Report from the AAC&U Institute on General Education
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“General education is the signature of American higher education that helped our nation rise to prominence. We must change with our context and build a citizenry able to tackle the challenges and opportunities of today, including global interdependence, innovation in the workplace, and civic engagement in a diverse democracy.”

AAC&U Institute on General Education, June 2014

Design of the AAC&U Institute

The Institute contained 4 tracks of informational seminars, workshops, and team discussion time. In addition to attending sessions, the team interacted with an AAC&U mentor and developed and received feedback on an action plan. Penn State’s five-member team divided up amongst the tracks to gain as much information as possible. This document briefly overviews the main points and themes that emerged from our experiences.

What we learned about GETF progress to date

The challenges the Task Force has faced, in the past and for the foreseeable future, are not unique to Penn State’s efforts to revise the General Education program. The questions, issues, and concerns we have encountered are typical. We are not the only group, for instance, who has had to modify the timeline of a faculty governance vote nor are we the only group that struggles to balance transparency and decision making.

In facing those challenges, the GETF has done many things well including:
• Faculty engagement: We have avoided a top-down imposition of a revised Gen Ed and have solicited input from faculty through multiple approaches
• Student engagement: We have solicited input from students through multiple avenues, including student membership on GETF committees
• Development of the website that permits transparency and communication
• Engagement with the Faculty Senate
• Vision: We spent the first year focusing on opportunities for improvement

What we learned about future steps and possibilities

Our team heard much of value throughout the Institute, some of which reinforced current thinking of the GETF and some of which suggested new considerations. The major
The informational takeaways below were synthesized from across Institute tracks and are organized according to the relevant PSU and Task Force units. Each section begins with a brief information overview followed by recommendations for future actions that the Task Force may want to consider.

**Institutional Needs: Facilitating a Cultural Change**

We must recognize that reform of the type we seek requires cultural change at the institutional scale. Further, while each of our challenges are also faced by other institutions, our institution is unique in that we simultaneously face the challenges of all types of institutions (2-yr, 4-yr., large, small, etc.). Cultural issues we must recognize include:

- Faculty at all institutions feel a strong connection to their Gen Ed contributions. While striving to improve and move forward, we must not forget to recognize and support the many good efforts that are already in place.
- The struggle of ownership over learning between Gen Ed and the majors is typical across higher education. In addressing the relationship between major and Gen Ed, the AAC&U urges institutions to:
  - avoid the “Fallacy of Inoculation.” Student learning of any knowledge or skill requires repeated exposures across time and settings.
  - develop an integrative piece to the curriculum. Based on national trends and research, this piece is essential for modern general education and cannot be achieved by just one group, department, or unit. Development and implementation must be intentional and interdisciplinary.
- The Gen Ed program belongs to faculty, staff, and students. We must continue efforts to engage these stakeholders so that change happens from the grassroots.

Our Institute team recommends several steps to address the needed cultural change.

- The Task Force should continue to intentionally identify and engage leadership at all levels of the institution throughout the process. This will involve a continuation of ongoing efforts as well as clear agreement regarding consultation and communication expectations.
- Explicitly link our reform efforts to the institutional mission and strategic planning.
- Invite national experts to meet with Task Force contributors to provide information and address questions that have emerged through the revision process.

**Institutional Needs: Institutional Baccalaureate Outcomes**

Penn State lacks a clearly defined set of baccalaureate outcomes that span the curriculum (Gen Ed and the major) and co-curriculum. This has raised a few challenges. For instance:

- The Gen Ed program is perceived as the only opportunity to forward valued student experiences (e.g., engaged scholarship, ePortfolios).
The relationships between what students experience and learn within majors, minors, Gen Ed, and the co-curriculum are difficult to resolve.

Our Institute team recommends discussion among appropriate leadership around possible adaptation and adoption of the AAC&U LEAP outcomes to define PSU’s baccalaureate outcomes. Doing so would allow:

- Identification of our unique PSU ‘stamp’
- A system that supports
  - connections between the Gen Ed program, the co-curriculum, and the majors
  - intentional advising as students work toward achievement of these outcomes

**Task Force Needs: Working toward a proposal**

Reform of this scope and for an institution the size of Penn State requires a significant commitment from Task Force contributors and the institution.

- Reform efforts of this scope can take a few years to complete.
- The new Gen Ed program must have broad support to be successfully implemented.

