example, to fill a G.E. core requirement. We're taxed to the limit. We hire every qualified adjunct we find to teach those sections because our small faculty can't possibly keep up with it. But I think departments just do what they can do. If a department is not able to accommodate certain classes for non-majors, then we don't tell our kids they can have that class in their cluster. Think of the cluster as a tool. It's not a panacea—it does not include every area, and not every class is available to students. But the advisor can sit down and say, "Here are some areas that will help you." And you could get a cluster in most areas.

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Anne: Is there going to be an expectation regarding the number of upper division vs. lower division courses in a cluster, in order to maintain a certain level of academic rigor?

Rhonda: There will be a strong suggestion that both lower division and upper division courses are represented in a cluster, but it can't be an absolute because there are some clusters where all the courses offered would be lower division.

Ron: There is certainly an upper division requirement for minors. I believe that six credits of a minor must be upper division credit. There are currently no requirements for clusters. We just discussed this in the Curriculum Council on Tuesday. But

most recommended clusters have at least one upper division course in them.

David: So should a department reserve certain courses as nonclusterable?

Kevin S.: I think so. I suppose if the students took the prerequisites as well, they could put all these classes in a cluster; otherwise they would end up with a minor in Business by the time they completed the prerequisites for certain courses.

Anne: And we would hope that the adviser would help the students determine which classes should be excluded from clusters because of the prerequisites.

Rhonda: I think if the catalog descriptions were written correctly, with all the prerequisites clearly indicated, this wouldn't be a problem.

David: Also, campus-wide, we must say a prerequisite is a prerequisite and hold students to this.

Kevin S.: I think it will also be incumbent on us to be open-minded and maybe relax on some prerequisites, particularly if they are just devices to protect our majors. We've done this with some of our 400-level classes. Perhaps we might determine which of the prerequisites are absolute. We might say, "If you pick up this one class—this is the class you really need," then we might be able to relax a bit on the other prerequisites.

Ron: I think that is key. If the departments buy into the idea of clusters, they should have a way to accommodate everyone. One of the biggest complaints I have received is, "Yes, this is a great idea; but if students are trying to complete three prerequisites for each course in a cluster, pretty soon they are doing more than they would to complete a minor for a cluster." We should keep in mind the spirit of the clusters. Unlike the minor, which is broad-based and tries to cover the basics in a field, a cluster is focused. We should find a way to keep clusters focused. Maybe we will have to say to students, "Ideally we'd like you take this 400-level class, which is what our majors and minors would take, but for someone working on a cluster, maybe this other class that doesn't have the prerequisites is better." If a student loads up a cluster with prerequisites, the program isn't going to work because it's going to throw the student far over the credit limit.

Ellen: I agree, but in many cases the prerequisite is part of the cluster.

Ron: Sure, but a lot of clusters haven't been working that way. I'm thinking about some recommended clusters. Sometimes the department will say that a cluster needs this, this, and this, forgetting that the last class has three additional prerequisites not listed on the cluster sheet. Suddenly, that cluster is not a workable situation.

Ellen: If seniors are not specifically required, at this point, to have clusters, at what point do students lose the option of not fulfilling this requirement?

Kevin M.: I've heard that if students are currently juniors, then they should be trying to build the requirements.

Rhonda: I would say that if you're advising a freshman or sophomore who knows he or she wants to do an integrated degree and is thinking about clusters instead of a minor, get the clusters defined as early as you can. But obviously if you have a senior who is about to graduate and needs to design some clusters looking backwards, it's a little bit more piecemeal. And that's what's happening right now.

Anne: And if the student transfers from a specialized degree to an integrated degree, would he or she be able to build a cluster from courses already taken?

Rhonda: If it weren't within the same discipline as the major, I would think so.

Anne: So then clusters must be outside the major's discipline?

Rhonda: Typically, yes. There might be a couple of exceptions.

Kevin S.: This new thing that we're promoting, with one emphasis within the Business Management major and one outside, may require some exceptions. For example, if somebody wants to be a specialized finance guru, he could have two business clusters, but that's because we will still be a specialized major. We want to get in on this fun stuff; we want some more integration as well.

Ron: The reason that the clusters are encouraged to be outside the major area is, if you require two clusters within your integrated major, you have essentially changed your integrated major into a specialized major. And that's not the spirit of it.

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Sometimes we have this tunnel vision of our own area like it's the only thing that's important in life, when it in fact is not. But it's a little hard also to say that clusters always have to be outside the major because when you start talking about majors with emphasis areas, for example, we have received permission in our area to have a journalism major pick up a cluster in new media. Now those are both from the Communication Department. We only offer one degree, and that's a bachelor's degree in Communication, but those are two separate emphasis areas within the program. Right now we're allowed to have one cluster in an emphasis area as long as it's not an extension of the same emphasis area, although it's technically in the same major. Then the other would have to be from outside the major completely. So there aren't really hard-and-fast rules on this sort of thing. Max Checketts said, "I wouldn't say I'd disapprove two clusters coming through the same area as an integrated major, but you would have a pretty big sales job to try and convince me that we should allow that to happen." I think, if we keep in mind an idea of what a cluster is supposed to do, which is to diversify and to give experiences in other areas, then we really shouldn't have a problem with wanting to have cluster areas within the major because it frustrates the purpose of clusters in the first place.

WILL CLUSTERS REALLY MAKE OUR STUDENTS STRONGER?

Anne: At this point, what is the impact you see clusters having on the university?

Ellen: Perhaps a better question is what will be the impact on the university's "product," because we can say all kinds of things about the impact on the university: more headaches more whatever. Perhaps the more relevant question is, "Will this really make our graduates stronger?"

Rhonda: I think it will be better for the students, and it will be much more chaotic for the faculty. There's a lot of frustration already. I get calls all the time: "I'm going to approve anything. I'm just sick of this. I don't need one more thing to do." Many are struggling, asking how on earth they will advise what should go into a preschool cluster when they've never even gone near that building. It's a little tense right now, but it's getting there.

Ron: If we're rethinking education, we must try some innovative programs. Nobody knows how this will wash out in the end. But in my mind, it certainly is an exciting concept—the idea that we have some flexibility and that students can actually build in areas that they see as important to their future. It certainly contrasts with what's done at most state colleges where you march in and they say, "Go down these chutes," and you get your degree, and one size fits all. Maybe the end result will be something really exciting that we'll be known for. Perhaps our graduates will be highly sought after because of this, as well as other things that we do here. Maybe it will become a logistical nightmare that we can't handle, and we will back off and try something else. Certainly I think the effort is worthwhile.

David: One of the downfalls of other institutions is the fact that faculty in different departments never get together. In the Secondary Ed. Department, I have no idea what the Business Department does, and quite frankly, they probably ruin kids... [laughter]. Clusters open doors that, in other institutions, never are opened. Without clusters, endorsements, or minors, traditionally as a Secondary Ed. faculty, I would never talk to Ellen, who is our English Ed. person because, well, she has her own problems and I've got mine. Clusters are the way to open this campus and to use combined energies and opportunities and expertise to build better students. I see it as a godsend because it's a territorial world, and that binds us instead of opening us. I would much rather know what the Business Department is doing and praise them than not know and build walls. I can't deny that it's going to be a painful experience to get there, but that's why we came. ☺

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