

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
GENERAL EDUCATION COUNCIL
concerning
THE REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION

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**A Report from the General Education Council to the Faculty Senate,
voted unanimously by the Council on April 6, 2001**

This report summarizes recent work and decisions of the General Education Council. In assessing the recommendations of the University Task Force on General Education (*General Education: A Program for Change*, February 2000) against current and foreseeable budgetary constraints, the Council has developed both general recommendations to guide this and future General Education Councils as well as specific motions for adoption by the Faculty Senate. This report is organized as follows:

- I. The background of the recent General Education review.**
- II. The Council's analysis of the current General Education program.**
- III. Recommendations for immediate implementation.**
- IV. Motions to be forwarded to the Faculty Senate.**
- V. Recommendations for subsequent implementation.**

I. Background: The Review of General Education

The University's General Education program has been the subject of review and much discussion over the past several years. In 1996, the General Education Council determined that it would be wise, ten years after the program's inauguration, to ensure that its goals were appropriate, and that they were being achieved. It was suggested that the Council ask other faculty, and students, to participate in such a review.

Then, in December 1996, Acting Provost Pat Crosson, with the support of Chancellor David Scott, assembled a Task Force on General Education. Over the subsequent three years, this group grew to include 126 people working in 11 specialized subcommittees. The original charge from the Provost, and the Chancellor's presentation to the Task Force at its initial meeting, encouraged members to develop a comprehensive review and to suggest new initiatives where appropriate. The Task Force's report, including the work of all its subcommittees, was widely disseminated on the campus. It did not identify the costs of its new initiatives.

It is important to note that the Task Force was an administrative creation, and that it ceased to exist with the issuance of its February 2000 report. The General Education Council, as an enduring part of the campus governance system, has the less enviable and ongoing responsibility to ensure that a general education program in the undergraduate curriculum meets all of its objectives within the University's fiscal constraints.

The General Education Council is grateful to the members of the Task Force for their idealism and hard work in assembling a specific proposal out of a highly diverse set of competing goals and alternative strategies. The Council takes the Task Force report as a visionary statement that might guide efforts to revise general education. While we agree with much of the report's content, current budgetary constraints preclude our endorsement of broad-scale reform of the general education program until some future point when our budgetary picture is brighter.

II. The Council's analysis of the General Education program

Undergraduate education at UMass engages four distinct curricular arenas. First, the General Education program aims to equip every student who comes here with the intellectual skills essential for subsequent learning at the University and beyond. Second, students are expected to develop mastery of a specific subject area. Third, the requirements of schools and colleges aim to cultivate a common intellectual heritage. Fourth and finally, electives provide a less constrained arena for a student's personal growth and maturation. These

four arenas constitute the undergraduate curriculum, and while they add up to a minimum of 120 credits, the proportion of course work required in each one varies considerably from one major and college to another.

The General Education Council has, on several occasions over the past ten years, re-examined and reaffirmed the philosophy and general principles of the program that has been in place on this campus since 1986. We also do not find significant flaws in the program itself as described in Faculty Senate Document 85-024. Nonetheless, faculty, students, and administrators have expressed dissatisfaction with the program. The problems, we have concluded, are in the implementation, and not in the conception. The transition from the lofty purposes and ideals of a general education to the realities of the University's program, as it exists in 2001, has not been an easy one. We have identified three reasons for this.

1. There is no natural and focused constituency for supporting General Education: no professional association, graduate program, or alumni development programs. In the competition for resources within Academic Affairs, there are no structures to sustain the urgency of the case for support of General Education. Criticisms go unchallenged; programmatic drift is neither detected nor arrested.
2. In general, departments are encouraged, but not required, to offer General Education courses, yet students *must* complete their General Education requirements.
3. Faculty intend General Education to be an intellectual program, and students see it as a set of requirements. This is to a degree inevitable – it is unrealistic to hope that the majority of students will be readily cognizant of the pedagogical rationale for any set of academic requirements – but current practice has exacerbated the problem.

The current General Education program is an artful compromise between the ideals of a liberal arts program and the practical need to lay disciplinary foundations. It was designed to allow departments to offer, for General Education credit, courses that would introduce students to the principles of methods of a discipline and to the fundamental knowledge base required to pursue further study in the discipline. Often these goals can be achieved in one course, but not always. The program was also designed to allow students to meet its requirements while they pursued courses that would be fundamental to their eventual majors. The program was shaped to require breadth of knowledge without imposing an overwhelming course burden.

Part of the success of the compromise lay in the expectations of courses. The program's guidelines state that "critical thinking and problem solving shall be the norm, rather than the exception." Courses in the Social World curriculum areas were all to require writing: "Preferably, paper assignments will be included in Social World courses, but essay examinations will be considered acceptable if the instructor responds to them with written comments on both content and composition." It was intended that these course guideline would foster the development of diverse modes of learning among students and lead them to synthesize what they were learning. At the time each course was approved for a General Education designation, it met the criteria of the course guidelines.

The situation in some of these courses has changed, however. In the late 1980s, the campus was hit with a series of budget cuts and hiring freezes at the same time that some of its most active teachers were retiring in large numbers. In Fall 1985, the ratio of full-time faculty campus-wide to students was 1 to 18.5. In Fall 1999, it was 1 to 19.1. More important than this, though, is the reduction of faculty in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, which offer the vast majority of General Education courses. In 1985, Arts and Sciences faculty numbered 833 FTE. In 1999, that number had dropped to 758, a 9% decrease. Yet, over the same period, enrollment by FTE undergraduate majors in these colleges and undeclared majors increased by almost 7%.

