

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
OFFICE OF THE FACULTY SENATE

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GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE
“THE NEW GENERAL EDUCATION WEBSITE”
(QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION TO FOLLOW)

The web site referred to below is available at:
<http://www.umass.edu/gened/>

Stephen Gencarella, Communication

This has been a collaborative project over several months. In addition to members of the Committee, many other people and several other offices on campus have been involved in this effort. I would like to thank Emily, our graduate assistant, without whom we literally could not have accomplished this task. Her patience, goodwill and dedication have been exemplary. I can testify that she was here on a Sunday making sure that this web site could see the light. From all of the members on the Committee, we want to thank you for your hard work.

I wanted to thank my colleagues who have been a real inspiration: Martha Baker and Wilmore Webley. The other members of the Committee who cannot be here are: Justin Fermann, Amilcar Shabazz and Elizabeth Chilton. We would like to thank John Cunningham and Martha Stassen for supporting this project. We would like to thank all of the members of the General Education Task Force, specifically John McCarthy and Amy Fleig whose language on the original web site helped lay much of the groundwork for us appears here. We would like to thank the General Education Council, particularly the Chair, Randall Knoper and Ernie May. We would like to thank the current General Education Fellows. We are thankful to John Lenzi and Dori McCracken from the Registrar's Office and Matt Ouellett, Mei-Yau Shih, and Karin Camihort from the Center for Teaching. We would like to thank Karen Maynard and her entire staff and many students who volunteered their time at Undergraduate Advising to provide us feedback. Finally, we would like to thank Chancellor Holub for his advocacy for General Education. We would especially like to thank Provost Seymour for her tireless support in keeping General Education strong and thriving at this University.

There are three purposes of this new web site. The first is to provide resources for a number of audiences: students, parents, and faculty who are currently teaching and who join the General Education teaching community. The web site is also for administrators and advisors at every level of the University. The second purpose of this web site is to announce and enact the General Education community and to build on our strengths in the future. Thirdly, we hope that this web site will serve as a way to recognize and truly celebrate the General Education experience, which is a remarkable and unique experience at the University. We have cutting edge aspects such as the diversity component. We have an award-winning writing program. There are so many aspects of this where it has been a joy for us to learn and work with others.

If there is time, we will certainly take questions. We will ask you for any suggestions you have now or in the future. We will also hope that you spread the word about the web site and, of course, spread the good news about General Education on this campus.

Wilmore Webley, Microbiology

I want to thank Steve, who has been tireless in his efforts to round-up and create collaborations across departments and other entities on campus. That was one of the things that happened throughout this process that we are very happy with.

For too long, we have walked around campus and heard students complain about General Education. After receiving the charge from Provost Seymour, the General Education Task Force got together and decided we needed to market General Education properly. As a first step, we thought it was necessary to redesign a web site for General Education in order to retool and sell the program to our students. Students should not be going to their advisors saying, “Do I really have to take this course?”

We felt it was important to have the General Education values on the web site. Inherent in this, we are explaining to students why General Education is an important component of their overall college experience. We wanted students to know the history of General Education and that it did not start at UMass. We went all the way back and realized that the concept came about in the Renaissance. They had a bad economy, things were not going well. The educational system decided it needed to find a way to help students become more well-rounded and marketable so that they can go out and have a greater impact on society. We do not just want students to go to the General Education web site and click on the link that tells them which class they can take and which one they can opt out of. We want them to understand the General Education process, why we have these courses, and what this will do to enhance their experience.

We have listed the learning objectives, which come straight from the purpose statements and the General Education Council. Students can see what General Education is supposed to do for them and can hold themselves accountable. They can also hold their instructors accountable in specific courses, so that they will get what they are supposed to get from the curriculum.

We also have curriculum areas and designations which are sometimes confusing for students. We felt it was necessary to make these designations simple enough so that students can actually follow them. We even have which and how many courses the students will need from a particular designation.

The “for students” section was tricky because students do not always want to read a lot. We start with an analogy of being in an IMAX theater, watching a 3-D movie without the 3-D glasses. What do you see? The image is blurry. You cannot see the details. You know that you are missing the depth and the breadth of the whole process. As you put those 3-D glasses on, everything becomes clearer. That is what we should communicate to our students about the whole General Education process. You truly are not able to utilize what you have learned in your major until you are able to adapt it to what happens in everyday life. The way to do that is to use the principles you are learning in General Education to integrate the depth that you are getting in your major. You can move on and apply this so that when you go out in your society to make an impact on people’s lives you can do it in a seamless manner. Essentially, when students are done they will be able to have creative, productive, exciting lives because of the General Education process.

