

**ANNUAL REPORT**  
**of the**  
**GENERAL EDUCATION COUNCIL**  
**AY 2006-2007**

**Presented at the**  
**666<sup>th</sup> Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate**  
**October 18, 2007**

**COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP**

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## Summary

While the first meetings of the General Education Council in 2006-2007 spent a great deal of time discussing questions of online General Education courses—and doing the regular business of reviewing proposed courses for General Education designations—the Provost’s visit to the council in December fundamentally redirected efforts into developing an “action plan” for the review and revitalization of General Education. Questions of assessment—what to assess and how to assess it—became central to these plans for review, and visits from Martha Stassen and Marilyn Blaustein from the Office of Information and Assessment helped shape the council’s thinking and discussion. A University team, including the chair of the council, attended an American Association of Colleges and Universities Institute on General Education in May, and it issued a report and recommendations as the result of what it learned there. That document joins the council’s action plan (both of which are appended to this report) as templates for reviewing the program this coming year; the council is aware that the Provost will be appointing a Joint Task Force on General Education, and we hope that its efforts will be appropriately coordinated with the council’s. Meanwhile, the program of Small Grants in Support of Diversity Education continued, funding another group of excellent projects. These developments, and a few others, are described more fully below.

### Online Learning and General Education:

A large part of the September, October, and November meetings of the council was given over to discussion of General Education courses offered online. Such offerings are growing, as the University continues to develop distance education, and students are free already to take online courses at the other UMass campuses—e.g., UMass Lowell, which has substantial offerings—and count them toward their requirements. Meanwhile, University courses previously approved for General Education credit may be converted into online courses without any General Education Council review. The question raised was whether the council should try to exercise special control or oversight over General Education courses taught online in order to insure that these courses continue to meet Gen Ed criteria and standards. In particular, there was concern that the translation of a course from a face-to-face classroom context to an online context has the potential to erode the main things the general education program is supposed to stand for, namely critical thinking, problem-solving, and (for social world courses) writing. Council members asked: Should the council develop special approval criteria for online courses? If so, what sorts of criteria should be set? And should the council try to assert jurisdiction over courses being converted to online offerings?

To help the council think about these matters, two teachers who regularly offer online courses were invited to give presentations to the council at its November meeting: Lisa Dush, an English Department Teaching Assistant, who offers 100-level English General Education courses, and Richard Yuretich, who teaches General Education Geosciences courses online, and who has been on the Ad Hoc Committee on Online Learning. These two teachers demonstrated their courses, which can only be described as exemplars for online learning—with explicit policies, plenty of detailed instructions, low enrollment caps, lots of online discussion, and plenty of writing and problem-solving. The messages from both these teachers were: that online instruction can be better than face-to-face instruction for some students and some purposes; that a great deal of work has to be put in by the instructor when first fashioning the course and when responding to and evaluating student writing and discussion “posts”; and that General Education goals can be satisfied by online courses without establishing additional criteria for them. As Professor Yuretich emphasized, good policy in an online course should be the same as good policy in a face-to-face course, and the standards we apply in evaluating face-to-face courses should be the same standards applied in evaluating online courses.

Even so, remembering that General Education approval forms ask proposers of large lecture courses to explain how General Education goals will be met in that format, council members concurred that asking the same of proposals for online courses would be prudent. The initial response to the question of online General Education courses, then, was to approve a change in Form F—the form used for all General Education designation proposals—to ask proposers to specify course format and to explain how critical thinking is accomplished within that format.

Meanwhile, quinquennial reviews of General Education courses will also inquire into course format and its effect on General Education goals.

### **Review and Assessment of General Education**

In December, Provost Charlena Seymour addressed the council. Her message in a nutshell was that General Education needs to be reviewed and refurbished. Stories still circulate, she said, of students who are not enamored of General Education requirements, who think of it as a nuisance to be gotten out of the way, or who want to take courses in their majors and put General Education requirements off. To counter this, General Education has to be made interesting to consumers. Its grand purpose must be rearticulated, foregrounded, and demonstrated. Our presentations of it—including the catalogue copy and the general rationale—must be “massaged,” and made cohesive. And we need information and evidence that students are learning—and that these courses will benefit students after leaving the University.

