

# **General Education Review Task Force Report**

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## General Education Review Task Force Report

### Introduction

Interim Provost Lorin Baumhover appointed the General Education Review Task Force (GERTF) in November 2010. The task force consisted of seven faculty from diverse academic units and perspectives regarding the General Education Program. The GERTF was charged: “to review implementation of the General Education Curriculum including policies, procedures, organizational structure, and personnel.” The GERTF was to “make recommendations to streamline implementation, identify barriers and inefficiencies with possible solutions, and suggest ways to improve coordination of effort between faculty and the General Education Program.” We were to suggest modifications that would improve function and implementation without altering the core philosophies of the new curriculum such as integration via the new perspectives and themes, writing across the curriculum and the vertical writing model, etc.

To address this charge, the GERTF met with numerous groups and constituencies involved in the implementation of the General Education Curriculum. Specifically, we met individually with the following groups:

1. **December 2, 2010 – General Education Office** (General Education Director Carter Hammett-McGarry; General Education Faculty Coordinator Paulette Marty; Assessment Coordinator Elaine Gray, and Interim Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education Michael Mayfield.)
2. **December 2, 2010 – Council of Chairs**
3. **February 14, 2011 – Faculty Senate**
4. **Last half of February 2011 – Several groups of advisors** from across the university including the Learning Assistance Program, the College of Business, General Advising and University College Academic Advising.
5. **February 28, 2011 – Writing Program Administrators**

During these meetings the various constituencies noted numerous concerns regarding the current implementation of the General Education Program. Of these, the most common were related to a lack of flexibility in the curriculum for students, course designations, concerns with faculty workload, academic integrity of First Year Seminar, transfer credits, integration, and complexity.

In addition to the above-noted meetings with those involved in the implementation of the General Education Curriculum, we also conducted an online survey of all faculty members. Considering the critical role of faculty in the implementation of the General Education Curriculum, we viewed the data gathered from this survey as our most important source of information. The faculty survey received a strong response with the participation of 307 faculty members. Another 14 faculty emailed the GERTF chair privately. The issues that they noted in their responses aligned closely with the information we received in our individual meetings, but also addressed a broader range of concerns. Most notably, their concerns addressed issues with course designations, course approval process, student flexibility, first year seminar, transfer credits, advising, accreditation, administrative issues, and faculty workload.

Based on the faculty survey and meetings with key constituencies involved in the implementation of the General Education Curriculum, the GERTF discovered that the majority of concerns could be categorized into six general areas:

- A. Student flexibility
- B. Advising complexity
- C. Transfer credits
- D. First Year Seminar
- E. Course approval process
- F. Administration

In order to address these concerns, we propose below five reforms that we believe will effectively address these primary concerns. These reforms include:

- I. Replacing the historical studies, literary studies, and fine arts designations with only two designations (humanities/fine arts and social/behavioral sciences) as specifically required by SACS
- II. Reforming the transfer credit approval process
- III. Eliminating First Year Seminar as a required course
- IV. Streamlining the General Education course approval process
- V. Relocating the administration of the General Education Program to the College of Arts and Sciences

## **I. Reducing the Number of Course Designations**

Numerous survey respondents and many of the individuals who met with the GERTF raised concerns with course designations. The concern with course designations is also directly related to several broader concerns including limited student flexibility, advising complexity, imbalance between course supply and demand, and political/administrative issues. Survey respondents were most likely to express concern about designations resulting in limited student choice in which it was perceived that student theme and course selection are determined in large part by whether a course carries a particular designation. Respondents were split on whether designations should be eliminated or added to more courses.

Currently, students are required to complete 6-9 hours of coursework in each of three perspectives (Aesthetic, Historical and Social, and Local to Global) with the additional requirement that one course carry a fine arts designation, another course carry a historical studies designation, and a third course carry a literary studies designation. Notably, some themes carry no designations whereas other themes carry from one to three designations (i.e., the “trifecta themes”). The availability of course designations appears to have created demand for courses where such demand did not previously exist. Some department chairpersons have found that offering a course with a particular designation and/or appearing in multiple themes has resulted in substantial demand for a course that cannot be met with current staffing. Consequently, students run into a bottleneck in these high-demand areas that then pressures departments to offer more seats in a course that might not otherwise be central to the department’s strategic plan.