A year ago, I was about to buy my first house. I went to Springfield to the lawyer who was doing the closing. He was a UMass graduate. He related how he nearly dropped out of UMass because he was not finding his footing. Then, he went and completed a General Education course in Asian studies—something his advisors told him to do because there was no other course that he could take that semester. Sound familiar? It turns out that course was a turning point in his life. Something in that course changed his mind about life, opened up his eyes to see what the possibilities could be, and he turned out to be one of the best lawyers around in Springfield. He now owns his own law firm with a staff and is doing very well.

These are some of the stories that we hope to have on this web site. These products of General Education at UMass will show students that this is not a waste of their time. It truly is a meaningful experience.

Martha Baker, Associate Dean for Natural Resources and the Environment

I must mention that Wilmore teaches one of the very popular General Education courses on campus: the Biology of Cancer and AIDS. It is standing room only, every semester. I often hear students say that that class literally changed their lives. These General Education classes can certainly be exciting and life changing.

As we developed this web site, we decided parents also needed to be educated about the value of General Education. We thought their child might come home and say, "I'm an Animal Science major, why do I have to take a class in literature?" Or, "I'm a business major, why do I have to take a class in the social world?" We wanted to give parents some information. The first question asks: why General Education? There are ways parents can engage their children in conversations about the value of General Education. This web page is fairly short. It just gives parents the ways to start talking to their children. We have listed some myths about General Education. For example, one myth is the idea that General Education is outdated because the purpose of college is to get a job with a high salary. Another myth is that General Education courses have no relationship to one's major. This page gives parents answers to myths such as these.

Lastly, it is important for parents to respond positively to their child's General Education courses and engage the child in conversation. Parents should ask, "What General Education classes are you taking? What are you talking about? What are you reading?" We are also working with Jeanne Horrigan in the New Student Orientation program and hope to include some information about General Education in the parents' booklet as well. Hopefully, when parents come on campus in the summer, we will talk to them about the value of General Education.

Professor Gencarella

The third major audience is faculty. This includes those who are teaching courses and may wish to re-evaluate their work and those who are considering teaching General Education courses. We need to have top-rate teachers at the helm of these experiences. As a result, we devised a web page for teaching and advising. We walk through the creation of the syllabus on this page. We tried to design this section for any novice faculty member who may not quite understand the importance of General Education.

We created this with the purpose of walking faculty through General Education. We hope they will embrace the learning objectives, figure out the curriculum areas and designations, what those terms mean and how they can contribute to them. We then want to walk them through the course application process. That is the simplest way of introducing faculty to General Education, but it was not the only resource we wanted to provide. In collaboration with the Center for Teaching, we also have a series of teaching resources that are available both for well-practiced and new faculty members.

The web site will become a place to highlight the contributions of the General Education Fellows. This is a program which is in its second year. We also have a section on how to assess your course. Assessment can be a terrifying word, and we are doing our best to ensure faculty members that it is a natural part of the process. It is beneficial to look at how to assess students, teaching, and the course itself. Finally, we offer resources for advisors who rank at every level. In putting this together, we met faculty members who had no idea that they should be using knowledge about General Education to advise their students. We also met departmental secretaries who knew more about the program than we did. We tried to translate resources available for advisers. We hope to use this as an opportunity to build on the sense of community with everyone involved in General Education.

Professor Webley

To complete the site, we thought it was important to have a section on governance. We debated this, and a few people thought it was not necessary. But, if something is going to run correctly, it needs a structure. We wanted those who examine the site to see that there was some sort of control and governance. We have links to the General Education Council and the General Education Task Force. There are links to the legislation, the handbook, and the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment.

If someone wants to design a General Education course and wonders what the process will be like, he/she should be able to go to this site. He/she should be able to assess the time commitment necessary. Hopefully, as people go through this process, they will have all this information at their fingertips. The General Education courses put forward will become better each time as instructors are able to see examples of new syllabi. The General Education program at UMass is a very special one, and we hope to make this site unique. People will be able to come to this site in order to see an example of what a good academic program should look like.