In response to this charge, the General Education Council developed a list of goals and began incorporating them—and elaborating them—in a “General Education Action Plan” (attached to this report as Appendix A). The initial set of goals were:

- Do what we can to increase faculty understanding, support, “buy in,” and ownership of General Education
- Increase student knowledge and understanding of General Education
- Insure that syllabuses of General Education courses explain how the courses will meet General Education goals and learning outcomes
- Revise and widely distribute the booklet for students, “General Education Requirements”
- Organize workshops, or a conference, on General Education (addressing concerns of course content, best practices, testing and other forms of assessment, etc.)
- Have meetings for first-time instructors of General Education courses
- Set up a website devoted to General Education (that would include the rationale for General Education; courses under consideration for General Education designations; course descriptions and syllabuses of current General Education courses; explanations of how courses meet General Education goals)
- Seek greater funding support from the administration
- Get studies of General Education learning outcomes underway. Define measurable goals and appropriate assessment (timed exams, portfolios, evidence of learning). Have students complete start-course and end-course learning outcomes assessment to gauge how well students met the learning goals.

In connection with this, the council responded to the recommendation in the University Writing Committee’s 2005-2006 Annual Report—that “The General Education Council should consider the feasibility of creating a designation for writing-intensive courses and requiring a certain number of such courses as part of the undergraduate curriculum”—by asking that that recommendation be suspended while the council’s larger review of the General Education Program takes place.

Meanwhile, the council pursued multiple means for developing assessment strategies. At its March 2007 meeting, the council heard a presentation from Martha Stassen, Director of Assessment, and Anne Herrington, Professor of English. The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment had been working with a group of individuals (including Anne Herrington, John McCarthy when he was General Education Council Chair, and Maurianne Adams for the General Education diversity subcommittee) on an assessment project related to General Education diversity courses. They looked at TA support, interviewed large General Education diversity course instructors about their pedagogical strategies, and conducted syllabus analyses focused on a range of issues related to diversity education. Stassen and Herrington shared their analyses and discussed next steps.

Then at the April 2007 meeting, Martha Stassen returned, this time with Marilyn Blaustein, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, to talk about assessment data they have already gathered about the General Education Program and to get some guidance from the council about what kinds of questions it would like answered about the program and what kinds of assessment information it would like to have in the future. Stassen supplied the council with examples of data already gathered, including: "General Education: Juniors' Attitudes and Experiences," a report on a phone survey conducted in 1998, which belies the general impression that students are unhappy with General Education; and a report on a 1997 focus group on attitudes about General Education convened by the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment in Collaboration with the General Education Task Force. Stassen and Blaustein also supplied data showing the large increase in non-tenure system faculty teaching General Education courses; the increase in average course size; the tendency for large-lecture courses to be General Education courses; and the proportion of General Education courses in the average first-year student's schedule (approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$ ). One of the outcomes of this meeting was the formation of a SRTI Questionnaire Subcommittee (Gail Cruise, Mark Leckie, and Maurianne Adams) charged with the task of identifying kinds of information about General Education that could be gathered using the SRTI course evaluation instrument and developing questions to add to the SRTI form.

Over the summer, a group of council members and other interested parties organized and took part in a workshop on assessment of diversity education with Patricia Gurin, the Nancy Cantor Distinguished University Professor, Emerita, of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan and a national expert on general education and diversity-related outcomes assessment in higher education. The workshop focused on ways to pose measurable outcomes as the objectives of a course and ways to use classroom assignments to measure learning outcomes. The group also discussed available standardized testing instruments and evaluated their capacity for measuring complex behaviors such as critical thinking and writing. Members of this group subsequently formed a working group on General Education assessment which met twice over the summer and developed plans for two pilot assessment projects, one looking at critical thinking education in General Education courses, one looking at diversity education. The proposed projects can be found in the General Education action plan (appended to this report).

Also, in late May, the chair of the council, along with Director of Assessment Martha Stassen and Acting Deputy Provost Andrew Effrat, attended the American Association of Colleges and Universities Institute on General Education, a four-day institute with special emphasis on developing learning outcomes for General Education, reforming General Education programs within institutional settings, and assessing the effectiveness of General Education. The report of the UMass team is attached (Appendix B). Its foremost recommendation is that the University establish a task force to review General Education. It also makes recommendations on processes for reviewing General Education; means to enhance awareness and engagement of faculty and students in General Education; strategies for assessment of the program; approaches to reviewing and revising the curriculum and structure of Gen Ed; ways to support instructional development; and the distribution of resources.

