

SPECIAL REPORT

of the

**ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL, AD HOC COMMITTEE ON STRATEGIC OVERSIGHT,
GENERAL EDUCATION COUNCIL, RULES COMMITTEE AND
UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION COUNCIL**

concerning

**REVISIONS TO THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST**

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1. Introduction

In Fall 2007, Provost Charlena Seymour and the Faculty Senate created a joint task force to make recommendations for improving General Education at UMass Amherst. This General Education Task Force (GETF) began its work with rather modest, short-term goals, but soon discovered that the challenges were bigger than had been anticipated. Many students and even some faculty do not fully understand the purpose of the General Education curriculum. General Education is often seen as an arbitrary collection of requirements that need to be checked off to get a degree. Students do not receive as much benefit as we would hope from courses that constitute one-third of their total curriculum.

Early in the work of the GETF, it was concluded that part of the problem with the less-than-ideal condition of General Education on campus has to do with lack of effective communication about a basically sound program of substantial merit. The issue of communication has been addressed by the creation of a website (<http://www.umass.edu/gened/>) which explains and coordinates the General Education program for each of its varied constituencies.

a) Adding Value, Improving Quality

However, the GETF found more substantive issues that went beyond communicating about the current system. The Task Force also worked to improve the value and quality of the General Education program. The GETF's final report (http://www.umass.edu/senate/FinalReport_final.pdf) describes the results of the Task Force's work on these and other difficult problems. Among other recommendations, it proposes a two-pronged approach to the problem of enhancing student learning in General Education:

1. Reduce the number but increase the intensity of courses by shifting from a 3-credit to a 4-credit model. The report includes a specific proposal about how to do this.
2. Develop upper-level "integrative experiences" that help students pull together the learning they have done in General Education courses and their majors.

When the GETF finished its work in May 2009, it recommended that the General Education Council pursue implementation of this approach.

b) Accelerating the Schedule for Implementation

Shortly thereafter, however, the desirability of quick action became evident. The July 8, 2009, message from MSP President Phillis and the June 18, 2009, message from Chancellor Holub (http://www.umass.edu/chancellor/budget_update_061809.html) describe the budget crisis that will affect this campus in the fiscal year that begins on July 1, 2010. Because the Commonwealth has already spent the second year of the federal stimulus money during FY2009, the campus can expect to bear the full brunt of cuts in state funding on July 1, 2010.

Both the MSP President and the Chancellor urged faculty to become involved in developing ways of dealing with this crisis with minimal harm to the institution, its students, and its employees. Accelerating implementation of the GETF's recommendations would offer an opportunity to do that by permitting the campus to meet its teaching obligations despite inevitable faculty attrition due to retirements and resignations when there is little or no hiring.

In July 2009, when the budget crisis had become clear, the GETF met to consider accelerating the schedule for implementing these changes. The GETF unanimously endorsed a proposal to proceed immediately to

implement the revised General Education curriculum beginning in Fall 2010 (http://www.umass.edu/senate/Final_to_fac_Sen_GE_4_credit_plus_integrative.pdf). This proposal was subsequently also endorsed by the other bodies that are signatories to this Special Report. An Ad Hoc Committee on General Education Revision and Implementation (GERICO) was created by the Rules Committee of the Faculty Senate to propose, plan and oversee implementation (<http://www.umass.edu/senate/adhoc/gerico.html>).

2. Rationale

The rationale for these changes is explored in detail in the final report of the GETF. The most relevant paragraphs are quoted below; the full report is available on the Senate website (http://www.umass.edu/senate/FinalReport_final.pdf).

Four Credit Option

Moving from three-credit to four-credit General Education courses offers students in the early stages of their college career the chance to spend more focused time on fewer courses, facilitating the opportunity to engage in the “deep knowledge” highlighted in the research. Students would be able to explore a topic or discipline in more depth and spend more time practicing the critical thinking and communication skills associated with the discipline. The four credit course design also makes it more possible for instructors to incorporate varied learning experiences (independent work, group work, application to “real world” topics, additional hands-on work) to facilitate student engagement in their learning (addressing “Learning in Community” and “Integrating Education and Experience”). These courses could also offer more challenge to students by requiring greater participation in the course.

This option also offers the possibility of a more efficient use of instructional resources. For example, this option may mean that fewer, better, General Education courses can be offered. A streamlined set of courses would help facilitate the General Education Council’s Quinquennial Review process, make communication with instructors and departments more manageable, and potentially improve alignment of course and General Education learning objectives.

Upper-Division Integrative Experience

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on integrative learning as an essential component of preparing college students for their future. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), a national organization taking a leadership role in general education and liberal learning curricular development, identifies integrative learning as one of the Essential Learning Outcomes (see Appendix B) students need to develop to excel in a “complex and volatile world” (AAC&U, 2007, p. 13). At the same time, the burgeoning research into how individuals learn has highlighted the challenge that novice learners face in making connections among seemingly disparate sets of information and experiences (see, for example, the National Research Council, 1999 & 2001). Therefore, institutions of higher learning are being called upon to offer students multiple opportunities to practice “integrating and applying their learning” to new situations, challenging questions, and real-world problems (AAC&U, 2007, p. 13).

