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GENERAL EDUCATION PLANNING AND OVERSIGHT TASK FORCE

Revision to Goal Statement and Learning Objectives for General Education

(Legislative)

Implementation: Upon approval by the Senate

Introduction

The University Faculty Senate establishes the intent and structure of General Education for undergraduate students, approves General Education courses, and provides oversight of the program’s effectiveness. With the exception of revisions to First-Year Engagement and to Intercultural and International Competence requirements (University requirements which often overlap with General Education courses), the current General Education program has not been modified since its adoption on December 2, 1997. The General Education Planning and Oversight Task Force was charged in March 2013 by the Faculty Senate and the Provost to revisit and revise General Education. In part, this charge stems from studies of General Education nationally and at Penn State which suggest that student learning is enhanced by a coherent General Education curriculum with a clearly defined purpose. Otherwise, General Education courses often appear to students and faculty as unrelated to each other or to a larger purpose.

Discussion and Rationale

A key first step toward addressing this challenge is to develop capacity for alignment toward explicit purposes of the General Education curriculum. To that end, the General Education Task Force recommends modifications to the stated goal of the General Education program to reflect Penn State’s educational mission through contemporary General Education learning.

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1 Appendix A.1 and A.2 General Education http://senate.psu.edu/policies-and-rules-for-undergraduate-students/appendix-a-1-general-education-baccalaureate-degree/
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Objectives and 2) to enable comprehensive, curriculum-level assessment that continually refocuses the General Education curriculum around those General Education learning objectives. The scholarship and consultation that led to this present recommendation and informed the development of the proposed learning objectives is summarized in an October 21, 2014 Senate informational report. In previous General Education Task Force reports, the term “objective” was used to describe the knowledge, skills, and thinking processes for which learners should be able to exhibit gains following instruction, and that terminology is continued here. This recommendation for updated goals and objectives addresses identified gaps in the current General Education program. Most notably, this step allows the university to explicitly construct a General Education curriculum around these learning objectives and assess the value of our General Education curriculum on an ongoing basis.

In advance of any other proposed curricular change to General Education, the Task Force recommends adoption of a revised General Education goal statement, which includes seven unranked and interrelated learning objectives. The proposed learning objectives have been modified from those adopted in 1997 to reflect changes in knowledge and society important for all Penn State graduates. General Education learning objectives lay a foundation for and complement the learning accomplished in other parts of the undergraduate degree. Overall, the objectives of General Education have been reframed to reflect the national emphasis on a range of literacies, skills, and ways of thinking necessary in today’s world. Some of the objectives are quite similar to those from 1997 (e.g., Effective Communication) and some reflect only minor changes. The greatest revisions are reflected in two of the seven objectives: Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning, and Global Learning. Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning has been added to reflect the importance of helping all Penn State graduates engage with the world in meaningful, intellectually grounded ways consistent with the priorities and values of the institution that emphasize student engagement. The language describing Global Learning expands the existing language on international interdependence and cultural diversity to reflect the interconnectedness of the twenty-first century and the absolute necessity for our students to participate in intercultural, international, and global contexts.

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3 A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 21, 2014) http://senate.psu.edu/senators/special-committees/general-education-planning-and-oversight-task-force/reports-and-resources/

4 In some disciplines, the terms “goal” or “outcome” may be used to convey this concept. The term “objective” is used in this manner by the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence at Penn State. www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/tools/programassessment/definitions.

5 A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 21, 2014), Part A. The Task Force’s plan for bringing reports to Faculty Senate is summarized on p. 57.

6 Key scholarship informing this is referenced in two prior Senate Informational reports (October 21, 2014 and October 16, 2013), and includes College Learning for the New Global Century (2007), Association of American Colleges & Universities and A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future (2012), The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement.

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In adopting the revised General Education goal statement and the seven learning objectives, it is important to keep in mind that they will be actualized through an array of current and new courses proposed by the faculty, each of which will include student learning opportunities for some portion of these objectives. No single course will need to address all, or even most, of these learning objectives. These General Education learning objectives do not supplant course-level, disciplinary learning objectives. Rather, the General Education learning objectives reflect the sum of General Education-level skills, knowledge areas, and ways of thinking that each course partially contributes to student learning. (Senate Legislation on a curricular structure at a later point will clarify aspects such as how many of these seven learning objectives General Education courses or student choices will need to meet.) Nor do the General Education learning objectives intend to preclude additional aims, especially of long-term learning goals that go beyond the available assessment measures. Although some assessment data may need to be collected from courses, these proposed learning objectives are associated with the General Education curriculum and assessment of these objectives will be at the level of the General Education curriculum (i.e. assessment data will be aggregated across multiple courses). Nor is General Education-level curricular assessment associated with teaching evaluations or course-level assessment. Each of these learning objectives is associated with existing assessment tools adaptable to course content for any discipline which can be used to assess to what extent the proposed General Education learning objectives are being met for our students, to point to areas of excellence, and to target curricular improvements.

