By capitalizing on four established strengths, the University’s Academic Plan seeks to create a distinct education for students

As the chief architect of the University’s Academic Plan, Vice Chancellor and Provost Deborah A. Freund wants to see that students are prepared for the future. “The purpose of the Academic Plan,” Freund says, “is to make sure each student who comes to Syracuse University is offered every opportunity to become a truly successful citizen of the world.” As lofty a goal as that may sound, the route to academic excellence that is charted in the plan is down to earth, well marked, and, to some degree, already well traveled at Syracuse. Political science professor Dan Holliman, who has worked closely with the vice chancellor, points out that the plan’s basic strategy is to foster logical extensions of Syracuse’s successes. “It is not our intention to superimpose abstract schemes on the curriculum,” he says. “We made an inventory of the strengths that the University has already demonstrated, and then matched the most relevant of these to the demands made of a contemporary education.”

A study of SU’s 132-year track record as an institution of higher education led the dozens of faculty, students, and administrators who contributed to the writing of the plan to reach consensus on a series of distinctive strengths that have developed on the Syracuse campus. Briefly stated, the “four signature strengths” highlighted in the plan are these:

• an integration of theory and practice that recognizes both as harmonious complements in the learning process;
• a blending of traditional liberal arts studies with contemporary professional studies in programs that exposes students to the world of ideas without ignoring their career aspirations;
• a commitment to offering students a rich variety of international and culturally inclusive perspectives for the purpose of facilitating greater range in their thinking and deeper understanding in their human relationships; and
• an emphasis on writing as a primary form of personal expression, social articulation, and professional communication.

These strengths, which have developed separately and to different degrees at SU’s constituent schools and colleges, will serve as models for crafting educational “signature experiences” that any student coming to Syracuse can expect to have. “We have negotiated a broad consensual statement of what we believe is required to give students a superior education, and we have described an institutional model by which Syracuse can deliver it,” Freund says. “There will be no micromanaging of the Academic Plan. It is up to every college, school, department, and program to make good on the educational experiences put forth by the plan, each in a way that is organic to the particulars of its discipline.”

The four signature experiences described in the plan will not be realized in a set of uniform required courses, nor are they meant to lead students away from their major concentrations or resolute interests. “It is the faculty’s responsibility to shape the curriculum,” Holliman says. “The Academic Plan offers a set of heuristic principles, or general points of guidance, that is designed to give a distinct and consistent character to a Syracuse education that transcends specialization without diluting it.”

Each discipline is being asked to offer its students an education broad enough to contain all four kinds of experience without any sacrifice of depth or rigor in its individual subject matter. Accomplishing this presents a set of distinct challenges to every branch of knowledge studied at the University. At this early point in the implementation of the Academic Plan, many of the best minds on the Hill are wrestling with these and similar questions.

Theory and Practice: Overcoming Insularity

Pamela Heintz, director of SU’s Center for Public and Community Service (CPCS), is working hard to make the Academic Plan’s theory and practice component a vital force in the education of Syracuse students. Her office, located in the Schine Student Center, is the campus nexus of an educational process known as “service learning.” CPCS matches the academic, personal, and career interests of thousands of SU students with
the needs of scores of nonprofit and public organizations providing crucial services to people in the Syracuse area. "We have to stop thinking of higher education as no more than an expert filling up the empty head of a student," Heintz says. "Our information tells us that we learn best by doing, and that means following up classroom theory with active application. In service learning we enhance coursework by giving learning realistic dimensions. Architecture students and their professors are working with neighbors to design a new park. Literature students are reading stories to children who have never been read to. Students with advanced knowledge of computing are learning new things about computers—and themselves—as they give people their first lessons at the keyboard. As you can see, service learning is a lot more than 'feel-good' volunteerism—though heaven knows I have nothing against that."

The integration of theory and practice promoted by CPCS contains a social dimension that is crucial to education. The contacts that students make in service learning situations tend to lead them across the cultural barriers of class, race, religion, and even personal taste. "We’re offering students experiences that can help them overcome the serious educational disadvantages of insularity," Heintz says.

School of Information Studies Dean Raymond von Dran has taken an active role in marrying theory and practice within the more traditional boundaries of his school’s curriculum. "Our Community Information Technology Institute (CITI) helps transfer new technologies to not-for-profit institutions," he says. For one recent CITI project, students, working for credit, created a database that links the United Way’s contributions to various charities to outcomes. "As a result, United Way can identify the programs that are benefiting the most people, and use this information in planning future contributions," von Dran says.

**Liberal Arts and Professional Studies: Well-Rounded Citizens**

When some college students talk to their families about what they are studying, the conversation can end with a parent saying, "That all sounds very interesting. But will it help you get a job?" In other cases it can end with, "That all sounds very practical. But are you sure you’re getting an education?"

The Academic Plan finds ample evidence in SU’s own history that liberal arts studies and career preparation can be treated as two elements of a single quality education, rather than competitors fighting for the turf of the undergraduate mind. The University’s decentralized collegiate structure fosters this kind of relationship by allowing students to focus on their professional aspirations, while at the same time requiring them to exploit the rest of the University’s resources. The S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, which attracts students from all over the world, is a model for this. Approximately 75 percent of a Newhouse undergraduate’s courses must be taken in schools and departments elsewhere on campus. Moreover, a remarkable number of Newhouse students go further in ensuring themselves a well-rounded education by completing dual concentrations. According to Rosanna Grassi, the school’s associate dean for student affairs, "In 2001, we had 1,815 undergraduates with concentrations in Newhouse departments. Of these, 822 were dual majors, with a majority of them taking their second concentration in the College of Arts and Sciences.”