We hope to conduct a campus wide competition for a General Education logo. This logo will be used on the web site, on each General Education syllabus that will somehow be linked through SPARK. When you look at that course, you automatically know that it has a General Education designation. Faculty members will be proud to stand in front of our students—the brilliant leaders of tomorrow, who are on the verge of making use of their lives in a special way. We will be able to train them in a way that when they leave, they will not only remember us, but they will remember the system, the process that got them to the place they are today.

Senator Ralph Whitehead – I think this a wonderful improvement, but I have a couple of suggestions. Could we look at the FAQs for a second? Could you add the question, what is General Education, to the web site? Secondly, it might be useful to add another section for prospective students. Finally, do you, at any point, tell students that much of what they will be doing at UMass in their first two years will be related to General Education?

Professor Webley – There is nothing that conveys that directly. We do not want to compartmentalize General Education. We really want students to see it as an integrative and necessary part of their overall education. At some point, when students look at the General Education courses, they will not see this as something else that they have to do but as truly a part of their overall college development. Without it, they will know that they are lacking those 3-D glasses. We are not, at this point, thinking about actually compartmentalizing it in that manner, but it is certainly something that we could consider as we see the surveys come back from the site.

Chancellor Holub – Do you have any evidence that the students who reach a better understanding of what General Education is have a better view of General Education courses, enjoy them more, and feel that they are worthwhile?

Professor Webley – We have not asked that direct question, but based on the combination of questions that have been asked over the years, and even in my General Education class, we have asked students about their General Education experiences. Overwhelmingly, it seems that the students who enjoy General Education more are those who are taking a General Education course with a faculty member who understands the purpose of the program.

This is one reason we are so heavily bent on the teaching aspect of it. For too long, our teachers have not really understood General Education. Martha and I did a survey in our college and realized that there were teachers who did not realize they were teaching General Education courses. We need to get the marketing out to these individuals. Our students are not going to buy into General Education if our teachers do not. As we start informing teachers, hopefully they will start designing their syllabi in ways that show that they are teaching General Education. This will mean General Education purpose statements and objectives are being fulfilled in their classes.

Associate Dean Baker – When advisors meet with students, they need to make sure that students understand the importance of General Education. Sometimes we hear advisors saying, “Well, let us talk about the major classes, and you need a couple of General Education courses as well.” Instead, they should engage students and talk about the value of General Education, suggesting courses that might be of interest.

Provost Seymour – On “Dancing with the Stars,” there are three judges who sit and evaluate the performance of the dancers. One of them says, “Ten” and goes, “whoo-who-who.” I am giving you a ten. I think this is absolutely terrific. You have exceeded our expectations in terms of what could be done. I remember having the conversations about General Education two years ago, asking what we were going to do about the program. You have taken this task and have fulfilled it brilliantly. I cannot thank you enough. I know a lot of time and effort went into this presentation and into developing this web site. I do not know if there is anything out there that is better, but this certainly has established a benchmark.

John Jenkins, Chair of the Academic Matters Council – That calls for an additional thank you. You have taken all the groundwork that has been laid since 1986—and even before with those who fought for a better core curriculum—and introduced it to the way 21st century students think and should think about this. I thank all of you who are new to the General Education review process. I am sure when someone said, “Let us review General Education again,” there was a universal groan. You have made this happen. I especially thank those of you who weathered the initial installation of the program in 1986 and stayed with us for three long years a decade ago and who returned to this process with faith and goodwill.

Senator O’Connor – I certainly echo what Provost Seymour and Chair Jenkins have said. Right after we instituted General Education in the late 1980s, I was at a national pre-med advisor’s conference in Washington, D.C. There were over a thousand people from virtually every college and university in the country. There was a panel of medical school admissions deans. One of the people on the panel said, “Other than science courses, what is it that you really look for in a prospective physician.” The person who answered the question was the Dean of Admissions at Harvard Medical School. He had been Dean for about 25 years. He stood up and he said, “Is O’Connor from UMass Amherst in the audience? I want you to explain the General Education curriculum at UMass Amherst.”

The program has struggled, but it has always had a reputation. Really, this is fantastic.

Professor Webley – We ask you to go to the site, look at it, and give us your feedback. We will be happy to take these comments into consideration and continue working on this. We hope that next year at this time, the site will look even better than it does now.