### **Small Grants in Support of Diversity Education**

The Commission on Campus Diversity in its March 2005 report called on the University administration to "support the development of more General Education Diversity courses that focus on issues of difference, culture, power and privilege." To that end, the Chancellor's Action Plan on Improving Campus Diversity (April 2005) proposed "incentive grants for curriculum and pedagogical development projects" in diversity education. The Provost allocated funds to support these grants, and the first round of applications were reviewed by the General Education Council in spring semester 2006; \$60,000 was awarded to fifteen proposals. Before announcing the second year's competition for diversity grants, the General Education Council was asked by the Provost's Office to solicit progress reports from the 2006-2007 grant recipients. The Center for Teaching took charge of this, gathered interim reports, and produced a summary report, which the council reviewed. In December, a call went out for proposals for 2007-2008. Seventeen proposals were received, totaling \$88,983. After reviewing them, the council funded fourteen proposals,

for a total of \$43,521. Unlike the previous year, the full amount allotted for the grant program--\$60,000—was not used. This was the effect of having received fewer proposals, yet using the same criteria for funding, namely, whether the proposals suited the purposes of the grant program, the projects were sustainable, the budgets were justified, and there were plans for assessment. The council felt that winning proposals were supported at levels sufficient to allow the most important work to be accomplished. The council would also like to say that the proposals funded offer a range of exciting and worthy projects that will have a sure impact on diversity education at the University. They are a testament to the eagerness of University of Massachusetts faculty to bring their talent and creativity to bear on our aim of educating our students about difference, culture, power, and privilege. The members of the General Education Council look forward to enlisting our many new faculty in this effort, to (we expect) an increased number of proposals for 2008-2009, and to the continuation of this important grant program. The council would also like to thank the Center for Teaching for its help—in collecting progress reports on the 2006-2007 grants, in hosting a gathering last semester for both 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 grant recipients, and for helping gather together the final reports on the 2006-2007 grant projects.

### **Courses Approved for General Education Designations / Quinquennial Reviews:**

The council reviewed and approved the following fourteen courses for General Education designations:

PHYSICS 190Q: Einstein's Dice (PS)  
CLASSICS 102: Roman Civilization (HS)  
CLASSICS 202: Age of Augustus (AT)  
MIL 290A: Iraq, Understanding a Complex Country in Complex Times (HSG)  
JUDAIC 343: American Jewish Diversity (HSG)  
ANTH 205: Inequality and Oppression (change from G to U)  
JUDAIC 309: Music of the Jewish People (AT G)  
COMPLIT 391: French Film (AT)  
POLISCI 181: Controversies in Public Policy (SB)  
HONORS 292S: Engaging with the Community (IU)  
HONORS 291J: Cross-Cultural Preparation Seminar (IG)  
SPORTMGT 202: History of Sport and Physical Activity (HS)  
AFROAM 390J: Cross-Disciplinary Contemporary Issues: War and Patriotism in African American Literature and History (IU)  
COM-DIS 210: Introduction to Communication Development and Disorders (D)

The following three courses went through their quinquennial reviews:

SOC 103: Social Problems (U)  
SOC 244: Sociology of Immigration (SB&U)  
SOC 332: Social Change in China (G)

### **Submission of Course Approval Requests in Electronic Format**

In December 2004, the Faculty Senate approved the requirement that all course proposals submitted to the Academic Matters Council and Graduate Council be accompanied by an electronic version in Microsoft Word format. The General Education Council, at its March 2007 meeting, decided it would like to require the same – in order to facilitate the distribution of proposals for General Education designations to the appropriate subcommittees for review, to make it possible to post proposals online for consideration by the University community, and, eventually, to reduce paper consumption. For the time being, the council asked for a transition period during which both hard copy versions of proposals (with the important signature page) and electronic versions would be submitted, but it envisioned a time when electronic versions of proposals would replace hard copy versions.

The council voted unanimously in favor of the following motion: That the Faculty Senate require that all proposals submitted for General Education designations be accompanied by an electronic version of the proposal in Microsoft Word format. [Note that at the May 10, 2007 Faculty Senate meeting this motion was amended to accept proposals in any OIT-supported electronic format.]

