Faculty Senate Secretary’s Report to the General Education Council
18 November 2016

This is my summary of the points made during the Faculty Senate discussion in committee of the whole on November 10th. It is organized analytically to highlight the four areas of continuing concern among faculty that merit more consideration by this Council.

1. Goal of the DIV course. Is the DIV course intended to provide intellectual resources enabling students to develop habits of mind that will help them address social questions arising from diversity among humans and the various ways that diversity is perceived and acted upon, or is it intended to inculcate a certain set of beliefs on an array of contemporary social issues?

The language of both the September and November versions, particularly when compared to the older diversity and G and U designation prose, is being read as moving from the former toward the latter. Those raising this concern have pointed variously to the phrasing in the overall learning goals, the statements regarding the pedagogical structures to be used in the DIV course, and the rephrasings of the U and G designation criteria. The strongest expression of this view came not in the debate but in Professor Daphne Patai’s comments now on the Faculty Senate website. Others think the problem is insufficient move towards inculcating attitudes and focusing on action; Student Trustee Odam’s remarks calling for the course to serve “decolonization” was a strong expression of that perspective.

2. Place of the diversity requirement as a whole (the DIV plus the G and the U) in the General Education portion of the curriculum. This involves two primary questions:

a. When should it come in the sequence?

   There appears to be strong consensus that, special circumstances aside, the DIV course should be taken during the first year. This does raise some particular concerns about subsets of students as noted in number 4 below.

b. How does it relate to the rest of the General Education program, particularly the social world requirement?

   Defining the relation of the diversity requirement to the rest of the General Education program involves answering several questions. Both the September and November versions of the proposal suggest a 3-course diversity requirement – which is more courses than used for the purpose at any other Research 1 University I have looked at – involving a DIV course that replaces the fourth social world requirement plus a G course and a U course.

   This design has elicited articulation of several concerns:
a. Eliminating the fourth social world course renders the I and SI designations irrelevant. Some faculty members see this as the final move in a longer-term retreat from the initial idea that interdisciplinary study has a distinct and necessary place in a General Education Curriculum.

b. Taking over the fourth social world requirement further reduces the humanities requirements, adding another reduction to the one decided when General Education courses went from 3 to 4 credits. This has elicited concern not only from faculty in humanities and fine arts, but also from faculty in engineering and computer science believing that serious engagement with art and literature enriches the lives and professional practice of their students.

c. Requiring DIV plus G plus U effectively places diversity at the core of 75% of a student’s social world studies. This argument rests on a practical appreciation that tight program requirements in many majors plus a rational response to demands on time lead students to prefer courses that help meet two requirements over courses that help meet only one. The easily-foreseen consequence of a DIV+U+G sequence is driving enrollments across all the social world offerings to those that also carry a G or a U designation. As noted in the committee of the whole discussion, this has the effect of crowding out courses on other aspects of arts, literature, culture, historical study, human societies, the impacts of technological change, and the increasingly important human-nature nexus.

3. Campus readiness to provide adequate instruction. This is less about number of seats, though that has been a point of concern, than about supply of capable and adequately trained instructors. The current pedagogical structures for the DIV course include “student discussion and collaboration within small group contexts in order to provide opportunities for students to listen to and learn from each other and voice their concerns and experiences.” Small-group sessions of this type are often characterized as “difficult conversations” with the implication that they require an instructor with very specific facilitation skills. While some faculty with closely aligned research interests have expressed readiness to teach the courses, the committee of the whole discussion reinforced impressions from earlier comments that many faculty members regard the university as currently lacking sufficient numbers of properly-skilled instructors to accomplish this goal. There has been considerable discussion of training through TEFD, which is already offering a series of programs about teaching diversity courses or other diversity-related concerns, but some participants in the committee of the whole

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1 As an aside noting my own perceptions, the 2016 presidential election demonstrated the importance of certain areas of knowledge about the social world that are not group-centered. It would have been difficult to campaign on a promise to restore manufacturing jobs if more voters understood that automation is at least as large a reason for loss of jobs in manufacturing as outsourcing production to low-wage countries. Similarly, more widespread understanding of the need to move human activity into more ecologically sustainable patterns would have affected debates on energy sources, infrastructure, and environmental issues.
discussion seemed to be saying that they are not confident that TEFD has the resources to serve as a sufficient trainer.

4. Impact on certain students of specifying that the DIV course will be taken in the first year. Participants in the committee of the whole discussion identified three distinct sets of first-year students likely to encounter significant obstacles to taking the DIV course during their first year:

   a. Those in credit-heavy programs with highly structured course sequences – meaning just about all majors in natural sciences, computer science, engineering, and nursing. While some do say that students should take a Gen Ed course (plus College Writing) during the first year without specifying what Gen Ed course, others seem to have some preferences.

   b. Those coming from poorly-resources high schools arriving – through no fault or error of their own – without enough pre-calculus math to take the general chemistry course, which is a gateway to many science majors. Depending on how they do on the math placement test, these students need to take one or two math courses, delaying their general chemistry course into their second or third semester. This puts them behind in their program, creating ripple effects for all parts of their studies.

   c. International students, in two respects. While some arrive quite fluent in English, others are still developing the level of fluency they need to study successfully at a university where English is the language of instruction. These students may find it difficult to take the course immediately since it will be dealing with topics expressed in rather nuanced terms. Many international students will also face the challenge of comprehending and addressing a set of assumptions about social life very different from those prevailing in their home country.

Transfer students face a distinct problem, since most of them arrive after at least one year in college. Many have raised this point, but little has been said about how their situation might be handled. This leaves those focused on helping transfer students maintain good progress in their studies rather worried. Since diversity courses early in one’s studies are reasonably common – but not universally required – at 4-year institutions but much less common in community colleges, it appears that much depends on each transfer student’s own path to UMass.

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