Academic Programs
By Mary Hull Mohr

Luther is distinctive in offering a single degree: the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.). The liberal arts were at the heart of the founding of the educational system in Europe and made their way across the Atlantic with the establishment of Harvard in 1636. An undergraduate curriculum, the liberal arts are the arts that liberate—as Luther’s mission statement states: “a way and kind of learning which moves students beyond immediate interests and present knowledge into a larger world; an education that not only disciplines minds in the pursuit of knowledge, but develops whole persons who are resilient enough to confront and evaluate the changing society in which they serve.”

As a foundation for the study of those arts, Luther first-year students share a common course. What is now called Paideia I began in 1964 as the Core: a 16 hour correlated requirement in English, history, and religion. In 1972 the course, reduced to eight hours and taught by faculty from across the college, centered for two years on Nature, Self, and Society and for three years on texts within units (e.g., The Odyssey in the Ancient Greek unit and The Communist Manifesto in the China unit). In 1977 this became Paideia I, a course in English and history. In recent years Paideia I is an interdisciplinary course, focused on important questions and taught by faculty from many departments.

Just as Paideia I has changed over the years so has the rest of the curriculum. The modern language offerings now include Russian and Chinese; there are new majors in the natural and social sciences; and faculty have developed a number of “studies” programs, responding to national issues and concerns. A Black Studies (now Africana Studies) program began in 1970 and a Women’s Studies program (now Women and Gender Studies) in 1991. International Studies complements the increasing opportunities available to students wishing to study abroad. More recently an environmental studies program enables students to connect with college sustainability initiatives.

Majors with a professional focus have also been added, e.g., the social work major in 1973 and the nursing major in 1974. Initially the central mission of the college was to prepare pastors and teachers for the immigrant church. Education courses have been in the curriculum from the beginning. They were organized into a department in the 1940s.

The content of courses changes over time as research results in new knowledge and interpretations. College requirements also change, but a course on the Bible has been a requirement of all students since the college began. Luther’s founders intended for the study of this text to be central to education; and 150 years after those beginnings, the Bible is still foundational as sacred text and cultural document. The commitment to that text has remained strong.