

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
GENERAL EDUCATION COUNCIL
and the
GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE
concerning
THE PURPOSES OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Presented at the
687th Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate
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GENERAL EDUCATION COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

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1. The General Education Task Force

In September, 2007, Provost Charlena Seymour and the Rules Committee created a joint administration/Senate General Education Task Force (GETF) to “re-energize and improve this important component of undergraduate education.” The faculty members of the GETF are Maurianne Adams (Education, Rules Committee, and General Education Council), Martha Baker (Natural Resources and the Environment), Carol Barr (Undergraduate Studies), Elizabeth Chilton (Anthropology), Barbara Cruikshank* (Political Science), Alexandrina Deschamps (Women’s Studies, Rules Committee, and General Education Council), Isabel Espinal** (Research and Instructional Services and General Education Council), Robert Feldman (Social and Behavioral Sciences), Justin Fermann (Chemistry), Stephen Gencarella** (Communication), Judy Goodenough** (Biology and General Education Council), Anne Herrington (English and General Education Council), Randall Knoper (English and General Education Council), Mark Leckie (Geosciences and General Education Council), Alan Lutenegger (Civil and Environmental Engineering and General Education Council), John McCarthy (Linguistics and Rules Committee), Anne C. Moore* (Library), W. Brian O’Connor* (Biology and Rules Committee), Amilcar Shabazz (Afro-American Studies), Julian Tyson** (Chemistry), Wilmore Webley (Microbiology), and Gordon Wyse* (Biology). Members of the GETF from the administration include Marilyn Blaustein (Institutional Research), John Cunningham (Deputy Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education), Bryan Harvey (Associate Provost), Pamela Marsh-Williams (Assistant Provost and General Education Council), Richard Rogers (Associate Provost), Charlena Seymour (Provost), and Martha Stassen (Academic Planning and Assessment). Graduate students on the GETF are Emily Cachiguango (Education) and Amy Fleig (Political Science).

The GETF met throughout the academic years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009. It focused on reviewing and making recommendations in a number of areas of General Education: purpose and learning objectives, curriculum delivery, assessment, and how resources and systemic challenges affect the success of General Education. The GETF used various sources of evidence to inform its work. This evidence included the student perspective (focus groups, survey), course characteristics (course data like course enrollment, student characteristics, percent enrolled for General Education credit, and pedagogical techniques gleaned from analysis of course syllabi), the instructor perspective (General Education instructor survey asking which General Education learning objectives they address in their course(s), the challenges they face in teaching General Education, and their recommendations for improvements to General Education), and the administrative/governance perspective (interviews with General Education Council members). The Task Force also reviewed the recommendations and findings from the national Liberal Education reform effort led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the research on learning and its implications for course and curricular design, and the General Education practices/curriculum structures used at other large research universities. Finally the Task Force hosted a General Education Workshop for members of the Councils and Committees with responsibility for Undergraduate Education and used this as an opportunity to share the results of the evidence described above and generate ideas for how to improve General Education. GETF and General Education Council members also participated in two assessment workshops (one focused on defining Critical Thinking and the other on methods for assessing General Education).

Among the results of the GETF’s work are:

- (1) A restatement of the purpose and learning objectives of General Education.

Current status: The restatement appears as a motion in this report.

- (2) A General Education communications/marketing campaign, including General Education posters and the new General Education website.

Current status: Posters have been distributed. Website was demonstrated at Senate meeting on April 23, 2009 and is now available at <http://www.umass.edu/gened/>.

*2007-2008

**2008-2009

(3) Enhanced General Education instructor development and support, including workshops on General Education instruction and assessment and the General Education Fellows program that supports instructors in a year-long focus on enhancing General Education course(s).

Current status: The fellows program is now entering its second year.

(4) General Education Assessment Tools, including an instructor survey that provides information on the alignment of courses to General Education Learning Objectives.

Current status: The alignment survey was administered in Fall 2008, and its results have informed the deliberations of the GETF.

(5) Enhanced support for the General Education Council Quinquennial Review process, including TA support and the creation of an online course submission, review, and approval process.

