Date: 9 October 2014 (affirmed by Senate majority 14 October 2014)

To: GETF Task Force

From: PSY Senate (Fred Haag, Chair)

Subject: Senate Response to and Committee Reports on 2014 GETF Models Rollout

INTRODUCTION

The Penn State York Senate is pleased to be part of the discussion about what sort of General Education curriculum will best serve students across the commonwealth. That stated, while we appreciate the effort that has thus far gone into exploring possibilities, we anticipate many challenges moving forward with any of the proposed models.

Our core Senate Committees reviewed the GETF plans with their designated constituencies in mind. Throughout our campus-wide review, we centered on values behind the General Education revision, which were stressed during a recent (September 22) GETF visit to York. These values call for a curriculum that will lend itself to assessment; promote integration across disciplines; and strengthen core skills. We also considered what has been identified as an “image” or “marketing” problem with General Education. Beyond these various priorities affirmed by the GETF, we focused on the needs and resources of our campus.

It has been repeatedly stressed that no one model of General Education is to be adopted without significant revision. As such, we reviewed not only what was supplied by the GETF but also the current General Education model, evaluating it as an option that might be enhanced by incorporating elements of the alternative models. The contents of the PSY Senate committee discussions appear below.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

A. Academic and Student Issues

The committee believes that any model of General Education adopted by the University should do the following:

- Retain a 45-credit General Education program (regardless of model).
- Announce explicitly what students are to learn (if the goal is to encourage students to integrate material from multiple sources, then this is what must be assessed).

- Support multidisciplinary programs (including the “I” designated programs) and develop sufficient funding streams and support for their development and maintenance.

- Retain at least six credits of writing courses (regardless of model).

- Require writing/speaking/quantification in the first year (regardless of model) as part of entrance to major (with C or better required).

B. Cultural Diversity and Enrichment

No report was provided.

C. Curricular Affairs

The general consensus was that this revision of General Education is an excellent opportunity for a more diverse campus, one that offers a richer array of courses and comes closer to the environment in a small liberal arts college. The committee discussion of the GETF documents led to the following main points:

- Incoming students to our campus need to see a structure in place for General Education. Regardless of the prototype chosen, the revised curriculum has to be enforced across the university as a whole. There should be consistency among all campuses and UP.

- If the promise of central funding for new hires is kept, this would be a great opportunity for our campus to look at reinstating key faculty members in critical and analytical thinking and integrative thinking courses (philosophy, for example).

- The Committee likes the idea of General Education moving beyond the 100 level. This sends a different message about the importance of General Education.

- Members approved of the logical thinking and reasoning of the Scaffolded Prototype but also wondered if our students would have their career goals in place as freshmen. Will they be able to build on the 200 and 400 level courses they need to take in this model? What happens to students who change their mind after a couple of years? There was also concern about losing the breadth aspect of General Education.

- The revision for General Education should carry across the three disciplines. There is a sense that the cost of adopting changes and the commitment to the new learning objectives should not rely only on courses and faculty members in the humanities but must occur in the sciences as well.

- It was suggested that the literacy course for sciences needed an overhaul. Science students would benefit greatly from one or two more literacy courses as part of General Education.
There was discussion about building on writing and communication skills before students enter their major. Students should take ENGL 202 and CAS 100 in their first two years and not toward the end of their academic careers.

A more pragmatic approach would include taking a closer look at the General Education prototype we currently have and revise certain courses in order to enhance the educational experience of students and prepare them for a more complex and global environment.

D. Faculty Affairs

The committee review of the GETF documents led to the following questions, concerns, and recommendations:

- Presuming that the changes include the implementation of “themes” (presumably that is what is implied by “structuring integrative learning”? and special courses associated with those themes, students may take introductory courses that end up not counting in General Education, possibly delaying graduation or increasing cost to the student.

- Will General Education requirements be consistent across colleges and disciplines? Inconsistency may already contribute to the notion that General Education is irrelevant or unnecessary.

- The “Proposed Learning Outcomes” are simultaneously redundant and inadequate.

Examples:

Outcomes under “Communication: Written” are limited to issues of practical “correctness” and do not address the higher-order writing skills needed for college and professional success in any medium. “Oral” goals are similarly limited.

“Intercultural Competencies” are redundant under “Communication” because they are addressed in their own category.

Even given these issues with the outcomes, it is clear that the current General Education program already can address these outcomes without significant alteration.

- The process of rethinking General Education has been rife with rumor, and many of the reasons given for reconsidering the General Education program do not appear to be problems with General Education as a program. At the very least, a wholesale shift in General Education will not intrinsically address these issues.

- We remain puzzled about the process because the suggested prototypes do not, on the surface, seem to address any of the problems identified in our current General Education program (these problems outlined in “Strengths and Weaknesses for the Current General Education Program” section of the September 19, 2014 progress report).
E. Teaching, Learning Technology Advisory Committee

The committee addressed the prototypes with a focus on teaching and learning with technology. In discussion, it used the GETF documentation as well as the Middle States Standards for the General Education Curriculum (Standard 12)—which includes an important emphasis not explicitly addressed in the prototypes, namely technological competency—to frame the conversation. Standard 12 states: The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

See: http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06_Aug08REVMarch09.pdf

The suggestions of the committee are as follows:

- The committee members felt that the “technology competency” focus is not specifically handled within the prototypes and therefore represents a missed opportunity. We interpreted the standard to include both technological foundational skills, such as competency with productivity software such as word processing and spreadsheet software, for example, and an updated approach to information literacy to include new media literacy, namely the ability to locate resources, evaluate them for credibility, use the information, and communicate it effectively using new media tools and skills. An overview of these skills can be found in a paper published by the MacArthur Foundation by Henry Jenkins, Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (2006).

