Distinguished Faculty Senators

General Education Task Force Co-Chairs:

Dr. Mary Beth Williams, Professor of Chemistry and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education, Eberly College of Science
Dr. Maggie Slattery, Assistant Professor of Bioengineering
Dr. Janet Schulenberg, Associate Director, Division of Undergraduate Studies

College of Earth and Mineral Sciences Faculty Senators:

Dr. Brent Yarnal, Professor and Associate Head of Geography, and Director, Center for Integrated Regional Assessment
Dr. Erica Smithwick, Associate Professor of Ecology and Director of Landscape Ecology at Penn State
Dr. Petra Tschakert, Associate Professor of Geography
Dr. Joan Redwing, Professor of Materials Science and Engineering, and Electrical Engineering

Dear Senators:

The need for informed citizens to possess scientific knowledge, and the lack of scientific knowledge among citizens, have never been greater. The proposal to reduce the General Education requirements for science is wrong, for many reasons.

A few years ago, after conducting a Capitol Hill briefing on behalf of several leading scientific societies, I had the opportunity to meet with high-level staff of a key House committee that addresses science. The bright young lawyer from the committee started the discussion by saying, in more-or-less these exact words: “I didn’t take science in college. I don’t know science. I don’t like science. But, I know that you are wrong about your science, because…” The statement that followed was breathtakingly erroneous, and if used as a basis for policies would contribute to a weaker economy with fewer jobs, less national security, and a dirtier environment.

In the Penn State MOOC I helped run last year, which we are working to convert to a Penn State general education science class, we outlined the extensive evidence that the Earth was
overpopulated with a few million hunter-gatherers about ten millennia ago. The thousand-fold more people living now depend on what we have learned and taught, built and shared, with central roles for science, engineering, agriculture and public health (and note that the introduction to engineering and other essential applications often is “science” in general education at Penn State).

The need for a broad general-education curriculum is clear. Please, in a world where we depend on science and its applications, don’t cut it back now.

Yours truly,

Richard B. Alley
Evan Pugh Professor of Geosciences