

Senate Council has approved this report for the January plenary session of Faculty Senate for their consideration.

GENERAL EDUCATION PLANNING AND OVERSIGHT TASK FORCE

Institutional Support and Resources for General Education

(Advisory/Consultative)

Implementation: Upon approval by the President

Introduction

Ongoing University strategic planning discussions include a central dialog around “transforming education”¹ and a focus on excellence.² General Education coursework is the common required undergraduate program for all (~90,000) Penn State students. It currently includes 45 of at least 120 credits for baccalaureate degrees and 21 of 60 credits for associate degrees,³ and distinguishes Penn State’s undergraduate education on the whole. As such, General Education is delivered at all Penn State campuses, and ~50% of all Penn State faculty teach General Education courses.⁴ Given the scope and impact of General Education coursework across the University, supporting excellence, innovation, and scholarship in General Education should be a central priority for the University. By pursuing this priority, Penn State has the opportunity to become a nationally-visible leader in the scholarship of General Education. Penn State should invest in and support instructional excellence and research, so that the outcomes of the General Education curriculum can be continually assessed to enable dynamic innovation and continuous improvement. **To accomplish this, it is important that Penn State create a formalized university-wide structure to serve as a pedagogical and educational research commons for participants in the shared mission of General Education. This structure would function as an engine for collaboration, innovation, assessment, and research in General Education. Such a structure is necessary for improving our current General Education program, as well as for any future revisions to that program.**

Rationale: why is formalizing the support structure of General Education important to Penn State?

¹ University-level Strategic Planning: Emerging Themes and Directions (March 21, 2014) <http://www.opia.psu.edu/advocates/2014/03>

² Barron introduces six major topics to spark discussion across University (May 14, 2014) <http://news.psu.edu/story/315948/2014/05/14/barron-introduces-six-major-topics-spark-discussion-across-university>

³ Appendix A.1: General Education (Baccalaureate Degree) and Appendix A.2: General Education (Associate Degree) <http://senate.psu.edu/policies-and-rules-for-undergraduate-students/>

⁴ In the Fall 2014 semester, there were > 2900 unique instructors teaching Gen Ed courses at all campuses and in all skill and knowledge domains. Source: Data Warehouse December, 2014.

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In response to a March 2013 charge by the Faculty Senate Chair and the Provost's Office to revisit and revise General Education, the Gen Ed Task Force has submitted three previous reports to University Faculty Senate.⁵ On pages 21 – 26 of the October 2014 Informational Report to Faculty Senate, the Gen Ed Task Force summarized data collected in meetings and focus groups with faculty, advisers, students, and administrators, and comments submitted via the website (gened.psu.edu). Among these data, the following critical needs were identified by faculty regarding Penn State's current General Education program:⁶

- A need for resources to adequately support General Education;
- A need for coordination, collaboration, and communication among those teaching General Education;
- A need for support and recognition of instructors teaching in the General Education program at all campuses;
- A need for support for curricular assessment that would enable ongoing evaluation and improvement of the General Education curriculum.

It was often remarked that the lack of resources since the last curricular change has led to a General Education program without cohesion and without the ability to implement all of the principles that were articulated in 1997. The above needs identified by Penn State faculty are consistent with national research and best practices in General Education, which indicate that coordination and resources are essential for excellence in the curriculum.⁷

The size and complexity of our University create challenges to meeting these needs, particularly if we are to initiate and sustain collaborations across the General Education curriculum, which spans disciplines and locations. This is especially true since the composition of the instructors who teach General Education has shifted so that a majority are fixed-term faculty members,⁸

⁵ (a) A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 22, 2013); A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (March 18, 2014); A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 21, 2014) See: <http://senate.psu.edu/senators/special-committees/general-education-planning-and-oversight-task-force/reports-and-resources/>

⁶ See also pp. 50 – 51 in the October 2014 Informational Report to University Faculty Senate.

⁷ A Progress Report to the University Faculty Senate (October 21, 2014); General Education in the 21st Century, Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley (2007) <http://www.cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/general-education-21st-century-report-university-california-commission-general> ; Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2011) <https://www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf> .