Current status: Software development is in progress.

(6) Exploration of curriculum changes, particularly the introduction of a credit-based General Education requirement with transition to 4-credit courses.

Current status: Recommended for further study by the General Education Council and the Senate.

Although recommendations under (6) may require future Senate deliberation, the only recommendation that requires and is currently ready for Senate action is (1), a statement of the purposes of General Education.

2. The Purposes of General Education

The General Education Council and the GETF recommend that Sen. Doc. No. 85-024B (as previously amended on May 10, 2001 and February 24, 2005) be amended by adding a summary statement of the purposes of General Education at this University. This statement will be included in section III "Principles" as a new subsection III.C:

C. Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the General Education requirement is to stretch students' minds, broaden their experiences, and prepare them for:

- **Their college experiences and subsequent professional training**
- **Their careers and productive lives**
- **Community engagement and informed citizenship**
- **A diverse and rapidly changing world**
- **A lifetime of learning**

The General Education curriculum does this by engaging students in:

- **Fundamental questions, ideas, and methods of analysis in the humanities and fine arts, social sciences, mathematics, and natural and physical sciences;**
- **The application and integration of these methods of analysis to real world problems and contexts;**
- **Creative, analytical, quantitative, and critical thinking through inquiry, problem solving and synthesis;**
- **Pluralistic perspective-taking and awareness of the relationship among culture, self, and others;**
- **Understanding and evaluating the consequences of one's choices and the implications of one's actions.**

- **Opportunities to develop and practice the skills of critical thinking, reasoning, communication, and integration of knowledge and perspectives, including:**
 - **Communicating persuasively and effectively orally and in writing;**
 - **Working effectively and collaboratively (in groups, across perspectives);**
 - **Developing information and technological literacy.**

3. Rationale

Part of the charge to the GETF was to clarify the purpose of General Education at UMass Amherst. Conversations among GETF members and the Provost and the evidence drawn from the student perspective all clearly pointed to a need to better articulate why students are required to take General Education courses and what students should gain from that part of their educational experience.

The purpose statement developed by the GETF draws from two sources: (1) the original 1985 General Education legislation (Sen. Doc. No. 85-024B) and (2) the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) current research on defining learning objectives associated with a liberal education. For this second resource, we relied primarily on the AAC&U's set of "Essential Learning Outcomes".¹ These outcomes were developed in consultation with representatives from hundreds of colleges and universities, members of the business community, and analyses of standards from various accrediting bodies. They focus on the outcomes that are essential preparation for twenty-first century challenges.

The GETF found that the original legislation, the learning priorities suggested by the AAC&U's "Essential Learning Outcomes," and recommendations by GETF members converged on the items in the proposed purpose statement. It reflects and elaborates upon the intentions of the original legislation and serves as a restatement of the original legislation that is responsive to changes in needs and pedagogical practices in the information age. In some cases language has been drawn directly from the original legislation; in other places the original language has been adapted for purposes of clarity or parsimony.

Two of the learning objectives require new terminology that reflects an elaboration of the original intent rather than a substantive change. Specific references to "information literacy" and "technological literacy" have been added. "Information literacy" refers to students' capacity to recognize when information is needed and gain access to, evaluate, and appropriately use that information. "Technological literacy" refers to the ability to effectively use computers, databases, and other technological tools. In a time when individuals are bombarded by an array of information, some from dubious sources or of limited veracity, information literacy is an essential skill, and one that might not have been conceptualized in exactly the same way more than two decades ago, when the General Education program was developed. For this reason, information or technological literacies should not be regarded as new requirements, but rather as updates of the critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and "computer literacy" learning objectives present in the original Senate document.

Finally, the purpose statement includes oral communication as well as the legislated written communication. This addition is implicit in the original learning objectives that refer to the ability to "articulate" the consequences of one's choices.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate amend Sen. Doc. No. 85-024B by adding section III.C Statement of Purpose, as presented in Sen. Doc. No. 09-060.

¹ http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/EssentialOutcomes_Chart.pdf