### **The General Education Variance Committee**

At the meeting of March 2007, Brian O'Connor, a member of the General Education Variance Committee, appeared before the council to recommend the adoption of a policy governing appeals of Variance Committee decisions. The council approved motions that the Variance Committee be included in the bylaws of the Faculty Senate and that a process for appealing a Variance Committee ruling be put in place. The addition to the bylaws as finally approved was worded as follows:

5-3-3 The General Education Council shall establish a committee on Variance consisting of: the Undergraduate Registrar, the Director of Transfer Affairs, the Provost's designee, and at least three faculty members. The committee Chair shall be a member of the General Education Council, appointed by the Chair of the General Education Council. The committee shall review all student petitions for variances from the General Education Requirements. The following conditions and procedures shall apply: (a) such petitions shall be made through the student's undergraduate Dean, with accompanying comment/recommendation by the Dean, and forwarded to the Registrar's Office for consideration by the committee, (b) all requests for variance from the General Education requirements based on an allegation of misadvising shall include a statement verifying such misadvice by the academic advisor or dean involved, (c) no requests shall be granted for the use of University of Massachusetts Amherst non-General Education courses to fulfill General Education requirements, (d) no requests shall be granted for a variance from the requirements based on a student's completion of a course because of a legitimate but mistaken belief that the course filled a General Education requirement, if the student may use the course to complete a General Education University, or major requirement not yet fulfilled, and (e) a student may register an appeal to the committee's decision only with approval of his/her initiating Dean.

## Appendix A

## AN “ACTION PLAN” FOR THE REVIEW AND REVITALIZATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION

In 1996, a decade after the inauguration of General Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a task force assembled by the Provost—and ultimately including 126 people working in eleven subcommittees—began an extensive review of the General Education Program. Its efforts culminated in a February 2000 report envisioning a large-scale reform of the program—including, among other things, two additional “writing intensive” course requirements, required upper-division General Education courses, and an upper-division capstone experience. Because of budgetary constraints, the ambitious plans of the task force were never realized. In 2001, faced with this failure and struggling with the difficulty of improving General Education without financial resources, the General Education Council submitted a special report to the Faculty Senate reviewing the program and making a series of more modest recommendations to improve it. Some of its most modest recommendations have come to fruition: 1) the Social and Cultural Diversity requirements were divided into “U.S. Diversity” and “Global Diversity” requirements; 2) the council has embarked on a “vigorous review” of courses that satisfy General Education requirements; 3) the University has increased the availability of residential learning communities to students who want one; 4) the Writing Center has enlarged its capacity and visibility, and has also become a vital part of the learning commons in the library; and, 5) with the program of Small Grants in Support of Diversity Education, at least one part of the General Education program has benefited from a targeted incentive to develop courses. However, the *main* recommendations of the council have not been realized: 1) the program has not truly been re-infused with its “grand purpose”; 2) students are not adequately informed of the value and purpose of General Education; 3) *faculty* are not adequately informed about or committed to the program; 4) the range and richness of interdisciplinary courses in the program has not been appreciably increased, 5) and course class size has not been reduced.

Although there are, of course, many excellent courses that are part of the General Education program, a perception remains that General Education requirements are troublesome burdens to be endured. First-year students often find that their course schedules consist primarily of large lecture courses—in which it is difficult to provide opportunities for active learning or to provide sufficient attention to or resources for student writing. There is little shared sense of the value of the program, either by faculty or by students. Increasingly, the program is perceived as fragmented and incoherent, consisting of distribution requirements and in this resembling the distribution requirements that the General Education program was designed to replace.

In light of this, the General Education Council forwards—and intends to pursue—the following plan:

1. The rationale of the General Education program will be rearticulated to heighten its importance and to establish its “grand purpose” (as the 2001 report on General Education put it) in relationship to a student's total education at the University. This recommendation is partly a reiteration of the council’s previous recommendations—and of motions by the Faculty Senate—to urge championing and explaining the program across the campus. The rationale of General Education simply must be disseminated widely, so that administrators, advisers, faculty, and students have easy access to it, are aware of it, and refer to it. It should appear in the university catalogue and in the advising materials given to first-year and transfer students. There should be a link to it on the University website, possibly along with a list and explanatory descriptions of all General Education courses. Teachers of General Education courses will be asked, on their syllabi, to situate their courses in relation to it, to explain the pertinent General Education goals and learning outcomes of the course and how they are met, and to convey a sense of the purpose and relevance of the course to a broad liberal arts education. In other words, we need to foster “buy-in” from both students and faculty, with adequate funding and support from the administration.