**Recommendations**

It is recommended that the current statement on General Education goals be updated as follows:

The General Education curriculum will enable students to acquire skills, knowledge, and experiences for living in interconnected contexts, so they can contribute to making life **better for others, themselves, and the larger world**. General Education encompasses the breadth of knowledge involving the major intellectual and aesthetic skills and achievements of humanity. This must include understanding and appreciation of the pluralistic nature of knowledge epitomized by the natural sciences, quantitative skills, social and behavioral sciences, humanities, and arts. To achieve and share such an understanding and appreciation, skills in self-expression, quantitative analysis, information literacy, and collaborative interaction are necessary. General Education aids students in developing intellectual curiosity, a strengthened ability to think, and a deeper sense of aesthetic appreciation. General Education, in essence, aims to cultivate a knowledgeable, informed, literate human being.

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8 Examples are described on pages 52-54 and Appendix K of A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 21, 2014).

9 Appendix VII: Final Report and Recommendations of The Special Committee on General Education to the University Faculty Senate (December 2, 1997) Goals.
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An effective general education program enables students to:

a. acquire knowledge through critical information gathering— including reading, listening, computer assisted searching, and scientific experimentation and observation;
b. analyze and evaluate, where appropriate in a quantitative manner, the acquired knowledge;
c. integrate knowledge from a variety of sources and fields;
d. make critical judgments in a logical and rational manner;
e. develop the skills to maintain health, and understand the factors that impinge upon it;
f. communicate effectively, both in writing and orally, and using the accepted methods for presentation, organization and debate particular to their disciplines;
g. proceed independently and in collaboration with others in seeking and sharing knowledge;
h. gain understanding of international interdependence and cultural diversity, and develop consideration for values, lifestyles, and traditions that may differ from their own;
i. comprehend the role of aesthetic and creative activities in expressing both imagination and experience.

An effective General Education curriculum shall facilitate teaching and learning through seven key objectives:

a. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION – the ability to exchange information and ideas in oral, written, and visual form in ways that allow for informed and persuasive discourse that builds trust and respect among those engaged in that exchange, and helps create environments where creative ideas and problem-solving flourish.

b. KEY LITERACIES – the ability to identify, interpret, create, communicate and compute using materials in a variety of media and contexts. Literacy acquired in multiple areas, including textual, quantitative, information/technology, health, intercultural, historical, aesthetic, and scientific, enables individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, to lead healthy and productive lives, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

c. CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL THINKING – the habit of mind characterized by comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating a conclusion. It is the intellectually disciplined process of conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

d. INTEGRATIVE THINKING – the ability to synthesize knowledge across multiple domains, modes of inquiry, historical periods, and perspectives, as well as the ability to identify linkages between existing knowledge and new information. Individuals who engage in integrative thinking are able to transfer knowledge within and beyond their current contexts.
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e. CREATIVE THINKING – the capacity to synthesize existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways and the experience of performing, making, thinking, or acting in an imaginative way that may be characterized by innovation, divergent thinking, and intellectual risk taking.

f. GLOBAL LEARNING – the intellectually disciplined abilities to analyze similarities and differences among cultures; evaluate natural, physical, social, cultural, historical, and economic legacies and hierarchies; and engage as community members and leaders who will continue to deal with the intricacies of an ever-changing world. Individuals should acquire the ability to analyze power; identify and critique interdependent global, regional, and local cultures and systems; and evaluate the implications for people's lives.

g. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ETHICAL REASONING – the ability to assess one’s own values within the social context of problems, recognize ethical issues in a variety of settings, describe how different perspectives might be applied to ethical dilemmas, and consider the ramifications of alternative actions. Individuals should acquire the self-knowledge and leadership skills needed to play a role in creating and maintaining healthy, civil, safe, and thriving communities.

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GENERAL EDUCATION OVERSIGHT AND PLANNING TASK FORCE

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