Industrial design professor Donald Carr describes a similar spirit at the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA), whose students, in many cases, have chosen Syracuse over small art colleges. “We want our students to take advantage—to embrace—the fact that they are at a major research university,” he says. “We ask that they take introductory courses in philosophy and psychology. We actually encourage them to take a business class. All these things will serve them well.”

Carr, architecture professor Christopher Gray, speech communication professor Amos Kiewe, and civil engineering professor Samuel Clemente team-teach VPA’s interdisciplinary “Synergy Laboratory,” a course in which students of various majors engage in cross-disciplinary dialogues on such phenomena as the Carrier Dome and DestiNY U.S.A., a multipurpose commercial development planned for Syracuse. Carr particularly enjoys the opportunities that the course creates for students to discover the value of other disciplines. “For example, it comes as something of a revelation to some of the visually oriented design students when they learn from the speech communication students that almost any design project they hope to see realized must begin as words to communicate their intentions,” he says.
Internationalization and Inclusion: Personally Global

In a speech introducing the Academic Plan, Vice Chancellor Freund told the faculty that "internationalization of our curriculum is vital in preparing our students for the future. We must infuse international concerns throughout the curriculum in all disciplines and programs so that students are exposed to the ideas and challenges of the world." She went on to cite that some 20 percent of Syracuse students (graduate and undergraduate) take at least one semester abroad in an educational exchange program. Though this ratio is already strong in comparison with similar universities, Freund challenged faculty and administrators to raise the figure to 35 percent, noting that increased financial support for students would be a salient factor.

Through the Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA), the University operates programs in Hong Kong, London, Strasbourg, Florence, and Madrid. (The Harare, Zimbabwe, program is temporarily suspended because of political uncertainties.) Many SU students also take advantage of exchange programs run by other universities. "This has been a year of gathering information and having conversations about new directions," says Jon Booth, deputy director of DIPA. "There is no question that the 9/11 tragedy was a general setback to international education. But we are regaining momentum and moving toward the creation of new programs and affiliations that will make studying abroad educationally attractive for students not traditionally inclined toward it."

Some students may find international educational experiences that don't require an entire semester abroad. During spring break 2003, professors Gerald Greenberg (Russian and linguistics) and Erika Haber (Russian literature and language) will lead a group of SU students to Russia for "Cultural St. Petersburg," a one-week trip/one-credit course on the history and culture of the city. Future spring-break trips to exciting destinations are planned. Other students may find international experiences through internships at the Newhouse School, one of the nation's most recognized programs.

Writing: Clarity and Self-Discovery

Writing endures as the single most important skill necessary for academic success, and the debate over how to teach it endures as one of the thorniest on any American campus. A big part of the problem is that while the act of putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, seems simple enough to define, writing has so many functions that it cannot be covered in a single discipline. This is reflected in the fact that writing is taught across at least three academic lines at SU: the Writing Program, which offers a variety of expository writing courses, including freshman writing; the English department's Creative Writing Program, which offers courses in fiction and poetry writing; and the Newhouse School, which offers courses in journalistic writing and scriptwriting. VPA's speech communication department, while not officially listing writing classes of its own, offers courses in such communication techniques as persuasion and argumentation, which are essential to many forms of writing.

Writing Program chair Becky Howard explains one of the disciplinary distinctions between the kinds of writing instruction found at SU: "In communications, one is dealing with presenting and developing knowledge that one already has. It's the writing you do once you have things figured out. Writing instruction in our program encompasses that, but it includes other things as well. Writing can be an act of discovering complexity, or a way of discovering points of view other than one's own. Writing for us is a way of learning."

While the Writing Program is committed to offering students experiences in the process of writing, other opportunities for instruction on campus put greater emphasis on the creation of a writing product. "We hear from employers within the media all the time that the single most important skill our graduates can bring to them is the ability to write," says David Rubin, dean of the Newhouse School. "We know our students will be doing all kinds of writing, all the time: news stories, film scripts, speeches, press releases, pitch letters, ad copy, memos, and much more. Supervisors count on young employees who can do these things. If they cannot, they are at a distinct disadvantage in comparison with those who can."

Speech communication professor Kendall R. Phillips adds concern for yet another type of writing experience. "My own interest is in recognizing the civic or democratic function of writing," he says. "We live in an age when democratic discourse takes place through writing [letters to editors, postings on web sites, listservs, etc.]. So, for me, an aspect of writing competency that should not be ignored involves a broader sense of how to engage in democratic deliberation and dissent through persuasive argument, often done through the medium of writing."

As members of the Academic Plan's Signature Committee on Writing, Howard, Rubin, and Phillips agree that new opportunities and emphases will ensure that writing becomes, as Phillips puts it, "a more central part of our academic culture." "We have extraordinary writers and teachers of writing in so many places on campus," Freund says. "The key will be to use our strengths to make writing a central part of our students' lives by expanding the opportunities for them to write—in and out of the classroom."

Universities have a reputation for reluctance when it comes to institutional change, and they appear all the slower in the context of an age when corporations and even nation-states seem to restructure themselves overnight. But the quality of the progress that Freund has seen has made her optimistic. "I know we have the talent on this campus to reach our goal of full opportunity for all students in all four signatures," Freund says. "I also know skepticism is a distinguishing feature of any good faculty and, not surprisingly, there is still some willbuilding to be done. But I must say that I am impressed—and in some cases astonished—by the wonderful things already being done for students through the influence of the plan."