Although over the last twenty years the General Education Council has repeatedly re-examined and reaffirmed the philosophy and general principles of the program—and has stressed that the problems of the program lie not in its larger conception, its “lofty purposes and ideals,” but in its implementation—there may be a benefit in rearticulating those goals to give them more weight and pertinence for our students. Here are some attempts at such a rearticulation:

Short Version #1

An education for the future involves knowledge of and across multiple disciplines. Although the value of the more specialized education within a major is obvious to students and faculty alike, the capacity to draw upon broader and interdisciplinary learning and to think beyond the boundaries and routines of any single discipline is essential for meeting the multi-faceted and complex problems and challenges that face us now. The purpose of the General Education curriculum is to prepare people to learn now, and in the future—in the world of work, in responsible civic engagement, and in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. An educated citizen requires wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary, and intercultural knowledge as well as high-level, adaptable skills. The well-educated student should be skilled in inquiry and analysis, problem-solving and discovery, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, teamwork and collaboration, and ethical deliberation. Developing these interlocking bodies of knowledge and abilities is the heart of the General Education program.

Short Version #2

The Faculty at the University of Massachusetts asserts that an education for the future—for productive employment and for citizenship in a globally engaged democracy—requires wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary, and intercultural knowledge as well as high-level, adaptable skills in inquiry and analysis, problem-solving and discovery, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, teamwork and collaboration, and ethical deliberation. Developing these interlocking bodies of knowledge and abilities is the heart of the General Education program. Although the value of the more specialized education within a major is obvious, the capacity to draw upon broader and interdisciplinary learning and to think beyond the boundaries and routines of any single discipline is essential for innovatively meeting the multi-faceted and complex problems and challenges that face us now and in the future—in the world of work, in responsible civic engagement, and in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. In short, the General Education program exposes UMass students to diverse facets of the world around them, and it challenges them to understand their place in the world of the past, present, and future. The requirements of the General Education program are designed to supply students with the necessary range of perspectives from multiple disciplines that will enable them to grapple creatively with the large and pressing questions of our new century—and equip them to adapt to change and help create change.

Long Version

An education for the future involves knowledge of and across multiple disciplines. Although the value of the more specialized education within a major is obvious to students and faculty alike, the capacity to draw upon broader and interdisciplinary learning and to think beyond the boundaries and routines of any single discipline is essential for meeting the multi-faceted and complex problems and challenges that face us now. The purpose of the General Education curriculum is to prepare people to learn now, and in the future—in the world of work, in responsible civic engagement, and in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. An educated citizen requires wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary, and intercultural knowledge as well as high-level, adaptable skills. The well-educated student should be skilled in inquiry and analysis, problem-solving and discovery, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, teamwork and collaboration, and ethical deliberation. Developing these interlocking bodies of knowledge and abilities is the heart of the General Education program.

The requirements of the General Education program are designed to supply students with the necessary range of perspectives from multiple disciplines that will enable them to grapple creatively with the large and pressing questions of our new century—and equip them to adapt to change and help create change. The General Education curriculum enables students to learn how natural scientists, social scientists, humanists, and performing artists think about their disciplines and how they view their work in relation to both history and contemporary society. The interdisciplinary options in the curriculum are offered to help students integrate and apply knowledge from many different contexts to complex problems. The U.S. and global diversity courses prepare students for active citizenship in diverse communities, so that students can explore and understand cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own; often focused on difficult differences of racial, ethnic, religious, and gender inequality—and struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power—these courses cultivate a citizenship of personal and social responsibility at home and abroad and prepare our graduates for building communities that acknowledge and value difference.

Fundamentally, all courses in the General Education program strive to stimulate critical or analytical thinking and to provide contexts for examining the relationship between the individual and society. The capacity for critical thought includes the ability to imagine the consequences of one's choices, to articulate those consequences, and to increase understanding of one's relation to the worlds of nature, politics, and work. While acknowledging that these critical and imaginative skills are developed throughout a person's lifetime, and do not end with the completion of any set of courses, the University has determined that roughly one-quarter of the baccalaureate degree program should be devoted to the common General Education curriculum and has established a set of course requirements in several different areas for this purpose, as described below. Courses which are included in the General Education program are listed in this *Guide* and in the official online Course Guides with letter designations.

