

Minutes from the Academic Affairs Committee meeting on 29 September 2008

In attendance: Frank Chorba (chair), Tom Prasch, Sue Unruh, Robert Kerchner, Karen Camarda, Cal Melick.

Tom Prasch was “elected” secretary of the committee.

The main business of the committee was final action on the two proposals for modifying aspects of general education, worked through over the past semester.

In the case of the criteria for upper-level general education, the committee, after some discussion, set the allowance for percentage of upper-level courses that might count toward general education at 20%, and then approved moving the proposal forward to the Faculty Senate. The final version is appended below.

In the case of a revised skill set for general education, the committee reworked wording at some points to make the language catalog-ready rather than programmatic; expanded “processing information” to incorporate “information literacy” and added language both to define that and to incorporate technology skills (as suggested in earlier comment phases) at that point; fiddled with verb choice in the mathematical/scientific skill definition; and clarified language relating to required skills for particular ranges of courses. The committee approved moving the amended proposal forward to the Faculty Senate. Both pre- and post-reworked versions of the proposal are appended.

Criteria for upper-level general education

Background: There is increasing pressure for upper-level general education for at least two reasons: first, in the realm of ideas about how best to pursue general education, that pressure comes from the notion that general education ought to be pursued throughout an undergraduate career, often culminating in some sort of capstone, rather than be concentrated in out-of-major coursework in the first years (and this idea is consistent, clearly, with the direction of the WTE here at Washburn); second, and more narrowly, at least according to Nancy Tate, the new requirement for upper-level credit (45 hours) has increased pressure for general-education upper-level credits, and, as presently constituted, the General Education Committee is looking with more favor on such proposals (of course, this is just what Nancy Tate said, and perhaps it needs verification). At present, general-education options at the 300 or 400 level are very limited: one English course, one Philosophy course, half a dozen Art courses (all art history), a couple Modern Languages, one theatre, and none in the natural or social sciences. The problem is how to designate upper-level general-education courses, without just saying that any course counts (which seems to me to abandon the idea of general education, as opposed to specific disciplinary education, entirely).

Proposal: To be accepted as a general-education course, an upper-level course must, in the view of the General Education Committee, fulfill at least one of the following requirements:

1. It must have a strong interdisciplinary component, bridging the methods and approaches of multiple disciplines.
2. It must have a broadly foundational content, covering material of wide interest in the liberal arts.

No more than 20% of the upper-level courses listed in the catalog for any one discipline may be considered as fulfilling general-education requirements.

Skill set before amendments:

Revised skill sets for general education

Background: Faculty surveys suggest significant dissatisfaction with the existing nine designated general-education skills, with particular discontent about the “listen sensitively” and “interpret and assess human values” skills. In addition, it has been suggested (but not empirically demonstrated) that students can complete general-education requirements without fulfilling all nine skills. And in addition, as the university moves toward more rigorous standards of assessment, that the existing nine skills lack any clear definitions has become problematic.

Proposal: In revising skills, the aim is to provide a simplified and clear system with measurable student-learning outcomes to facilitate assessment. The proposed alternative consists of five groups of skills; any general-education course should fulfill the requirements of at least two (although many will cover more); courses within selected divisions or departments, as noted below, necessarily must fulfill at least one of the listed skills to ensure comprehensive coverage of all for any student completing general-education requirements.

1) Processing information

Processing information entails understanding and demonstrating comprehension of written texts, oral communications, visual information, and/or mediated presentations (film, websites, etc.) that combine several of the above. When presented with such materials, the student must be able to demonstrate an understanding of the basic argument of the materials, their core content, their intended audience, and their evident biases or subjective perspectives (or, to put it more neutrally perhaps, students must be able to identify the point of view of the material).

It can safely be assumed that all general-education courses will fulfill this goal.

2) Communicative skills

Communicative skills involve the ability of the student to communicate clearly his or her ideas in written and/or oral form, and embrace as well the expression of creativity by students in the visual, written, or performing arts. In written and/or oral communication, students must demonstrate the ability to shape a central thesis, to organize an argument, to cite references

properly, and to follow the rules of basic grammar and usage. In creative projects, students must be able to demonstrate the ways in which their creative work expresses ideas, an understanding of the form(s) employed, and an ability to employ the basic rules of their chosen expressive form(s).

Again, most or all general-education courses will likely fulfill this goal. It could be made a required element in any course approved for general education in the humanities and social sciences.

3) Mathematical and scientific reasoning

Students must be able to reason mathematically, and be able to interpret and analyze numerical data. Students must also understand the scientific method, and be able to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific theories. Within this framework, students should be able, employing the standard methods and procedures of the science being studied, to devise hypotheses, construct experiments to test these hypotheses, and interpret the results of experiments. Standardized testing can provide an assessment method for mathematical reasoning; performance on other written work can provide a mechanism for assessing a student's understanding of the scientific method and experimental design.

