Charlena Seymour, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

I am here to discuss a familiar story. In order to tell this story, it was necessary to get some background information. I was able to review the records of the Faculty Senate and Provost's Office, and I also re-read mail about the progress of General Education activities. This campus has been involved in General Education activities prior to December 1996, but I decided a ten-year perspective was about as far back as I was willing to go. At that time, Provost Pat Crosson and Chancellor David Scott gave a charge to the General Education Task Force to review General Education and suggest new initiatives. They asked John Jenkins to be the leader of the Task Force. There were over 100 people working on this particular project. There were eleven subcommittees. It lasted over three years in academic time. As a result, they came up with a grand proposal.

The final proposal, as it was so designated, had three points. I would like for you to pay attention to the vocabulary and the action words that are associated with each of these particular items. The emphasis, of course, was on knowledge, critical analysis of skills, and effective and ethical contributions to an interdependent world. It was our responsibility to develop a curriculum that addressed those guiding principles and to also translate these recommendations to the campus.

Shortly thereafter, the General Education Council reviewed the proposal submitted by the Task Force. The Council remarked that the Task Force had generated really great ideas, but there were problems in resources. They also felt that there was no natural constituency to advocate for General Education. One conflict was that the departments were encouraged but not required to offer General Education courses, but students had to take them. That is quite risky. If none of the departments offer these courses, what would students do for almost two years? Finally, the faculty intended to make General Education an intellectual program. However, regardless of how much time and effort we spent, the students merely thought of it as a set of requirements.

At the discussion in April 2001, the Faculty Senate suggested that the diversity requirement be amended to include one course on U.S. diversity and one on global diversity. The reason they were able to approve this amendment was that there was no money associated with making this particular change. Secondly, the Faculty Senate urged the Provost to promote the importance of the General Education program and to visibly encourage excellence in teaching General Education courses.

At that time, I was serving as the Interim Provost and had been in the job for two weeks. Lots of things were happening on campus. The General Education document also made some recommendations for future improvement. I am not going to go through all of them, but I want you to pay close attention to the last two bullets. While a lot of these activities were not attended to immediately, some of these suggestions were implemented as part of other projects. For example, as a result of hiring a new Associate Provost to address instructional technology for academic affairs, we are now effectively equipping more classrooms with instructional technology.
Finally, I would like to address the last bullet regarding incentives for departments to develop General Education courses, especially interdisciplinary ones. If we are going to have incentives for departments, it means that any General Education curricula must be driven by the faculty. What can we do to make it appealing for faculty to teach and be more involved in the General Education curriculum? We want the faculty to be enthused, engaged and involved in General Education. If they are not, it is going to be very difficult for us to persuade our students that this must be a requirement.

What happened between April 2001 and April 2005 that affected the implementation of this proposal? First, there were some internal administrative conflicts. There was a change in administration. Unfortunately, there was 9/11. As a result of 9/11, there were major operating budget cuts. It was not until 2005 that we were able to pull our operating budget back together and find money to develop new initiatives.

In 2006, I visited with the General Education Council, and they provided me with feedback. Instead of starting over again, I asked them to review what has been done and come up with a modern action plan. More importantly, I asked that the plan be faculty driven and involve senior faculty. I am very proud of the amount of time and energy that they have put into this action plan. While this plan was being developed, they took time out of their schedules to attend conferences and participate in seminars. This gave us an opportunity to not only learn about what else is going on in the world of General Education but also to benchmark ourselves against other university programs. We found that we are doing a very good job, but there are some areas that need to be tweaked. The fact is that we are moving forward. I believe we have a very good plan, and I am here to ask John Cunningham and Randall Knoper to talk about the next action steps.

John Cunningham, Chair of the General Education Task Force

As Charlena mentioned, we formed a Joint Task Force with the Faculty Senate. We met in December for the first time. We have not been working on this for a long time, but I want to show you a list of names that you all recognize and respect. These are many of the people who have been invested in General Education throughout their careers. There is a sense that the Faculty Senate councils are onboard and participating. There are a half a dozen General Education Council members on the Task Force, and former Chair John McCarthy is on here as well. We have a good, active group distributed wherever General Education is found in the curriculum. We meet twice a month. Once a month, the Provost joins us for those meetings.