2. Review the curriculum and structure of the General Education program

- Should there be fewer requirements and courses in the program—and, in place of the general proliferation of courses, a few better, smaller courses?
- The University Writing Committee has recommended that a Sophomore writing requirement or elective be created, and that a new General Education writing requirement be implemented. What is the feasibility of this?
- How should General Education include information literacy? Should information literacy be infused throughout the General Education curriculum? Should there be a separate information literacy designation?

3. Greater funding support should be provided by the administration.

- The administration should make offering General Education courses a part of the budgetary discussions with Deans and departments.
- Deans and department chairs should make General Education courses an important part of their offerings.
- There should be funding specifically, explicitly, and repeatedly tied to General Education. Too often it appears that TA funds initially tied to specific General Education courses become absorbed into a dean's base budget and then turned to other, seemingly more pressing, purposes.

4. Incentives, rewards, resources, and support for faculty and TAs in General Education courses will be provided. Currently, the difficult job of teaching General Education courses is often a thankless one, less visible in a departmental context than the needs of the major. Generating ways to reward and acknowledge this teaching as a valued contribution to the University's teaching mission is crucial for reinvigorating the program.

- Letters from the General Education Council and from the Provost thanking teachers for their work—with a copy sent to the chair and the personnel committee of the teacher's department—would be an appropriate first step toward revaluing this work in annual reviews of teaching.
- The General Education Council will explore various means to provide resources and support for teachers and to enhance recognition across campus of General Education and its purposes, such as annual seminars, workshops, or conferences on General Education goals, curriculum and pedagogy, and assessment of the program and learning outcomes.
- Web-based resources, such as an online collection of exemplary General Education syllabi, will also be provided.

5. Assessment methods will be developed to evaluate student attainment of the specific goals of specific General Education courses. If, as some expect, the University will be pressed toward using standardized tests to demonstrate learning in General Education, it behooves us, as a preemptory—or perhaps complementary—strategy, to develop a non-standardized, local means of assessment that can evaluate in a more nuanced way the complex learning that we ask of students in General Education. Arguably, the higher-level intellectual, problem-solving, integrative abilities, and the civic, intercultural, and ethical capacities that General Education tries to promote can be aptly judged only in the rich contexts of inquiry, analysis, critique, and action that our classrooms provide.

We ask the Office of Academic Assessment to work with the General Education Council to identify measureable goals and to develop appropriate methods of assessment. The council will then work with selected courses throughout the various aspects of the program to provide meaningful and ongoing General Education goal assessment.

As a first step toward the sort of assessment we desire, members of the General Education Council met with Martha Stassen (Office of Academic Assessment), Matt Ouellett (Center for Teaching), and Anne Herrington (Department of English) and forged a plan for pilot projects in assessment. Implementation and success of this pilot would depend on funding, particularly to support faculty evaluators of student work from General Education courses. The plan for the pilot is as follows:

#### **General Education Learning Outcomes Assessment Pilot Project:**

1. September 2007: Solicit, from General Education Council members, papers or other kinds of work produced in response to assignments designed to exercise students' *critical thinking* in General Education courses. We will ask for samples of student work that the instructors judge to be high, medium, and low levels of accomplishment in critical thinking; we will also ask for the assignments, course syllabuses, and enrollment numbers. The aim will be to gather an initial sample of critical-thinking work from the full range of General Education designations. If council members have not saved papers/assignments from courses they have themselves taught, they will be asked to retrieve examples from colleagues.
2. Using these solicited materials, as well as statements from last year's General Education course proposals specifying how proposed courses aim to meet the critical-thinking goal of General Education, the General Education assessment working group will create a provisional rubric/scale of critical-thinking learning outcomes.
3. October 2007: A fuller sample of student "critical thinking" work will be gathered from General Education courses, and a larger group of faculty members will be convened to read this work against the trial rubric/scale. The aim of this larger undertaking will be generate data measuring the attainment of critical-thinking goals as well as to further refine the learning-outcome rubric.

