Thoughts about Penn State’s General Education program from the Perspective of the Evan Pugh Professors (5/9/14)

(as summarized by Jim Kasting, GETF member and Evan Pugh Professor of Geosciences)

On April 2, 2014, several members of the Gened Task Force (including Mary Beth Williams, Chris Long, Carey Eckhardt, Ann Taylor, Tanya Furman, and Jim Kasting) met with a subset of the Evan Pugh Professors (including Bruce Logan, Moses Chan, Ken Weiss, Rob Hume, Tony Cutler, and Harry Alcock) to discuss issues related to Penn State’s General Education program and the ongoing work of the Task Force. Although no attempt was made to achieve consensus, several problems with GenEd were pointed out by the Pugh professors, and some tentative recommendations were made. Following is an attempt to summarize these points:

Perceived problems with the existing GenEd program

1. The Pugh professors collectively feel that there has been a general erosion of academic rigor in the undergraduate education program, much of it centered within our General Education program. Grade inflation is rampant. Some large GenEd classes, for example, are reported to have an ‘A−’ average. Many students enroll in classes that will provide them with an easy ‘A’, as opposed to classes that might be more useful but that require more effort. Late drops are over-used by many students to keep their GPAs high when they find out that a course is more difficult than they had anticipated.

2. A related issue is that in some Colleges large GenEd courses, some with more than 1000 students, are taught in large classroom settings or on-line with very few teaching assistants and little or no hand-graded work. Critical skills such as writing, speaking, and numeracy/quantification are difficult or impossible to teach in such settings. Some of these courses are graded entirely by computer scoring of multiple-choice quizzes and tests. We question whether this practice promotes effective learning.

3. Part of this latter problem is driven by the University’s budget model, which rewards faculty/departments for teaching large classes that deliver lots of student credit hours as cheaply as possible. There is no oversight at the University level to limit the extent to which this practice occurs. This can lead to a “rush to the bottom” in which Colleges compete with each other to offer such courses and gain additional support from the University.

4. Some Pugh professors believe that the practice of evaluating faculty based on SRTE scores should be eliminated because it encourages professors to make their courses easy and fun, as opposed to being rigorous. Not all the Pughs agree that the use of SRTEs should be abolished, but it is nonetheless highly likely that basing faculty evaluations partly on SRTEs is a contributing factor to grade inflation and to the lack of academic rigor in GenEd courses.

Recommendations to improve the quality of the Gened program

As pointed out already, no consensus was reached during the lunch meeting involving the Pugh professors and the GenEd Task Force; also, the Pugh faculty who were present were less
than half the full group. That said, here are some ideas for how the GenEd program might be improved. These recommendations are arranged in order of ease of implementation, starting with the easiest. The ones towards the bottom of the list are harder because they would require additional financial resources that may or may not be available.

1. Provide some guidance at the University level on grading large GenEd classes. For example, suggest or require that the mean grade be no higher than a ‘B’ in classes that have more than, say, 50 students. Large classes would need to be reviewed at some level to see whether this guidance was being followed, and exceptions would need to be justified. Alternatively, the suggestion was made to add class rank to the student’s grade; however, this would complicate student transcripts and might be difficult to implement.

2. Limit the number of ‘late drops’ that a student may use to something lower than the current number. Also, make the late drop period end somewhat earlier in the semester than it does now. As discussed in the May 1 GenEd Task Force meeting, our committee may not be charged with making such recommendations, but this suggestion could still be passed on to the Faculty Senate for their consideration.

3. Require that all GenEd courses contain an ‘active learning’ component in which skills such as writing, speaking, and numeracy/quantification are taught. For example, GA and GH courses might include writing and/or speaking, GN courses might include numeracy/quantification, and GS courses might include one or more of all three types of skill development. In practice, implementing this recommendation is hard because it almost certainly requires more TAs than are currently assigned to some big courses, and that, in turn, would require more money. In the Gened course Earth 2, for example, this requires about 1 TA per 80 students to grade the weekly homework assignments and to help in grading essay questions on the exams.

   Even though this requirement is hard, it is perhaps the most important recommendation listed here, because it is precisely this ‘active learning’ component that has disappeared from many existing GenEd courses. Oversight at the University level would be needed to ensure that active learning techniques are being emphasized in all courses.

   Parenthetically, we note that precisely such a recommendation was made back in 1998 by the previous incarnation of our Task Force, which was called the Special Committee on General Education (see http://www.psu.edu/ufs/guts.html). Their fourth bullet was this:

   **Recommendation #4**: Integrate key competencies for active learning (writing, speaking, quantitative reasoning, information retrieval and computer literacy, problem solving and critical thinking, collaboration and teamwork, intercultural and international competence), as appropriate, in all general education courses in the domain-knowledge areas (health sciences, sciences, arts, humanities, social and behavioral sciences).

The implementation section that follows this recommendation includes the following sentence: “Course proposals submitted for approval by the Faculty Senate, and course syllabi distributed to students, should be explicit in describing the ways the above elements are incorporated into the course.” In practice, this recommendation does not appear to have been implemented or, if it was, it has had little effect. Perhaps this is because the following statement was also included under the heading **Resource Issues**: “This recommendation does not entail substantial new, permanent funding.” But that statement is simply wrong. Evaluating written assignments requires manpower in the form of instructors or TAs. Thus,
enforcement of this recommendation should require that sufficient manpower is available in each GenEd course to perform these grading duties.

4. Better yet, if and when funds become available, require that all large GenEd courses be broken down into small (~25 student) sections that meet once a week under the supervision of either the instructor or a TA. These could be either discussion sections or teaching labs. Enough TA support should be provided so that no TA teaches more than two sections. (TAs ran three 25-student lab sections in Geosci 20 for many years, and it was a perpetual source of anxiety for the grad students involved.) This practice is followed by many elite private universities, but also (based on anecdotal evidence) by our peer institution, the University of Michigan. We should strive to reach this same standard.