⁸ The Increasing Trend in the Ration of Fixed-Term Faculty to Standing Faculty (December 4, 2012 report to Faculty Senate) <http://senate.psu.edu/senators/standing-committees/intra-university-relations/reports-and-resources/>

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with increasing involvement of part-time faculty and instruction by graduate students (at some locations).⁹ As part of their ongoing work, several University Faculty Senate committees are addressing these complex issues. However, to ensure excellence in the General Education curriculum, the University must explicitly provide support to all who teach General Education, regardless of appointment status. The University needs to work to create a more cohesive and better-supported faculty, including those part-time faculty who may tend to be marginalized but share the mission to teach the General Education curriculum.

Several existing Penn State units already support excellence in teaching, including the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (SITE), the Dutton Institute, the Center for Excellence in Science Education, the Leonhard Center, etc. Among these, only SITE is a University-wide entity. It is an administrative unit primarily charged with providing consultation services, workshops and short courses on pedagogy, and testing services, as well as for the administration of the Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness (SRTEs), University teaching awards, and seed grants for instructional projects. Yet, during meetings and town halls with faculty from all units and campuses, and discussions with the Gen Ed Task Force members, faculty identified additional needs for strengthening and supporting General Education that are currently not the charge of any unit, as summarized above and described in the October 2014 Informational Report.⁶

To address all of the needs expressed by faculty, to give distinct University-wide visibility to the importance of General Education, and to achieve the goal of excellence in our General Education curriculum, the University ought to invest in a clearly defined and *faculty-led* support structure comprised of an inter-campus, multi-disciplinary network of instructors (i.e., faculty, graduate students, post-doctoral scholars and others) teaching General Education courses at all campuses. We are not recommending the designation of a "Gen Ed Faculty," but rather the creation of a structure that facilitates support and exchange of ideas among instructors who have a strong interest and engagement in General Education. This is needed to bring together instructors in General Education, and to promote an ongoing, purposeful, excellent, and innovative undergraduate General Education curriculum. Establishing an intra-University structure for General Education would enable collaboration across locations and disciplines to develop, innovate, and assess the General Education curriculum. It would also provide incentives, support for, and recognition of faculty innovation and effort in General Education at the local and University-wide Penn State levels. These support efforts would be undertaken in close consultation with the Faculty Senate and its relevant committees.

One of the goals of the new support structure would be to offer resources for instructors that will facilitate excellence in General Education instruction, such as providing funding for conference

⁹ Trends and Patterns in the Use of Full and Part-Time Fixed-Term Faculty 2004-2010 (January 24, 2012)

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attendance or other exploratory or research efforts related to General Education course development, curricular innovation, and learning assessment. Incentives could be provided for course development. Recognition for innovation and excellence in General Education teaching could be provided for instructors of all ranks.

Further, this faculty-led network would foster and sustain communication about General Education among faculty, students, and other constituents, and engage instructors from all the skill and knowledge domains participating in the General Education curriculum. To do this, it must span the geographically dispersed University, with participation from every campus and college. It would need to be more than a web-based resource, though it should have access to state-of-the-art technology and funding to facilitate connections and collaborations throughout the University.

To ensure ongoing excellence, resources for evaluation and assessment of the General Education curriculum would also be necessary. By closely aligning with SITE and the Academic Council on Undergraduate Education (ACUE) Assessment Coordinating Committee, a task of this General Education structure would be to partner on General Education *program-level assessment*, i.e. beyond the level of individual courses or sections. Resources would be made available to collect data on the General Education curriculum, and provide these data in a consultative capacity to University Faculty Senate.

As referenced in this report, both national scholarship and the input from the Penn State faculty have clearly identified the need for resources and support for General Education instructors, to achieve excellence, innovation, and scholarship in our General Education program. Formalizing the support structure outlined in this report, and providing it with significant resources, would meet these needs, and improve delivery of the General Education curriculum for our students.

Recommendations:

1. The University should establish a signature intra-University faculty-led structure for General Education collaboration, support, assessment and research, which will be available to serve all Penn State locations and instructors who teach General Education courses.
2. The University administration should work with the Gen Ed Task Force and the appropriate Faculty Senate committees in the creation of this structure with a standing budget that will meet the needs of the instructors teaching General Education to best support, maintain, and promote excellence, innovation, and scholarship in General Education.

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GENERAL EDUCATION OVERSIGHT AND PLANNING TASK FORCE

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