Conversely, other departments have observed a sharp decline in enrollment in courses lacking designations. This has led to empty seats in previously well-enrolled courses.

These shifts in enrollment and student demand appear to be driven more by the presence or absence of course designations than by student choice. Moreover, in some colleges, departments have revised their major checksheets in a manner that substantially reduces (or even eliminates) students' choice of themes. It is unclear whether these modifications to the General Education Curriculum are the result of sound pedagogical decisions or the result of increasing the efficiency with which students can meet general education requirements. Regardless, such decisions have made course designations valuable commodities given that the allocation of financial resources to academic departments is driven largely by student credit hour production. With academic departments competing for limited resources, there is good reason to expect political conflict over the approval of course designations.

A final substantial area of concern surrounding course designations is whether the current guidelines for course designations are consistent with the SACS Principles of Accreditation. According to the SACS Principles of Accreditation (Section 2.7.3), the undergraduate degree program requires:

*“the successful completion of a general education component at the collegiate level that (1) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree, (2) ensures breadth of knowledge, and (3) is based on a coherent rationale. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent. These credit hours are to be drawn from and **include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts; social/behavioral sciences; and natural science/mathematics.** The courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession. The institution provides a written justification and rationale for course equivalency.”*

Whether the historical studies and fine arts designations consistently meet the SACS requirement that students complete hours in the humanities/fine arts and the social/behavioral sciences is unclear and raises the possibility that our General Education Program is out of compliance with SACS guidelines.

*Recommendations:*

In an effort to resolve many of the concerns described above, the GERTF recommends the following revisions to the General Education Curriculum.

1. Replace the historical studies, literary studies, and fine arts designations with those specifically required by SACS. Currently, the Quantitative Literacy and the Science Inquiry Perspective requirements guarantee that students meet the SACS requirement for completion of coursework in Natural Science and Mathematics. Creation of designations in Humanities/Fine Arts and Social/Behavioral sciences would help

ensure SACS compliance. Guidelines for course designations in these areas should be consistent with the SACS Principles of Accreditation while simultaneously being as inclusive of various disciplines as possible.

2. Approval of course designations should be the responsibility of the appropriate FCC.

These recommendations would increase the number and range of courses available to students to satisfy General Education requirements and should eliminate many of the existing bottlenecks that students encounter in the current curriculum. Furthermore, courses that are under-enrolled due to a lack of designations would likely see a recovery in enrollment if they were assigned one of the two new designations. This increase in efficiency will be especially desirable in the current budget environment. Finally, student advising would be simplified if most themes contain courses meeting both designations, as advisors (and students) would no longer need to hunt for discrete designations across the checklist to identify which courses and themes complete the General Education requirements.

## **II. Reforming the Transfer Credit Approval Process**

A variety of concerns relating to the transfer of credit hours from the community college system and from other four-year institutions were brought to the attention of the GERTF. These areas of concern fall into two broad categories: the reduction in the number of course choices available to students to satisfy the General Education requirements (relative to the previous Core Curriculum requirements), and the reduced flexibility for students in the new curriculum, especially regarding transfer of courses from other institutions.

In particular, the advisors discussed numerous case studies of transfer students who had completed many courses that would have satisfied the Core Curriculum requirements, but do not satisfy the new General Education requirements. There are many reasons that this might happen. For example, a given set of courses might be present in a particular perspective, but be spread across too many themes within that perspective. Alternatively, the set of courses might be disproportionately represented within one of the three perspectives, thereby failing to satisfy course requirements within each perspective. Some courses that would have been equivalent to Core Curriculum courses (and would satisfy general education requirements at other institutions within North Carolina) have no equivalent in the new General Education Curriculum. Potential transfer students are more likely to enroll in these orphaned courses when either they are undecided about which four-year institution they will attend (and therefore enroll in “standard” college level courses) or their community college advisors are not sufficiently familiar with our new General Education requirements.