The upper-division integrative experience provides a structured context for students to reflect on their own learning and explore the connections between the broad exposure provided by General Education and the more focused exposure of their major (offering a “Synthesizing Experience”). This experience would also provide students with opportunities to practice General Education learning objectives like oral communication, collaboration, and interdisciplinary perspective taking, at a more advanced level (“Coherence”). Finally, it offers students an additional common learning experience within their major (“Learning in Community”).

Further, as noted in the “Special Report of the Dean of Undergraduate Education” (http://www.umass.edu/senate/Final_to_fac_Sen_GE_4_credit_plus_integrative.pdf):

The specific rationale for this approach rests on the realization that, as currently configured, the sixth social world requirement adds relatively little in terms of breadth, provides little or no benefit to the student in terms of coherence, and strongly reinforces the notion that General Education is an introductory curriculum with little connection or relevance to study in the major. In contrast, the upper-level integrative experience would take advantage of the considerable breadth remaining in the lower division, would provide an opportunity for drawing together and reflecting on the disparate perspectives of the lower-division offerings, and would give life to the assertion that General Education can and should pervade the undergraduate experience.

The 3-credit integrative experience might be offered in a number of ways: as a distinct course; as a set of experiences distributed across more than one course; or through a combination of course-based and other appropriate activity. One opportunity to be explored is how closely the integrative and junior year writing components might be aligned.

3. Specifics

The General Education requirements have five components: Writing; Analytic Reasoning; Diversity; the Biological and Physical World; and the Social World. No changes in the Writing, Analytic Reasoning, or Diversity requirements are contemplated. The principal changes are presented in tabular form in Appendix A: “Effect of General Education Revisions Endorsed by the General Education Task Force” and in prose below:

Biological and Physical World (BS, PS)

The current requirement is one 3-credit BS, one 3-credit PS, and one additional 3-credit BS or PS. The new requirement will be one 4-credit BS and one 4-credit PS.

Social World (AL, AT, HS, SB)

The current requirement is two 3-credit AL/AT, one 3-credit HS, two 3-credit SB, and a sixth 3-credit course drawn from any of the Social World categories. The new requirement will be one 4-credit AL/AT, one 4-credit HS, and two one 4-credit SB and one 4-credit AL, AT, SB, I, or SI.

Integrative Experience

This new requirement is for a 3-credit upper-level course. The specific parameters of this requirement will be determined by the General Education Council during the Fall 2009 semester and recommended to the Faculty Senate for enactment.

Transition and implementation issues:

Effective date

The new requirements will be in effect for students who enter beginning in September 2010. Four-credit courses will therefore need to be available at that time. New integrative experience courses will need to be available beginning Fall 2011 (for some transfer students entering Fall 2010); most integrative experience enrollments will begin in Fall 2012 (for students who entered as freshmen in Fall 2010).

Interdisciplinary courses (I, SI)

The current system allows students to substitute a 3-credit SI course for the third course in the Biological and Physical World, and a 3-credit I or SI course for the second Arts/Literature course, the second Social/Behavioral course, or for the sixth course in the Social World. In the new system, a 4-credit interdisciplinary Gen Ed course (I or SI) or two 3-credit interdisciplinary Gen Ed courses (I or SI) ~~may substitute for the second 4-credit SB requirement~~ may be taken as the fourth Social World course.

Diversity requirement

The diversity requirements will remain unchanged. Since most students fulfill the domestic (U) and global (G) diversity requirements by taking a course that also has another designation (e.g., SBU), most students will fulfill the diversity requirements with 4-credit courses. The few stand-alone diversity courses (U or G designation only) will also fulfill the diversity requirement, even if they remain at 3 credits.

Transitional options

Students may use two 3-credit General Education courses to fulfill any 4-credit General Education course requirement with the same designation (e.g., two 3-credit HS courses satisfy the requirement for one 4-credit HS course). ~~At least one of the two required SB courses must be a 4-credit course, however,~~

Transfer students

Students may satisfy General Education requirements under the terms of the Commonwealth Transfer Compact or MassTransfer. All other transfer students must complete the minimum number of courses required for each General Education designation (including Diversity), plus two additional courses with General Education designation.

4. Recommendations

MOVED: 03-10 That the Faculty Senate approve the changes in the General Education requirements, as presented in Sen. Doc. No. 10-002A.

**APPENDIX A:
Effect of General Education Revisions Endorsed by the General Education Task Force**

Division Subdivision	Current Courses (credits)		Proposed Courses (credits)	
	Lower Level	Upper Level	Lower Level	Upper Level
Writing	1 (3)	1 (3)	1 (3)	1 (3)
Analytic Reasoning				
R1*	1 (3)		1 (3)	
R2	1 (3)		1 (3)	
Biological & Physical World				
BS	1 (3)		1 (4)	
PS	1 (3)		1 (4)	
Other BS/PS	1 (3)			
Social World				
AL / AT	2 (3)		1 (4)	
HS	1 (3)		1 (4)	
SB	2 (3)		1 (4)	
AL, AT, SB, I, or SI			1 (4)	
Other social world	1 (3)			
Integrative Experience				1 (3)
# of Courses	LL =12; UL =1; Total=13		LL=9; UL=2;Total=11	
# of Credits	LL=36; UL=3; Total=39		LL=33; UL=6; Total=39	

■ Proposed change in requirements

* May test out of requirement

Note: The two-course Social and Cultural Diversity requirement may overlap or stand alone.