Meanwhile, the General Education Council will convene a meeting of recipients of Small Grants in Support of Diversity Education, in November or December. This will be a workshop designed for several purposes: 1) To help recipients to formulate assessable learning outcomes—which they can specify on their syllabuses; 2) To help recipients develop assignments whose results can be measured using an assessment rubric; 3) To prepare this group

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to be a pilot group for a spring 2008 assessment of diversity education. The spring 2008 assessment will follow the general plan for the fall 2007 assessment, i.e., gather materials to develop an initial assessment rubric of learning outcomes for diversity education (work already partially accomplished thanks to the syllabus analysis of diversity-education courses already undertaken by the Office of Information and Assessment), gather a larger sample of student work from the grant recipients' courses, and convene a group of readers to evaluate the students' work.

These will be the first two steps in an ongoing assessment project of General Education. In the following years, the General Education Council will bring together teachers of General Education courses grouped by Gen Ed designation and by college. The groups will go through a process similar to that followed with the Diversity Grant group.

Appendix B

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM  
THE AACU INSTITUTE ON GENERAL EDUCATION, 2007**

May 29, 2007

From the UMass Amherst Team:  
Randall Knoper, Chair, General Education Council  
Martha Stassen, Director, Office of Assessment  
Andrew Effrat, Acting Deputy Provost

The Institute

The AACU issued a call for proposals to attend an institute on general education to be held in Newport, R.I., May 18-23, 2007. UMass Amherst applied, was accepted, and sent a team consisting of Randall Knoper, Chair, General Education Council, Martha Stassen, Director, Office of Assessment, and Andrew Effrat, Acting Deputy Provost. Also attending were teams of faculty and administrators from 27 other higher education institutions.

On the whole, we found the institute to be very useful and very well organized. The content focused on principles, strategies and examples in three main areas: conceptions of general education (including goals, curriculum, and relation to majors), reform or change processes, and approaches to assessing general education. The structure of the Institute, in addition to the usual mix of plenary and concurrent thematic sessions, built in opportunities for team meetings, for small group consultations, and for preparation of a final report. The faculty of the Institute included the President of AACU as well as colleagues with extensive experience in implementing and assessing general education in universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges.

We all came away from the Institute with a renewed sense of the importance of general education. Gen Ed constitutes a major portion of students' work at post-secondary institutions; it is a particularly significant part of the first two years of students' experiences; it is a place in the curriculum that can "turn off" students or excite them about a broader liberal education; it is often taught under the most challenging of circumstances (e.g., large lecture classes, not necessarily by faculty who give gen ed as high priority as more specialized courses); and its learning goals and outcomes are among the most complex to evaluate. We also came away with a stronger sense of confidence about the very positive aspects of what is being done at UMass Amherst, such as the learning commons, the writing programs, strengthening the use of learning technology in courses, learning communities, and many very effective Gen Ed courses.

Some Recommendations

Based on the presentations and discussions at the Institute, our own experiences and analyses, recent General Education Council discussions particularly related to the Action Plan, as well as the work of the multi-year Task Force that reported on Gen Ed in 2000, we have developed a brief list of recommendations and issues that we hope would be considered.

One of the commitments we were asked to undertake at the Institute was to share the knowledge, insights, and expertise gained during the Institute with colleagues back on campus. The first step in doing that is the preparation and delivery of this report to our sponsor, the Provost. It is our recommendation that we be authorized to present this report in the Fall to the General Education Council of the Faculty Senate and to the full Senate.

Our single most important recommendation is that the Provost establish a campus-wide Task Force on General Education. We suggest that the Task Force consist of about a dozen individuals including students, faculty, academic administrators, the Director of Assessment, and representatives of the Provost's Office, the Center for Teaching, the Undergraduate Advising and Learning Communities Office, and the Student Affairs division. We also suggest that a graduate assistant be provided to help staff the task force.

While we would want this to be an open-ended planning process with extensive opportunity for input from various constituencies on the campus and external to it, we recommend that it would focus on six broad areas:

- the review and planning processes,
- clarifying and communicating the nature of general education,
- the structure or design of the curriculum,
- instructional development,
- assessment, and
- finances/resources.

Some of the general guiding questions would be:

- What processes would be followed in reviewing and revising the Gen Ed program?
- How can we enhance awareness and engagement with Gen Ed on the part of students, faculty, and others?
- What are the essential goals and student learning outcomes of General Education and what re-design, if any, of the Gen Ed curriculum is needed?
- How might we strengthen the teaching of Gen Ed courses?
- What assessment strategies for evaluating student learning outcomes and organizational effectiveness could be put into place?
- What short-term resources (e.g., staffing the task force, enhancing our assessment capacity) and long-term resources could be allocated to support this effort?