There were many new courses created for the themes and perspectives, and many of these courses do not exist at any other institutions. However, there are courses offered at other institutions that may fit into one of our existing themes. Currently, students may request through the General Education Office that General Education credit be granted in these situations. There have been complaints, however, that the General Education Office is not very flexible when considering these requests.

For all of these reasons, when some transfer students come to Appalachian they find that to satisfy our General Education requirements, they must take many hours of introductory level courses. This adds time to their college career, forces some of them to take summer school classes, and increases their financial burden. Also, some of these students will be additionally penalized by the 50% tuition surcharge once they exceed 140 hours of college course credit.

*Recommendations:*

To help these students, we propose the following changes.

1. If a student is transferring to Appalachian from another accredited institution, and can provide documented evidence that they have satisfied the general education requirements at their previous institution, then that student will have satisfied Appalachian's General Education requirements as well. This would apply to students transferring from any accredited university, college, or community college within the United States. Already, General Education requirements are satisfied if a student has an Associate's degree from a community college within North Carolina. We recommend that if a student has an Associate's degree from any accredited institution within the United States, that this also satisfy Appalachian's General Education requirements.
2. If a student feels that a course should fit into an existing theme and would like General Education credit for that course, they must first bring this request to the General Education Office. If the General Education Office denies their request, the student can then appeal this decision to the college that houses the course for which they would like credit. (For example, if a student were seeking credit for a history course in a given theme, they would appeal the decision to the Dean's Office in the College of Arts and Sciences, as this is the college that houses the Department of History.) The decision made by the Program Director of Advising in the Dean's Office will be the final decision, and can override a decision made by the General Education Office.

We feel that the Deans' offices are an appropriate place to hear these appeals. First, the Deans' offices already handle a great deal of advising, and already have staff who make similar decisions about transfer credits. These staffers make informed decisions by working with the department chairs and faculty teaching these courses. Most importantly, however, it is the Deans' offices that perform the final senior checks on all students with majors within their college, and whether or not a student has satisfied his or her General Education requirements is already a part of the senior check. Thus, it is ultimately already their decision as to whether a student is granted a degree from their college.

### **III. Eliminating First Year Seminar as a Required Course**

Numerous survey respondents and several of the groups that met with the GERTF noted concerns with First Year Seminar (FYS). In general, their concerns focused on three issues. First, we heard numerous concerns regarding the large number of FYS courses being taught by

non-tenure track faculty and significant questions regarding the academic integrity of many FYS courses. A second and related concern regarded the substantial resources allocated to FYS in order to meet the demands of FYS as a required course (178 sections in the 2010/11 academic year). The third set of concerns were related to transfer students and their inability to substitute a previous university's FYS equivalent course and more notably significant dissatisfaction with FYS courses among older transfer students when assigned to FYS sections populated principally by 18-year-old freshmen.

*Recommendation:*

Considering the above concerns associated with FYS in addition to concerns noted with regard to student (curriculum) flexibility and transfer credits, we propose FYS should be offered as an elective within the General Education Curriculum rather than a required course. Specifically, if a student elected to take FYS, then this would reduce the required number of hours in the Local to Global, Historical and Social, and the Aesthetic perspectives to 6 hours each (currently, one perspective is required to be a 9-hour perspective). Students electing not to take FYS would still be required to complete 9 hours in one of the three perspectives. More generally, this would reduce the required number of credit hours in General Education from 44 to 41.

The proposal to make FYS an elective in General Education could directly and indirectly address several concerns with the current program. First, it would reduce the need to staff nearly 200 sections of FYS to meet this General Education requirement. Second, with the reduction in sections and demand for FYS courses, the dependence on non-tenure track faculty would be reduced and the academic integrity of FYS courses could be strengthened. Third, offering FYS as an elective rather than a required course would also provide students with 3 additional credits to meet their General Education and/or major requirements which would address broader concerns with the General Education Program related to student flexibility and transfer credits.

Recognizing the significant success of FYS regarding retention rates and promoting integrative thinking (a primary goal of the General Education Program), we believe it should continue to serve the majority of our students.

