

Faculty Senate Agenda Item

Date: August 18, 2005

Number: 05-09

Subject: General Education Reform

Description: In its February 21, 2003, "Commission Statement on General Education," the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association observes the following:

"Understanding and appreciating diverse cultures, mastering multiple modes of inquiry, effectively analyzing and communicating information, and recognizing the importance of creativity and values to the human spirit not only allow people to live richer lives but also are a foundation for most careers and for the informed exercise of local, national, and international citizenship."

"As understood by the Commission, general education is intended to impart common knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and to develop in them the skills and attitudes that an organization's faculty believe every educated person should possess. From an organization's general education, a student acquires a breadth of knowledge in the areas and proficiency in the skills that the organization identifies as hallmarks of being college educated. Moreover, effective general education helps students gain competence in the exercise of independent intellectual inquiry and also stimulates their examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values."

In "Our Students' Best Work: Five Keys to Accountability for Outcomes That Really Matter," The Association of American Colleges and Universities identifies five key learning outcomes that are based on "an emerging consensus across many professions, the business community, civic leadership, and the academy." These five are:

1. strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information skills – achieved and demonstrated through learning in a range of fields, settings, and media, and through advanced studies in one or more areas of concentration

2. deep understanding of and hands-on experience with the inquiry practices of disciplines that explore the natural, social, and cultural realms – achieved and demonstrated through studies that build conceptual knowledge by engaging learners in concepts and modes of inquiry that are basic to the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts;

3. intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills – achieved and demonstrated in a variety of collaborative contexts (classroom, community-based, international, and online) that prepare students both for democratic citizenship and for work;

4. a proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices – achieved and demonstrated through forms of learning that connect knowledge, skills,

values, and public action, and through reflection on students' own roles and responsibilities in social and civic contexts;

5. habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another – achieved and demonstrated through advanced research and/or creative projects in which students take the primary responsibility for framing questions, carrying out an analysis, and producing work of substantial complexity and quality.”

These statements of purpose, thoughtfully prepared by leading groups in higher education, provide a framework in which we can consider our general education program. Washburn University is in the process of putting a unique “signature” to a Washburn education through the “transformational experiences” program. It makes sense to further highlight the high quality and uniqueness of the Washburn experience through a “signature general education program.”

Issues pertaining to our current general education program

Our current general education program is now nearly 10 years old. (It was approved by the faculty in May, 1995). Our experience with this program has revealed some limitations:

- (a) There is no guarantee that a student will be adequately exposed to all or even most of the nine skills outlined in the program.
- (b) It does not explicitly address the “areas of knowledge.”
- (c) It creates difficulty for transfer students.
- (d) It is extremely difficult to assess.

Over the last couple of years, many faculty have suggested it is time to review and revise our general education program. However, no one wants to spend ten years developing the next iteration of general education at Washburn University. Perhaps some of the difficulties which characterize debates about general education could be avoided if we base the discussion on certain assumptions:

- (i) General education is the foundation of an undergraduate degree at Washburn University.
- (ii) This foundation should be of high quality.
- (iii) It is not important (nor even possible) for all of us to agree on detailed specifics of what should or should not be included in a general education program, but we can agree on general principles.
- (iv) Concerns about student-credit-hour generation (“turf wars”) are not easily overcome.
- (v) General education programs involving distribution groups recognize divergent faculty views and provide breadth of educational opportunity for students.
- (vi) Concerns of transfer students will need to be addressed by any general education program.

(vii) Our general education program should produce measurable outcomes (or identifiable characteristics) in our graduates.

A proposal for change

With these points in view, **we propose the following five changes to general education:**

- (1) Keep the total number of hours in and the makeup of the general education distribution requirements for each baccalaureate degree as is.
- (2) Require a 12-credit-hour core (see below).
- (3) Allow the core courses to count toward distribution requirements, with stipulations depending upon the nature of the core courses chosen.
- (4) Eliminate the “course-specific approach” to general education, and return to allowing all courses taught in a given discipline to count toward the appropriate distribution. (This thereby eliminates many transfer problems.)
- (5) Require students who transfer in 60 hours or more to take only two of the four core courses. Students who transfer in 30-59 hours would be required to take three of the four core courses.

