Preliminary Summary of Faculty Comments from Gen Ed Town Hall Meetings at UP/Campuses

The Faculty Subcommittee of the General Education Task Force was charged with collecting faculty feedback at Gen Ed Town Halls that were scheduled regionally for the campuses and at the colleges at University Park beginning in mid-March and continuing throughout April into May. Since all notes from these meetings have not yet been submitted, this is a preliminary report identifying the common themes emerging from 13 of these meetings. While there are some issues raised that may be unique to particular campuses or colleges, clear shared themes have emerged which are presented below. Overall more skepticism and negativity than positivity has been clearly expressed towards the suggested general education revisions. This is a point worth noting.

Theme 1: Why Make Drastic Changes/What’s the Evidence for What’s Broken and How to Fix It?

- Well researched and convincing evidence has not been provided regarding what is currently working well and what exactly needs to be changed with the current Gen Ed system. Before any changes are proposed and undertaken, there should be a systematic assessment of the current Gen Ed system/courses so that there is a baseline for informed decision making.
- What is the evidence that the proposed changes implemented in the context of a large university like ours are likely to accomplish the goals (e.g. increased rigor, improved higher-level critical thinking, etc.)?
- Problems with the current Gen Ed are acknowledged and are frustrating to faculty (e.g. students not able to get the courses that they need, large class sizes that are antithetical to higher-level learning). Why don’t we try to specifically address those problems rather than creating a new system that actually would not solve these problems and may create more complexity and difficulty? This seems like a better use of resources.

Theme 2: Clarifying the Philosophy of General Education

- Most faculty endorse the important role that general education plays in the growth and development of students; recognizing it as an important opportunity for exploration that should not be focused on “employment” objectives.
- Concern is expressed that the proposed changes would actually restrict rather than enhance students’ exploratory opportunities by requiring students to pursue themes.

Theme 3: Discomfort with the Amount of Ambiguity in the Proposed Gen Ed Changes at this Time Point and the Process of Moving Forward

- Many faculty members are uncomfortable with the lack of clear definitions for and identification of the pieces of the proposed Gen Ed curriculum (e.g. literacy, numeracy, etc.) at this point in time. How can they be asked to provide constructive input when there are so few specifics and details? Further, the proposed time line does not provide sufficient time for further faculty input before decisions are to be made. This seems to be leading to erosion of faculty confidence in the process.
Theme 4: Opportunities and Challenges for Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- Some faculty express enthusiasm for the opportunity to collaborate across disciplines and campuses.
- Some faculty/campuses view the opportunity to identify themes as something that could enhance the “brand” and help to recruit students.
- Many faculty express concern over the difficulties that arise in trying to initiate and sustain such collaborations, particularly when most faculty who teach general education courses are fixed-term.

Theme 5: What Would be the Impact on Campuses, Units, Majors, and Faculty?

- There is anxiety expressed over how the proposed general education will impact the available resources for campuses and units. Some of the campuses have expressed a great deal of concern that their resources are already stretched thin in covering the courses that they are already offering and that the “themes” part of the proposed Gen Ed curriculum would be an additional burden. Some colleges and units have expressed concern over possible diminution of their role in General Education.
- If the University adopts a new hybrid budget model, there is concern over “competition” for “students in seats” and how that would impact the approval process for themes.
- Faculty are concerned that they will be required to do additional work in the development, coordination, and teaching of themed courses without adequate support or value added towards their promotion and tenure or annual reviews.

Theme 6: Concern over the Logistical Problems that “Themes” May Entail

- Faculty have come up with long lists of logistical problems that could result from the themes requirement in a university that is as large and diverse as ours.

Theme 7: Process and Time Table

- Many have requested that a “more realistic” time table be established that would allow more informed input from the faculty before a scheduled Faculty Senate vote in October 2014.
- With the current time table, faculty are skeptical of the process and that their input is being considered and taken seriously.
Theme 8: Institutional Issues

- There are many broader institutional issues that impact the success of any General Education curriculum that are not addressed by the proposed revisions. These include such issues as: the composition of faculty (standing versus fixed-term), how teaching is valued in promotion and tenure and salary decisions, academic standards for student admissions to Penn State, the diversity of Penn State’s campuses, among others.
- Skepticism exists that unless the institutional culture and structure change, General Education changes will be less than successful.

Theme 9: Will There Be Adequate Support and Resources for Gen Ed Revisions?

- Skepticism exists that there will be adequate support and resources for Gen Ed revisions based on current competition for resources and past experiences with Gen Ed revisions that were mandated but resources with not forthcoming.
- There are mixed reactions regarding a “General Education Institute.” Some view it as a much needed and useful resource whereas others view it as another level of bureaucracy that takes resources away from other areas that need them.
- Many faculty members are reluctant to have Faculty Senate make a decision about Gen Ed curricular changes without first knowing what financial commitments administration will make towards these changes.

Overall Core Theme: Do the Benefits of the Proposed Gen Ed Changes Outweigh the Costs?