January 13, 2015

Dear General Education Task Force:

The Faculty Congress of Penn State Beaver met on January 8th, 2015 to discuss the latest two general education prototypes. Below is a summary of the issues that our faculty discussed. We ask that you please consider the below issues as you move forward with your proposal to the Faculty Senate.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael Hay
Chair of the Penn State Beaver Faculty Congress
Penn State Beaver

I. Issues involving both prototypes.

A. One of the major topics of discussion was the influence that both prototypes would have on the existing articulation agreements with local community colleges. Our 4-year programs rely on these transfer students who complete their general education courses at a local community college and then come to our campus for their final two years. Given that some community colleges won’t have courses that are interdisciplinary (drawing upon at least 2 domains) or courses under the chosen topic, the Foundation and Integration prototype would add 6 additional credits of integration courses, while the Chosen Topics prototype would add minimally 9 credits of integration courses. This seems to go against the University’s efforts to graduate our students sooner.

B. Another concern is the mandated three-semester timeline for students to earn a C in their 6 credits of GWS. What is the option for students that only passes their GWS course with a D during their third semester? The way the prototype is currently written, it appears that students who earn a D in a GWS course during their third semester will not be able to graduate from Penn State. Is this really what is intended?

C. We are also concerned with the requirement that a student must earn a C in his/her GQ courses. As written, this requirement is not just, since more advanced GQ courses depend on knowledge from less advanced GQ courses. For example, a student who places into Math 21 (30% ALEKS score) and earns a C will receive his/her GQ credit, while a student who places into Math 140 (76% ALEKS score) and earns a D will not. By earning a C in Math 21, the first student will have satisfied his/her GQ requirement by mastering algebra I at a C level. The second student, however, exhibited a competency in algebra I, algebra II, and trigonometry based on his/her performance on the ALEKS test, but will not earn GQ credits because he/she was unable to master calculus at a C level. If the University wants to set a minimal academic standard for a graduate’s math skills, we support that; however, more thought should be given to how that math standard is written.

D. Some of our faculty are concerned that neither prototype addressed the imbalance between the number of GN credits and the number of credits for the other domains (GA, GH, GS, GHA). If this imbalance is there for a reason, a justification would be helpful.
II. Issues involving the Foundation and Integration prototype

A. Our faculty are concerned with the scheduling challenges that will result by having the domain designation (i.e., GA, GH, etc.) linked with the learning objectives (i.e., Key Literacies, Creative Thinking, etc.) For example, if a student needs to take a GA course during his/her final semester at Beaver, we currently offer multiple GA course each semester to meet that student’s need. However, if the student must select a GA that meets a specific combination of learning objects, then this will significantly limit the student’s choices and may present a combination that isn’t even available given schedule conflicts, domain and learning objective needs, and the limited course offerings available at a small campuses like Beaver.

B. This prototype decreases a student’s required exposure to multiple domains (i.e., only 3 credits of GA, GH, GS, and GHA), while adding the requirement that each learning objective must be included twice. It appears that this prototype could result in less exposure to particular domains resulting in a general education that is focused on learning objectives rather than multiple hits on domains. Can this decreased emphasis on learning across domains and hitting each one more than once be justified more clearly?

C. Will the learning objectives be mandated for certain courses? And if so, how will the University verify that those learning objects are being met by a particular course?

III. Issues involving the Chosen Topics prototype

A. Because of limited resources, many of the campuses may only be able to offer a few topics. How will this affect a student that begins a topic at one campus and changes assignment to another campus which does not offer the same topic?

B. Currently, Bachelors of Arts majors have a United States Culture (US), an International Literacies (IL), and an Other Cultures (OC) requirement, which transfer students typically have to take once they arrive at Penn State since the community college usually don’t offer such courses. By adding a Global Competencies (GC) requirement (which community colleges also usually don’t offer), Bachelors of Arts majors will need to take 12 credits of cultural courses. With the addition of the 9 credits of integration courses, a transfer student will minimally have 21 additional credits of general education courses to take under this prototype. This will significantly harm our ability to recruit community college students into our four year programs who expect that most, if not all, of their general education courses will transfer and allow them to have completed the requirements. Furthermore, the IL, OC, and GC courses appear to be a redundant skill set, thus creating the GC requirement would not be necessary if the IL and OC requirements remain.

C. The campuses will be responsible for developing the various integration topics. It will be a challenge to connect the integration topics to the learning objectives. There will have to be new courses created and existing courses adjusted. Where is the work force coming from to create these new topical courses and how will it be supported?

D. The increased course content for US and IL courses may affect the number of already limited course offerings at the campuses. How will the University verify that those courses reflect at least 50% US or international content?