

October 17, 2012

A response to the General Education Open Forum, held Tuesday October 9, 2012:

I first want to thank Paulette Marty and Andy Koch for co-convening the Open Forum that was held to discuss the proposed changes to the General Education curriculum. However, my attendance at the full Forum left me confused and a bit uneasy.

Clearly, one of the major concerns for the Science and Math faculty is the proposal to change the minimum number of credit hours from 8 to 7 in both Science Inquiry and Quantitative Literacy. It was explicitly discussed by Paulette Marty that the "ease of transition" for transfer students was a driving force behind the motion. Faculty members from each of the Science departments (Biology, Chemistry, Geology, and Physics) as well as the Mathematics Department expressed not only their concerns but also a series of proposed solutions to the transfer credit discrepancy. To many of the faculty, this sounds like a relatively simple administrative issue that is easily fixed (and already is in the process of being addressed in most Science departments). Although the proposed Science Inquiry curriculum changes will streamline transfer credits for ~65 students per year, they will also affect thousands of incoming students who do not have this issue at all. This solution to the transfer credit problem seems both excessive and overreaching, and cuts the interactive lab time for Science students by 50%.

In a counter statement, Ray Williams (a member of the Gen Ed Advisory Group) refuted the "ease of transition" comment by saying that these proposed changes were not due to administrative concerns (e.g., the transfer student credit problem) but instead were proposed as an opportunity for the Science faculty/departments to experiment and develop new and better ways to teach their Gen Ed courses. The comment was made that, "If Chapel Hill can do it in 3 hours, why can't we?" This comment is misguided, since comparing Appalachian to Chapel Hill is like comparing apples to oranges in regards to available resources such as funding, available space, and staffing.

The reasoning behind the proposed changes is therefore self-contradictory. If these changes are not driven by administrative issues (i.e., the transfer students) as the Gen Ed Task Force Report states, then what are they due to? Are we to infer from Ray Williams' comment that the driving force is instead a money/resources issue? If the Gen Ed Advisory Group/Task Force sees these proposed changes as an opportunity for the Science departments to experiment and develop new courses without labs, then I must remind the Gen Ed Council that from 2007-2009, and in the years following, many departments spent an exhaustive number of hours developing new courses that could fit into Themes that would broaden the course offerings through Gen Ed. The Geology Department, for example, created or reconfigured six different courses (serving >1000 students a year) in order to make them "Gen Ed friendly" and worked tirelessly to integrate these courses into themes across campus. We spent several years overhauling and revising our curriculum to fit the current Gen Ed model, and it appears that we will be asked to do so again if these changes are approved. We have not seen any data that shows that the current model of how we are teaching our Gen Ed Science courses is broken and/or needs to be fixed. Furthermore, Ray Williams' comment that Science Inquiry departments will not be forced to adopt a 7-hour model is shortsighted, since FTE targets will preferentially favor large lecture courses that do not require additional lab staffing. Departments that choose to keep the 8-hour sequence in the Gen Ed themes will be encouraged to adopt 7-hour sequences in the name of resource allocation, whether they wish to or not.

I am grateful to Jill Ehnenn for her comments that while it may be "abundantly clear" that the Science and Math faculty are not in support of the proposed changes, that the Gen Ed Advisory Group/Task Force could perhaps instead listen to the "experts" who actually teach the Science and Math courses within the Gen Ed curriculum before making their decision. Both the Science Inquiry FCC and the Math Department have stated that they are against the proposed changes, and individual members from each of the Science departments on campus have likewise expressed their dissatisfaction with the proposals (and created potential solutions). This sends a very clear message, and one that needs to be brought to the Gen Ed Council. If these proposed changes pass and are implemented, the faculty will certainly want to know why their resounding dissent was ignored.

Many faculty members who I spoke to during and after the forum felt that our comments, concerns, suggestions, and proposed solutions fell on deaf ears. Although this meeting was supposed to be a forum, where comments are accepted and filed for consideration, it appeared that the Advisory Group/Task Force members spent more time refuting or denying the concerns of faculty in attendance rather than listening to them. While I thank Paulette Marty for stating that she would relay our comments to the Gen Ed Council, many faculty feel history is going to repeat itself with Gen Ed implementation and that their input will once again be ignored. As an example of this, Paulette Marty stated at the Oct. 8th Faculty Senate meeting that she wished that the Senators would remind their departments that there were 2.5 years of open forums, meetings, and calls for suggestions even though many departments complain Gen Ed requirements were thrust upon them. My colleagues and I attended many of those forums and participated in many of those calls for suggestions, and we observed that Gen Ed was implemented in spite of the concerns raised by numerous faculty members as well as faculty organizations across the University. Many faculty left the forum the other day with the same sense of foreboding; that despite our concerted and vocal attempts to make it "abundantly clear" that we are not in favor of the proposed changes to the Science and Math minimum hour requirements, our comments and solutions would not sway the Council's vote. The comments made by the representatives of the Gen Ed Advisory Group/Task Force at the forum made it appear that the decision has already been made.

Likewise, many faculty members were disappointed and frustrated to know that the panel listening to our comments, suggestions, and proposed solutions at the forum was not the actual decision-making body (i.e., the Gen Ed Council), but was instead comprised of members of the Gen Ed Advisory Group/Task Force who were the main players in proposing these changes to Gen Ed in the first place and thus have a vested interest in seeing their revisions passed. Could we, instead, hold a forum where faculty members could directly address the Gen Ed Council?

I sincerely thank the Provost for her efforts to slow this process down and allow for the various bodies on campus (e.g., Faculty Senate, Council of Chairs, etc.) to thoroughly discuss the proposed changes and send their recommendations to the Gen Ed Council prior to any decisions being made. Should the votes from those various groups on campus be a resounding "no" for any/all of the proposed motions, then I would ask that the Gen Ed Council rethink their motions, consider the proposed solutions brought forth from various departments, and use the faculty input to shape the next round of Gen Ed reforms.

I thank you sincerely for your time in reading this.

Respectfully,  
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