Our Institute team recommends:

- Each member of the GETF must commit to being a contributing member of a team and Task Force contributors should be encouraged and supported to act as leaders.
- Task force contributors must commit to educating themselves through reading and consulting with outside experts to help the institution build its knowledge base and develop capacity to navigate change
- Contributors to the work of the Task Force must have clearly determined ways to be recognized for their contribution and work.
- Remember the 10/80/10 rule (10% will be fully in support, 80% will be learning/open, 10% will be fully against). Focus on the 80% but listen carefully to the 10% against.

**Task Force Needs: Working to finalize a proposal**

At Penn State, the revised Gen Ed curriculum will need to be approved by Faculty Senate.

- We recognize that the curriculum is owned by faculty and students, and must be centered around principles of student learning.
- Engaging faculty in online discussions can be fruitful. But, discussions must be focused (ask for responses to specific, constructive questions) and moderated.

Our Institute team recommends that we:

- Re-double efforts to engage senate leadership and membership; determine the best avenues and mechanisms of purposeful communication.
- Identify the specific pieces of the proposal that will go to Senate and the order in which these will be voted on. All legislation must be specific enough to be understood but flexible enough to allow changes during implementation.
**GE Program Design**

The General Education program that we adopt must be focused on student learning and the preparation of students for the modern world.

**High Impact Instructional Practices and Faculty Support**

The success of any general education reform that focuses on student learning fundamentally rests on faculty commitment to developing pedagogical skills and assessing student learning. To be successful, the Gen Ed program must galvanize the campus to achieve learning outcomes. A few characteristics of model Gen Ed programs include the following:

- **Communication**
  - among faculty teaching Gen Ed courses.
  - informing students of the learning outcomes intended to be achieved in particular courses and across the Gen Ed program.
- Uses pathways/signature questions/themes to engage students in integrative thinking between and within courses, over time, and between campus and community life.
- Emphasizes competencies (the ability to do something) rather than courses or content.
- Encourages development of self-directed learning.
- Includes upper-level coursework.

Achieving these goals requires substantial institutional commitment to support faculty invested in working toward Gen Ed learning goals. On the whole, our Institute team recommends that the GETF develop a specific proposal for the General Education Faculty Institute. Though there are many particulars that will need to be considered in this proposal, key recommendations include:

- Mechanisms for faculty to receive credit (e.g., P&T, annual review) for their time and effort devoted to Gen Ed instruction.
- A system that provides the time, place, and incentives for faculty to work on course reform, development, and assessment (e.g., course releases, faculty fellows).
- An assessment system that allows faculty to accumulate course level, formative feedback.
- A system that cultivates and supports faculty leadership to guide implementation.

**Learning Objectives**

Learning objectives define the goals of the General Education program. The six objectives the team took to the Institute were derived from LEAP and existing frameworks for General Education. Key points to consider regarding learning objectives include:

- Objectives must keep the focus on student learning and be defined as developing competencies.
- Objectives must be shared with and understood by faculty and students.
- Single objectives must be addressed in multiple courses and settings for students to master these competencies.
● Gen Ed objectives should map to institutional baccalaureate objectives.

The Institute team recommends the following for further development of Gen Ed learning objectives:

- Learning objectives must be defined clearly and broadly so that faculty are better able to identify the ways these competencies will be developed in coursework.
- No single Gen Ed course is expected to address all objectives. But, each course must identify those objectives the course addresses, how students will achieve the objective, and how the objective(s) will be assessed.
- Faculty must have the opportunity to obtain formative assessment regarding student development toward the objective.
- There is a need for some form of rolling alignment review to ensure that courses remain well-aligned with Gen Ed objectives and can help students to meet these.

Assessment

Assessment plays a critical role in revising and implementing the Gen Ed program. Although we recognize accreditation pressures for assessment, a well-designed assessment program can serve both faculty and students.

- VALUE rubrics can provide developmental assessment information and rubric scores can be used for both formative and summative assessment.
- Assessment information needs to be provided at multiple levels.
- Faculty are encouraged to obtain and use formative assessment information.

Recommendations the team received at the Institute indicate that:

- ‘Signature assignments’ can be embedded in courses to further student learning and provide the student work for assessment purposes. [The Faculty Institute could facilitate development of templates to guide the development of these assignments within courses.]
- We must define a standard performance that is expected of students. This standard begins with our baseline and sets goals for student growth.