As outlined above, the general education program at Washburn University would look like this:

Basic competencies: composition (EN101, EN300), mathematics (MA110 or MA116), and wellness (PE198)

Core curriculum: 12 hours of a specified core

Breadth of knowledge: distribution of remaining hours (number depending on type of degree) across the three general education categories, with limits on the number of courses in any one discipline remaining in place

Assessment: We would carefully assess the basic competencies and the core curriculum. The core curriculum would be developed with assessment in mind from the start; that is, we would begin with the outcomes we would like to achieve and how to measure them, and develop course content from there. The “outcome” for the distribution (breadth of knowledge) requirements would be that the student successfully completes an appropriate number of courses (which we believe provides them with exposure to a variety of disciplines). This outcome would be further enhanced if a coherent program of study can be developed by the student in consultation with an advisor.

Timing of proposal and development of the core courses

Our recommendation for development, approval, and implementation of this proposal is as follows:

- (1) Faculty Senate refers General Education reform proposal to Academic Affairs Committee. AAC circulates proposal to the Major Academic Units for consideration, comment and suggestions. (Fall 2005)
- (2) AAC formulates a final proposal, based on MAU comments and suggestions. (Fall 2005)
- (3) Faculty Senate approves or revises the AAC version of the proposal (Fall 2005)

- (4) Faculty Senate appoints a committee or set of committees to develop the core courses (Fall 2005)
- (5) Committees develop core course content, outcomes, and assessments (Spring 2006)
- (6) Faculty Senate reviews, adopts, or amends the committees' work (Fall 2006)
- (7) Full general education reform proposal voted on by General Faculty (Dec. 2006)
- (8) Subject to General Faculty and Board of Regents approval, the new general education program would begin in Fall, 2007

Two ideas for a core general education curriculum (circulated to faculty last Spring) are attached as an appendix to this document. They are not part of this proposal.

Requested Action:

Referral to Academic Affairs
Committee (as outlined above)

Originated by:

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Appendix - Considering a core curriculum

The following is an example (with two variations) of a general education core curriculum. This example was circulated among faculty during the Spring 2005 semester.

- (1) The core would consist of four three-credit multi-disciplinary courses
- (2) Courses would be team-taught in some fashion. Perhaps these courses could be taught in a “sectional rotation.” That is, a given faculty member would teach a 3-4 week module, and would move from section to section teaching the same module to different groups of students. Each section of students would see faculty from 4 disciplines. Material covered in a particular section would be based on the interests and expertise of the faculty team that teaches the section.
- (3) Measurable learning objectives would be identified for each course and measured in every section of each course.

A. A core relating directly to the “transformational experiences”

The courses in this core would relate to one of the four transformational experiences. A portion of each course (roughly 20%) will be used to introduce students to the transformational experience requirement that corresponds to the course.

- (1) The Life of the Mind: Relating to the “Scholarly and Creative Activity Transformational Experience,” this course will expose students to the great discoveries, movements and advances of a variety of disciplines in order to see how knowledge is “created” in various settings, with a special emphasis on meaning and role of the scientific method.
- (2) The Life of a Citizen: Relating to the “Community Service Transformational Experience,” this course will introduce students to the concept of civil society, and explore the variety of ways in which individuals can and do contribute to the lives of their communities.
- (3) The Life of a Leader: Relating to the “Leadership Transformational Experience,” students in this course will see the role and responsibility of leaders in a variety of disciplines and professions.
- (4) The Life of Others: Relating to the “International Education Transformational Experience,” this course will expose students to aspects of life (culture, politics, thought, history) in at least two other countries.

B. A “Perspectives” core

Students would be introduced to topics of great importance that can be explored from a variety of disciplines and perspectives.

- (1) Cultural and Global Perspectives – prepares students to understand other points of view by exposing the student to a variety of cultural, sociological, historical, geographical, political and economic perspectives, both in the US and abroad.

- (2) Ethical and Civic Perspectives – prepares students to be involved citizens by exposing them to the ways that various disciplines and professions view ethics and ethical behavior, and by exposing them to the roles and responsibilities of individuals in civil society
- (3) Environmental and Behavioral Perspectives – prepares students for a general understanding of the physical world and the role human beings play in that world through an exposure to fundamental ideas in biology, chemistry, physics and psychology
- (4) Artistic and Literary Perspectives – prepares students for a general understanding of the roles played by the arts and literature in shaping our concepts of ourselves as individuals and members of society