We are looking at the delivery of General Education and the resources that are needed. Once we do that, we also want to look at student and faculty assessment of the courses. The General Education Council is already ahead of us in assessment operations. They started on this last year. Sometime between December and February, we began look at the purposes as well as the delivery of General Education. This gives you the three parts of the triad that are of concern to the Task Force.

We have taken some immediate actions to inform the students about General Education and to help give faculty a sense of belonging to a General Education cadre. We created a poster. Mark Leckie was very seminal in this, and there was a lot of work by other General Education Council members and undergraduate deans. There are posters in the back. You may take one and hang it prominently. They have been distributed around the campus in anticipation of the April pre-registration. The posters are attempting to tell students that General Education is not just a nuisance; it is related to a set of requirements we think are important. It emphasizes what employers are looking for in terms of problem solving, communication, writing and critical thinking skills. It is a first step. We hope it is effective.

We are also attempting to improve communication with the General Education instructors. First, we are getting a list of who is teaching General Education in the fall. We are going to contact them in advance and say, “Thank you for being part of the General Education teaching cadre. Here are some resources you can use.” There is a blog that is just about to go up and running and websites will be
developed for students and faculty to get information about General Education. We hope to have that up or be on the way to forming the website by next fall.

The summer institute for General Education instructors is also coming up. Richard Rogers is here to give specific details if we need them. The institute will start with a general session the first day for all General Education instructors. This will begin with the Provost and segue into general and breakout sessions by area. That will happen this June and will be an attempt to bring General Education faculty together, show the importance of General Education, and create a sense of down-the-line faculty who are involved in General Education.

As I mentioned before, we wondered whether our purposes from twenty years ago were the right purposes. We looked at documents coming out of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. They have had an ongoing dialogue about General Education for several years. The conversation involved many research universities and other liberal arts campuses. We found that they had a listing of what they thought were the essential learning outcomes for students. They are in categories that you can see here (referring to slides). We do not have any vertical components. General Education is a horizontal component, but it does not build vertically through the curriculum.

We are mapping the language that was presented about the General Education program in 1986 and then amended in 1988 and 1994. Over several meetings, we developed a statement of purpose. This survey form shows what we have come up with. We are handing this off to Randall Knoper and the General Education Council asking, “Is this, indeed, a good statement of the purpose? If it differs from the original and presently approved purposes, do we need to take Faculty Senate action?”

We have come up with this draft. Then, we asked ourselves, how well do we think we are ready to deliver these set of purposes? How confident are we that students are achieving the outcomes we desire? It was an interesting exercise that we did as a group with members of the General Education Council and Undergraduate Education Council. When it comes to being equipped for delivery, we are mostly “somewhat confident.” For several of the categories, less than the majority are “very confident” or “somewhat confident.” For the application of the methods of analysis to real world problems and contexts, we are about halfway. Fifty percent of the reviewers were somewhat or very sure about that one. For the understanding and evaluating consequences of your choices and the implications of your actions category, there are about forty percent of us who think we are either somewhat or very setup to deliver that. Forty percent are somewhat to very confident that we are working effectively and collaboratively with diverse groups.

When it comes to assessing how confident we were that students are achieving these learning outcomes, we are somewhere between the “not very” and “somewhat” category. You may do your own assessment of this, but the Task Force is somewhat confident that we are equipped and delivering.

