Why Inquiry?

Welcome to the Intellectual Inquiry Curriculum, or INQ as we like to call it around campus. I hope you are really looking forward to discovering more about the topics of your INQ classes. Even students who are excited about an INQ topic, however, may still have nagging thoughts in the back of their heads. Why do there have to be all these requirements? Why can’t I just take the courses I’m interested in? Is this going to be a waste of my time?

General education courses are often dismissed as requirements to get out of the way as soon as possible. After all, who wants to take required courses? Just calling something a requirement makes it immediately less appealing. When Roanoke’s faculty designed the INQ Curriculum, however, we wanted to make it engaging. We chose to use these courses to help students develop skills needed both to get jobs, but also to live rich, meaningful, satisfying lives. The faculty put a lot of thought and debate into each course and the overarching inquiry format.

Intellectual Inquiry means not just answering questions, but figuring out which questions to ask, questioning things we read or hear, questioning others and questioning ourselves. This is why we start in INQ 110 with a focus on critical thinking and reading. We ask students to write because writing helps us bring order to our thoughts, and requires us to marshal evidence to convince ourselves and others of the positions we take. INQ courses explore mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities.  At first blush, these requirements probably seem designed to force students to study topics they didn't find interesting enough to major in. Students should expect to learn some facts in these courses, but the real emphasis is on the questions these disciplines ask, the places they look for answers, and the evidence needed to form a convincing argument. Each discipline is a bit different from the others, but none has a monopoly on truth. In fact, few problems really worth solving can be tackled by one discipline alone. Ask the citizens of Flint, Michigan how we can solve their problems related to lead in water.  Flint doesn't need a dozen experts trained only in narrow specialties. Flint needs chemists who understand economics, politicians who value environmental justice, ethicists grounded in business, and educators who grasp the biological and psychological challenges inflicted on Flint's children. Flint needs what the graduates of liberal arts colleges like Roanoke develop by educating whole persons beyond narrow majors and beyond the classroom.

ThINQ

about it

Intellectual Inquiry is about thinking, questioning, writing, speaking, evaluating ideas, applying knowledge in new contexts, and working with others to find solutions to complex problems. That's heady stuff. And it easily fades from view when the task at hand is to calculate a p-value, write three more pages before falling asleep, or decipher Kant's arguments. Every so often, we all need to step back and ask why we are doing this hard work. When the answers aren't obvious to you, question your professors, your advisor, and your friends. Use the skills you have developed at Roanoke to find the answers.

Even if you believe that INQ courses have value, you may still question why we require a particular type or number. The arguments are too long to explore here. Perhaps the best answer is that we have a compromise between what seems necessary to develop skills and the rule of thumb used by most colleges that general education courses should take up about one-third of the requirements for graduation. We allow students to substitute disciplinary courses for up to three INQ courses because faculty recognize that major courses help students develop some of the same skills but in a more narrow disciplinary focus. Substitutions essentially decrease the number of requirements. Students who transfer to Roanoke after attending another college are allowed to transfer in general education courses. Admissions works closely with these students, some of whom will transfer in everything except INQ 300 and the IL requirement.  Once students start at Roanoke, however, no additional general education transfers are allowed. The college had this rule long before INQ. I suppose it is our way of saying that that if you want a Roanoke degree, you should earn it at Roanoke. After all, our motto is *Palmam Qui Meruit Ferat*. (Google it!) Sometimes I think having so many different topics available for each INQ course does make it harder to see what they have in common, but Roanoke's faculty feel that students will be more invested when they have some choice. We hope that when you are interested in the topic you’ll work harder and get more from the course.

Do INQ courses actually help students accomplish the lofty goals I mentioned above and develop skills that employers value? Yes. Faculty collect data on this every semester. We can document that the quality of student writing and oral presentations improves significantly across four years at Roanoke. Seniors know how much they have grown, and they tell us this when we survey them. Back in 2006 before we offered INQ, just 37% of seniors agreed that their Roanoke education helped them integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines. In 2015, 62% of seniors agreed with that statement. That is a huge difference.



Roanoke graduates are prepared to take on Flint and all of the other important challenges our world faces. I hope you will remember this when you apply for an internship or job. Talk about the skills you have developed both in your major and beyond. Talk about how Roanoke has helped you develop skills and asked you to apply those skills to complex problems.

Dr. Gail Steehler

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and General Education

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