See: http://www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF

- The committee wanted also to note that “technological competency” should not be synonymous with (or in a simplistic way equated with) a student’s access to/participation in online learning, but rather the underlying skills needed to work effectively, think critically, and successfully complete work required of a student and employee in a 21st century workforce. The committee also thought there could be an additional “value-added” for students (especially in the Scaffolded Prototype) with the ability to earn credentials (certificates, minors) through foundational skill courses, that demonstrate competencies in technical areas that employers might deem valuable. Our student member felt that other students would find this Scaffolded Prototype very appealing because of the potential to earn a minor while completing General Education requirements.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Beyond findings of individual committees, a number of additional issues rate attention if the General Education reform process is to move forward effectively. These include answering the following questions and addressing the following matters:

- Is there actual consensus about stated learning objectives? If everything flows from this, it would be supremely important to make sure that objectives are agreed upon first.
- Is there alignment between stated learning objectives and Penn State’s vision and mission statements—an important consideration for Middle States accreditation?

- What efforts have been made to insure that the adjunct faculty, who may often teach many of the General Education courses at the campuses, have had a chance to give input?

- Is there a mismatch between the prototypes and assessment types being discussed? AAC&U VALUE rubrics were discussed as one way to assess the curriculum, but these may be more appropriately applied to elements within courses rather than in a model that uses courses themselves as evidence of completion of stated learning objectives.

- The processes/opportunities by which students actually get a chance to reflect on and integrate their learning should be made more concrete. Simply taking a series of courses will not insure that integration and meaning-making has taken place. Actual curricular structures (capstones, for example, or courses that require students to reflect on and process their experiences) need to be in place to make sure that this actually happens.

- The fact that students do not understand the role of the General Education curriculum is not really addressed here with a practical solution—so will this problem not be perpetuated with any of the alternative models? Should there be an orienting course (included in the learning-to-learn course or in a FYS/FYE) that helps to set the stage explicitly for this awareness. Part of this course could be helping students to navigate the General Education curriculum and do some goal setting for future scheduling.

- Are there redundancies across Penn State Programs that could be accounted for/integrated now? The Engaged Scholarship initiative, for example, (with badging as an avenue for credentialing) seems to have many of the elements sought after in the General Education re-design (high-impact practices along with a process for acknowledging student accomplishments)


**CONCLUSION**

The range of questions, concerns, and comments included in this report reflects the enormous scale of the proposed reform. It also speaks to the importance of General Education for everybody in the Penn State system. While our campus remains united in its desire to provide the best possible education to our students, we find in the plans supplied by the GETF only a few of the building blocks necessary to construct a successful General Education curriculum.

Because of the immensity and complexity of the task ahead, we believe that at this time a total overhaul to the General Education curriculum may not be possible. However, change that is done incrementally (while continuing to work towards long-range goals) is both
possible and practical. We therefore suggest short-term modifications to the existing General Education model. This could essentially be considered a fourth prototype that incorporates new practices and vision and stays flexible enough to become further modified as longer-range plans develop. Please consult the following appendix for an overview of some potential strategies.
APPENDIX: STRATEGIES

A. Reinvigorate the curriculum at the course level

- Provide support to update current courses: Faculty teaching current General Education courses should be invited to attend (and are supported by compensation for travel, time for adjuncts, materials, and registration) symposia and institutes offered regionally with national speakers to evaluate and re-design courses to update them with research-based best practice that is discipline-specific and that includes incorporation (as appropriate) of General Education learning objectives. These re-designed courses should also include a programmatic assessment component.

- Build in the integration component through targeted courses: Funding is provided to support the development of new courses (including possibly an orienting or learning-to-learn course and a capstone) that provide opportunities to integrate knowledge across domains, communicate the importance of the General Education curriculum, and provide opportunities for students to plan for, reflect upon, and connect their experiences. Funding would also support the possible hiring of new faculty as needed to create and offer these integrative courses. Once these courses are available and in place, then the “I” designation could be added as a requirement for graduation. Basic elements in the courses should be agreed upon, but flexibility should be maximized so that units can create courses that suit their individual needs.

B. Emphasize building strong foundational skills early on (for all students)

- Require students to complete writing/speaking/math/technology courses in first year with C or better. Integration is one of the hallmarks of the General Education reform. The integration of foundational skills into a student’s academic toolbox is as necessary as the integration of knowledge across disciplines. This type of integration could be an important first step towards a wider integration of the curriculum. This gateway requirement also can be an important motivating factor for students to apply themselves early on in their academic careers.

C. Develop a short-term assessment plan that builds towards a comprehensive plan

- Compare success rates for students pre/post C or better requirement.

- Pilot assessment plans/instruments using re-designed courses.

- Track student performance in an orienting or learning-to-learn course and a capstone (if added); track performance in new “I” suffix courses (if added).

D. Continue work on long-term goals

We hope that the GETF will pursue the long-term goals of:
- Building a comprehensive assessment plan for General Education

- a plan that obtains consensus about the stated General Education learning objectives.

- a plan that maps out alignment between current curriculum, agreed-upon learning objectives, and Middle States requirements.

- a plan that identifies assessment measures that can be implemented at the course and program levels.

- a plan that develops an assessment timetable (implementation, data collection, analysis, reporting, and follow-up action).

- Continuing to seek a process by which the current structure (GS, GH, GA, etc.) can also include designations that ensure that students are also exposed to all of the stated learning objectives.

- Developing plans for course re-design institutes that are discipline-specific and that include integration of General Education learning objectives and assessment.