_Randall Knoper, Chair of the General Education Council_

First, I would like to reiterate what John has already said. The Task Force is a joint task force, and there are five members of the General Education Council on it. I do feel like we have been working in collaboration. I think that I can speak for the General Education Council in saying that when the Task Force was formed and brought a great deal of people, energy and resources to General Education matters, we were elated. I think that continues to be the case. I suppose the relations between the Task Force and General Education Council are still constantly being negotiated. Certainly, nobody wants the General Education Council to be sidelined as the Task Force goes straight-ahead and leads on things. I think everybody knows that the Council is the body of the Faculty Senate and will be the Council that must approve or disapprove of changes in the General Education program.
Still, on what fronts should the Council move ahead, and on what fronts should the Task Force move ahead? We are constantly working that out. I suppose those lines are not so stark; they are fluid. Basically, the Council had decided that going back and looking at the definition of General Education goals was not the best use of its energies. It more or less looked at the Task Force with delight as the Task Force plunged into what seemed like a complex and typical sort of problem. The draft that the Task Force has come up with has gone to the General Education Council. The Council seems to like it, mostly, and has provided some suggestions to the Task Force for revision. I am relatively confident that in the near future the Council will approve a version of these new goals.

Then again, there are various ways in which we seem to be working together. The leading version of the website was basically developed in the Council by Kevin Klement. I want to give him some credit for working out a wonderful flowchart for both the faculty and student versions. I think that is going to be important. The Council’s recommendations and suggestions for the summer institute have been incorporated into that plan as well.

A while back, the Council decided that one of the fruitful uses of its energy would be to work on assessment of the General Education program, including its courses, its curriculum and what students learn. Martha Stassen and the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment have always been present, helping the Council in this effort. Indeed, they talk, as they will, of the Council’s efforts towards assessment of General Education and leave out large efforts towards assessment that are taking place through Martha’s Office. At any rate, Marta’s help has been indispensable, and she has aided the Assessment Subcommittee of the General Education Council to get assessment projects off the ground or at least onto the launching pad.

The Council’s earliest efforts included review and information from Marilyn Blaustein, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, and from Martha Stassen. This included looking at class sizes for General Education courses, looking at who was teaching them and how they are structured, and looking at which departments are teaching most of them. We heard from Martha Stassen about a project she and a group of faculty members undertook to assess General Education diversity courses. This was a phone survey of junior-year students about their attitudes towards General Education, and some focus groups organized around questions of General Education. Then, last summer some of us participated in a workshop on assessment of diversity education with Patricia Gurin from the University of Michigan, who is a national expert on General Education and diversity related outcomes assessment in higher education. This group also discussed available standardized testing instruments to try to evaluate their capacity for measuring complex behaviors like critical thinking and writing. Members of this group subsequently formed a working group on General Education assessment which met over the summer to develop pilot assessment projects which would look at critical thinking and General Education courses and also look at diversity education.

Finally, the General Education Council has an active assessment subcommittee. We have been working on a revised form for evaluating and approving courses submitted for General Education designations. This kind of form, of course, would have to be key to the goals of General Education. It has to remain in process, but I think that we are forging a version of it. We have also now asked that courses be submitted in electronic form. Our dream is that this can all be brought together so that courses can be submitted online. They can be evaluated online. They can also be approved, and once they are approved, can be generated automatically online. Some plans for that are in the making. Ideally, this will also provide us with a rich database about courses, our evaluation of them, and their review.

Then, on the near horizon is the development of General Education specific questions for the SRTI, the usual course evaluation forms, and a survey of General Education teachers on the effectiveness of General Education. The Task Force has been talking a little bit about aversion to the latter, and with this project as with these other improvements of General Education, the Council will certainly work to coordinate and combine efforts.
Richard Rogers, Faculty Advisor to the Provost for Undergraduate Education

I just came back from a meeting with Academic Computing on this very topic. We met this morning with the Center for Teaching and had lunch with the Task Force on this topic. We hope to have an application for the summer institute that goes out to all instructors next week. We are working on that. We are already hiring IT student helpers to be available to work with faculty who have issues surrounding instructional technologies. The deadline for the application will be April 22. We will select 20 of those General Education instructors. They would be in the summer program from June 2 to June 12, and then have the rest of the summer to implement some of those great ideas in their General Education courses in the fall and spring semester.

Each selected instructor would get a laptop and an inking pad to highlight and use in a chalkboard style. They will also receive a stipend of $4,000 to implement their ideas and redesign their General Education course. They would be assigned to work with a senior teacher who has been selected for their expertise and will also receive some student help to make these changes.