All general-education courses in the natural sciences and mathematics must fulfill the appropriate portion of this goal; that students must take courses in both mathematics and natural science to fulfill degree requirements ensures that the entirety of this goal will be comprehended in any student's progress toward a degree.

4) Critical, analytic, normative, and interpretive reasoning.

Students must demonstrate a variety of interconnected reasoning skills in the construction and critique of both factual and value judgments. They must know how to establish or corroborate factual claims and to analyze and assess the soundness of deductive arguments and the strength of inductive arguments built on those claims. They must know how to analyze and assess arguments establishing or using normative principles in ethics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, statesmanship, and other normative or value-laden human concerns. They must know how to assess the form, and interpret the content, of the creative expression of ideas in art, architecture, literature, music, and performing arts.

Reasoning in these terms can be assessed by evaluating how well students, in their written or oral presentations, assess the information presented to them or construct their own arguments, positions, or theses.

All general education courses in the humanities and social sciences should include this aim.

5) Global citizenship

Students should understand, in political, historical, economic, and cultural terms, the nature and structure of the United States; its place both within a global community of nations and in the

context of a globalized economic, political, and cultural sphere; and their own role as citizens within this national and international framework.

Establishing global citizenship as a general-education skill recognizes the growing importance of both a citizenship component in general education and a sense of the need to train students to perform in a world increasingly shaped by processes of globalization. Courses in United States and world history, anthropology and sociology, political science, geography, and economics contribute components to this understanding of global citizenship, and can be required to address such components to be counted toward general education. Requiring students, either in general-education courses or in courses in their chosen major, to have courses in at least three of these fields should ensure relatively comprehensive understanding of this aim (and is not unlike the present requirement in the natural sciences that general education requires coursework in at least two disciplines).

Skill set as amended:

Revised skill sets for general education

Background: Faculty surveys suggest significant dissatisfaction with the existing nine designated general-education skills, with particular discontent about the “listen sensitively” and “interpret and assess human values” skills. In addition, it has been suggested (but not empirically demonstrated) that students can complete general-education requirements without fulfilling all nine skills. And in addition, as the university moves toward more rigorous standards of assessment, that the existing nine skills lack any clear definitions has become problematic.

Proposal: In revising skills, the aim is to provide a simplified and clear system with measurable student-learning outcomes to facilitate assessment. The proposed alternative consists of five groups of skills; any general-education course should fulfill the requirements of at least two (although many will cover more); courses within selected divisions or departments, as noted below, necessarily must fulfill at least one of the listed skills to ensure comprehensive coverage of all for any student completing general-education requirements. Establishing global citizenship as a general-education skill recognizes the growing importance of both a citizenship component in general education and a sense of the need to train students to perform in a world increasingly shaped by processes of globalization.

1) Processing information/Information literacy

Processing information/Information literacy entails understanding and demonstrating comprehension of written texts, oral communications, visual information, and/or mediated presentations (film, websites, etc.) that combine several of the above. When presented with such materials, the student must be able to demonstrate an understanding of the basic argument of the materials, their core content, their intended audience, and their evident biases or subjective perspectives. Students should also be able to find such information, employing library resources, databases, and other search devices and technological tools.

All general-education courses will fulfill this skill.

2) Communicative skills

Communicative skills involve the ability of the student to communicate clearly his or her ideas in written and/or oral form, and they embrace as well the expression of creativity by students in the visual, written, or performing arts. In written and/or oral communication, students must demonstrate the ability to shape a central thesis, to organize an argument, to cite references properly, and to follow the rules of basic grammar and usage. In creative projects, students must be able to demonstrate the ways in which their creative work expresses ideas, an understanding of the form(s) employed, and an ability to employ the basic rules of their chosen expressive form(s).

Communicative skills is a required element in any course approved for general education in the humanities and social sciences.

3) Mathematical and scientific reasoning

Students must be able to reason mathematically, and be able to interpret and analyze numerical data. Students must also understand the scientific method, and be able to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific theories. Within this framework, students should be able, employing the standard methods and procedures of the science being studied, to propose hypotheses, design experiments to test these hypotheses, and interpret the results of experiments. Standardized testing can provide an assessment method for mathematical reasoning; performance on other written work can provide a mechanism for assessing a student's understanding of the scientific method and experimental design.

All general-education courses in the natural sciences and mathematics must fulfill the appropriate portion of this skill; that students must take courses in both mathematics and natural science to fulfill degree requirements ensures that the entirety of this skill will be comprehended in any student's progress toward a degree.

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All general education courses in the humanities and social sciences will include this skill.

5) Global citizenship

Students should understand, in political, historical, economic, and cultural terms, the nature and structure of the United States; its place both within a global community of nations and in the context of a globalized economic, political, and cultural sphere; and their own role as citizens within this national and international framework.

Courses in United States and world history, anthropology and sociology, political science, geography, and economics contribute components to this understanding of global citizenship, and courses will be required to address such components to be counted as general education.