Further, as the General Education Council undertook the periodic review of previously-approved courses, it became apparent that most students were completing many of their General Education requirements in large courses in which there was little opportunity for active learning, and in which resource limitations precluded the requirement of student writing. This remains the case today.

The most discouraging aspect of the current situation in General Education is that its greatest impact falls on first-year students, the population that the program should benefit most. On average, three-quarters of first-year students' courses are General Education courses. General Education courses constitute each student's important transition from the culture of high school to that of the university. In particular, General Education courses carry the burden of teaching students how to be active inquirers and critical thinkers in a research university. If a student's first year at the University consists mostly of large lecture courses with minimal faculty interaction and very little writing, this not only handicaps the General Education program's objectives, but compromises the rest of a university education as well.

III. Recommendations for immediate implementation

Taking into account the recommendations of the Task Force, and the Council's own assessment of the problems noted above, there are some steps that involve few or no new resources and that can be implemented now.

1. The most pressing need is to re-infuse the General Education program with the sense of grand purpose with which it was established. It needs constantly to be invigorated with new faculty, new courses, and new students. Greater attention must be paid to recruiting, sustaining, and rewarding instructors – faculty and teaching associates – to teach General Education courses. Further, the Council and the Provost must enlarge and enrich the range of courses that meet General Education requirements. Finally, in the transition from high school to the university, new students need to be counseled to understand the values and objectives on which the General Education requirements are based. They need an explanation, by faculty, of General Education that goes well beyond a description of the requirements themselves.
2. The Council believes that the Faculty should take responsibility for the program that they have endorsed. General education is fundamental to a university education, and is an integral part of departmental activity. The Faculty should be widely informed of the purpose of the program, as well as of its specific requirements. We cannot expect students to believe that there is a coherent purpose to requirements if the faculty, as the principal embodiment of the campus's educational mission, do not express this. Students should also read of the purpose of general education in campus publications, and hear this message from the New Students Program and from advisors. Unless all participants in the educational process are aware of the purpose and value of any kind of program, it will eventually come to be seen as only a list of courses on a degree audit.
3. The single most important feature now lacking in many courses in the General Education curriculum is student writing. Ensuring that students write in many areas of the curriculum is at least as important as the dissemination of knowledge across these areas. In writing well, students demonstrate not only a mastery of received knowledge, but also a capacity to organize, evaluate, and create information, and then to communicate that mastery convincingly. There are ways of incorporating writing into courses that do not require the instructor to read everything written. Faculty should avail themselves of the assistance available to them from the Writing Program and from the Center for Teaching to find ways of increasing student writing in their courses. There should be a place for students to get help with their writing in their General Education courses.

4. The courses now offered to fulfill the Social & Cultural Diversity requirements have sufficient capacity to implement a change suggested by the Task Force, and long considered by the Council. We recommend that, of the two Diversity courses that students must complete, one focus on diversity in the United States, and one on diversity outside the United States. We would designate these as “Domestic Diversity” and “Global Diversity.”
5. The Council should encourage an increase in the availability of courses that meet the Interdisciplinary designation. Likewise we will encourage additional opportunities for faculty to develop and students to complete individual and linked interdisciplinary courses, already authorized in the current curriculum.
6. Finally, the Council will immediately embark on a vigorous review of all courses previously approved for General Education designation. Members of the Council will work with faculty and departments to assess whether these courses are meeting the published criteria for designation, and if not, to coax approved courses to this standard. Where this is not feasible, General Education designation shall be withdrawn.

IV. Motions to the Faculty Senate

While part of the implementation of some of these aforementioned steps rests with the Council, the Senate is requested to endorse the following motions:

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate urge the deans of the Schools and Colleges to provide faculty resources dedicated to ensuring that General Education is explained and championed in advising during the New Students Program and other advising periods.
37-01

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate urge the Provost to promote the importance of the General Education program, and to visibly encourage excellence in teaching in General Education courses.
38-01

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate amend Sen. Doc. No. 85-024, to require all students, effective with the freshman class and transfers entering Fall 2002, to complete one of their two Social & Cultural Diversity requirements with a course that focuses on diversity in the United States, and the other with a course that focuses on diversity outside the United States.
39-01

V. Recommendations for subsequent implementation

Under the current practice of shared governance between the Faculty Senate and the Administration, it would be irresponsible of the Council to bring to the Senate proposals for improvements in General Education when there is no reasonable expectation that the resources can be found to fund them. Nonetheless, we believe the Senate ought to be informed of our recommendations for future improvements in General Education, so that we can together make the case for directing future resources to these ends. These include:

1. All students should understand that their writing can be improved, whatever their level of proficiency, and so all students should take the College Writing course. We believe that removing the current exemption from ENGLWP 112/113 would encourage this understanding. We understand that the removal of the exemption would immediately place additional demands on the first-year writing program.
2. Reducing General Education course class size, so that active learning objectives involving writing and problem solving can be better achieved. Ultimately, this means increasing the size of the faculty. Large lecture format courses ought to have discussion sections of not more than 25 students per course.

3. **The University should gradually increase availability of learning communities – which currently serve some 34% of first-year students – to serve every first-year student who wants one.**
4. **Fund a writing center to assist any undergraduate student to overcome writing problems.**
5. **Equip many more classrooms with instructional technologies that encourage active learning, such as ‘class talk.’**
6. **Provide targeted incentives for departments to develop and offer General Education courses, especially those that are interdisciplinary in character.**