The following overview of preliminary recommendations and issues offers a more specific outline of some of the main suggestions that we would want to put forward for consideration. Of course, at this stage, this outline is preliminary and rudimentary.

### **1) Overarching Processes**

- Appoint a Task Force to review current Gen Ed practices and outcomes and make recommendations for enhancements/improvements
  - Clarify a timeframe for Task Force work and specific tasks/timelines.
  - Make the process inclusive of various constituencies – e.g., faculty, students, alumni, employers (maybe working with career services), invite constituencies for focused discussions around student learning outcomes and other issues.

- Maintain close communication and collaboration between the Provost's Office and the Gen Ed Council.
- Identify "low-hanging fruit" changes or enhancements that could be done fairly quickly/reasonably and that would demonstrate movement and commitment.
- Clarify evidence needs for which audiences (what evidence? disseminated to whom?).
- The Task Force should review the work of the previous Task Force (reported in 2000) as well as the Gen Ed Council Action Plan to ensure that it is taking into account issues and proposals that have been identified.

## **2) Enhancing Awareness and Engagement**

- Identify islands of excellence or points of pride already present in our Gen Ed program which can be acknowledged and on which we can build.
- Hold meetings of Gen Ed relevant faculty and administrators.
- Explore the commonalities in the outcomes of education as desired by students, faculty, Gen Ed, major, prospective employers, and the like.
- Improve methods for telling the Gen Ed "story"/rationale and student learning outcomes, through:
  - Links to first year experience/learning communities.
  - Links with majors – conversations with departments.
  - Links to advising processes/check lists.
  - Gen Ed Council recommending elements present on syllabi (e.g., noting Gen Ed status, learning outcomes addressed, etc.).
  - Develop Gen Ed Website.
  - Revise catalogue text on Gen Ed.
  - Review and revise admissions material.

## **3) Assessment**

- Conduct analyses using current evidence to get an overview of the status of Gen Ed.
  - Generate relevant Gen Ed course "descriptives" or demographics (e.g., number of courses in various departments, size, who teaches, etc.).
  - Analyze SRTI data on Gen Ed courses re student experience in classes by size, instructor type -- how does this compare by course level and student level, etc.
  - Use NSSE data to look at outcomes/experiences and how they compare to other research universities.
- Pursue a Learning Outcomes Assessment project – perhaps focusing on student writing – develop design and timeline, identify technological and human resource needs, etc.
- Develop ongoing and systematic assessment tools and processes that can be used by the Provost's Office, the Gen Ed Council, and others to monitor Gen Ed effectiveness (e.g., Gen Ed-focused SRTI instrument, course review rubric, assessment of student needs, learning outcomes, and institutional processes involved in the teaching and delivery of the curriculum).

## **4) Curriculum/Structure**

- Explore methods for reinforcing Gen Ed outcomes throughout students' UMA experience.
- Weigh the value of developing a closer relationship between General Education and the majors, conceptualizing the skills and outcomes to be developed in the General Education curriculum as important foundations for work in the major.

- Identify Writing Intensive courses.
- Formulate the goals and objectives of Gen Ed in terms of intended and desired student learning outcomes (particularly taking into account the set of “Essential Learning Outcomes” developed empirically by the AACU).
- Work collaboratively with Gen Ed Council, students, and others to help make the outcomes relevant/appropriate to various audiences/purposes.
- Develop undergraduate research opportunities and mentoring as a vehicle for strengthening general education in a Research I institution.

### **5) Instructional Development**

- Clarify instructor development needs and develop workshops to address them.
- Work with the Center for Teaching to review/audit current practices for TA development – ensure that these match with Gen Ed development needs.

### **6) Finances/Resources**

- Be clear that there is limited funding for long-term Gen Ed reforms, assume minimal funding when considering changes.
- Commit some shorter term support for work of the Task Force around themes presented here, including staff support for the Task Force, and support for gathering of assessment evidence.

In sum, we recommend that, building on past efforts, current interest, and present successes, a major initiative to re-examine our Gen Ed program be undertaken. This initiative would seek to revive the sense of grand purpose of General Education, to ensure that it is an integral part of the UMass Amherst undergraduate curriculum, to enhance its design, delivery, and assessment, and to build on its strengths to be a national exemplar.