The Health, Physical Education and Recreation (HPER) Department at Kingsborough Community College (KCC) underwent a dramatic change in 2010 when the college revamped its general education curriculum and reduced a long-standing 3-credit general health requirement for all majors to 1 credit. A major impetus for this reduction in credits was the college’s desire to implement a mathematics requirement for all degree programs, which at that time did not exist. When Pathways (a new general education curriculum for the entire university system) was implemented in 2013, half of the degree programs (13) at the college removed this 1-credit requirement to remain within the 60-credit limit for the Associate of Art degree. Additionally, very few degree programs at the college had elective space in their curricula. Thus, students could only take health courses as credits beyond their degree requirements. The result of this reduction and/or elimination of health in the curriculum was a dramatic decline in the number of sections of general health and other health courses offered within the department and, consequently, less work for full- and part-time faculty. More importantly, it meant that most students never took a health course within their degrees at KCC. This situation was lamentable in light of the prevalence of behavior-related diseases in the United States, such as obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

The purpose of this article is to explain how the transition to a Common Core curriculum across City University of New York (CUNY) schools created space for the introduction of health education courses and the process by which the HPER Department at KCC was successful in advocating for the approval of health courses into the Pathways curriculum of the college. Prior to the implementation of Pathways, the discipline of health was not permitted to be part of general education at KCC, based on New York state’s definition of what constitutes the liberal arts (State Department of Education/The University of the State of New York, n.d.). The definition is quite antiquated and uses the outdated phrase “health and hygiene” to describe the discipline. Along with many faculty members in my department, I have argued for many years that some of the health courses in HPER belong in general education. They are an integral part of what it means for a student to be generally educated. Paradoxically, I would often note to the administration and my faculty colleagues that there were already health courses in the general education program of the college, such as “Sexuality & Culture” and “Ethics in the Health Professions.” These courses existed in the departments of Behavioral Sci-
ences and History and Political Science, respectively, and were considered general education based solely on their existence in those departments. To HPER faculty members, this seemed to be quite arbitrary, biased and unfair.

In 2013, the CUNY Board of Trustees approved the Pathways initiative, a new system of undergraduate general education requirements across its 20 undergraduate campuses (City University of New York, n.d.). Prior to the Pathways initiative, each campus had its own unique and local general education curriculum. This curriculum varied from 30 to 60 credits on respective campuses. The intention of Pathways was to standardize general education among the campuses and consequently ease student transfers within the system. Quite often, students would move among the various campuses of the university system, most typically from one of the community colleges to a senior college, but also from one community college to another or from one senior college to another. This transfer phenomenon became known as “swirling.” As a result of this swirling, some students would accumulate upward of 150 credits in completing graduation requirements. Many of CUNY’s students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and the chancellery argued that the university was placing an undue hardship on the students most in need and consequently was not meeting its mission to educate the citizenry of New York (CUNY, 2015).

The Pathways program is divided into two groups: the required common core and the flexible common core. The required common core (12 credits) includes student learning outcomes in the traditional disciplines of English Composition (6 credits), Life and Physical Sciences (3 credits) and Mathematical Reasoning (3 credits). The flexible core (18 credits) includes five groups: World Cultures and Global Issues, U.S. Experience and Diversity, Creative Expression, the Individual and Society, and the Scientific World. Students take 3 credits in each of the groups and one additional course in the group of their choice.

The Pathways initiative was met with much opposition by CUNY faculty across many campuses, particularly at the senior colleges where faculty members had been involved in creating the general education programs at their respective campuses. The perception among faculty was that the university was imposing curricula from the top down without faculty input, which was perceived as a violation of university bylaws (CUNY, 2016). Indeed, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC-CUNY), the union representing CUNY faculty, along with the University Faculty Senate (UFS) sued the university based on this reading of faculty purview in the bylaws (PSC-CUNY, 2014). The PSC-CUNY and the UFS lost their case in 2014, and Pathways became the general education curriculum for each campus.

With the advent of the centralized Pathways initiative, an opportunity for health courses to be included in the general education curriculum became apparent. For a course to be accepted into Pathways, it must meet student learning outcomes in either the three groups of the required common core or one of the five groups of the flexible common core. The change in focus from being simply based on a discipline to being based on student learning outcomes provided a fresh opportunity for health courses to be considered as general education. With this new perspective on general education, HPER faculty members initially proposed two courses — “Human Sexuality” and “Drugs, the Individual and Society” — for inclusion in the flexible common core of Pathways at KCC as part of the Individual and Society group. The following semester, a new course was proposed, “Global Health Issues” in the World Culture and Global Issues group. All three courses were approved unanimously by the college’s Curriculum Committee without debate as a result of the change in perspective from disciplines to student learning outcomes. They were then approved by the governing body of KCC (the College Council) and passed forward to the university’s Common Core Course Review Committees for final approval. To date, “Drugs, the Individual and Society” has been approved by the university and “Human Sexuality” was sent back for minor revisions. We are awaiting final approval for Global Health Issues. This semester, we are proposing four more courses for consideration at KCC as Pathways courses in the Individual and Society group: “Men’s Health Issues”, “Health and Nutrition”, “Women’s Health Issues”, and “Social, Cultural and Health Perspectives of Urban Gardening.”

As chair of HPER at KCC, I realized that a description of our success might prove beneficial to other health departments at colleges and universities across the United States that have experienced similar declines or reductions. From a student point of view, it is particularly important for health departments to seize the opportunity to advocate for change to have a place at the academic table. In this way, students will be able to partake in these important courses while having them count toward degree requirements.

References


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