#### **IV. Streamlining the Course Approval Process for General Education**

There were many concerns raised by the survey respondents regarding the course approval process. The most common concern was that the General Education course approval process is driven more by *political* interests and the desire of individual departments to maintain or increase their FTEs, rather than the core needs of the General Education Program and the academic interests of Appalachian students. Respondents also noted that they felt a few faculty and/or departments dominated the course approval process. Concerns were raised that some courses were approved for themes to simply provide designation requirements rather than to strengthen or complement the themes. Respondents indicated concerns with non-tenure track faculty or faculty outside a specialized curriculum being allowed to decide whether a course should be approved as meeting theme/perspective/designation requirements. And finally, respondents suggested that the course approval process was too onerous and/or bureaucratic and noted

concerns with seemingly inconsistent requirements and changing deadlines or timelines for the approval process.

*Recommendations:*

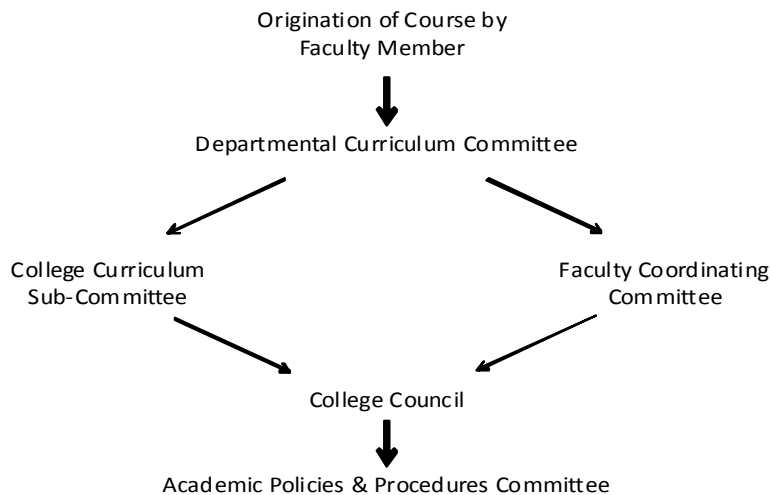
In part to address the above concerns regarding faculty governance and the approval process for proposed General Education courses, the GERTF recommends the following:

1. The approval process for proposed General Education courses should be streamlined to the system depicted in Figure 1, which is consistent with the current approval process of any proposed academic course at Appalachian.
2. As depicted in Figure 1, the appropriate Faculty Coordinating Committee (FCC) should review all proposed General Education courses concurrently with the respective college curriculum sub-committee. Should either committee reject the proposed General Education course, the proposal would not advance to the next approving committee (i.e., the respective college council).
3. Guidelines should be developed for the specific roles and responsibilities of FCC members and chairs. In addition to roles, responsibilities, and composition, these guidelines should include but not be limited to specifics of how proposed courses are integrated within themes, availability of seats in classes within themes, core needs of the General Education Program, and academic content of proposed courses.
4. The General Education Council should be transformed from a course-approving committee to an advisory council for the General Education Program.
5. The Director of the Honors College should be granted the authority to approve honors-designated courses for inclusion within General Education themes.

Figure 1.



## General Education Course Approval Process



### V. Relocating the Administration of the General Education Program

The addition of a new administrative structure to handle General Education has resulted in an unwieldy apparatus that has created confusion for students, faculty and advisors. The additional layer of administration is necessary to some degree, but in its present form, often seems to operate at cross-purposes with other student-oriented offices, while duplicating effort and yielding inconsistent results. The frustration this administrative structure causes leads to a negative impression of the General Education Program and causes faculty to limit their participation or choose to not become involved. To alleviate these conflicts and foster participation by presently disillusioned faculty, we suggest a reorganization and relocation of the General Education Program that will take advantage of existing resources and expertise for purposes of efficiency and faculty buy-in.

#### *Recommendations:*

1. Relocate General Education administration from University College to the College of Arts and Sciences for reasons of resource efficiency and structural integrity.

Close to 90 percent of General Education courses are offered by departments within the College of Arts and Sciences. Housing day-to-day oversight of General Education in that college would enhance the credibility of the program among faculty and encourage broader participation among them.

An anticipated budget cut of at least 16% will require additional administrative efficiencies:

- 1.1. The College of Arts and Sciences has considerable course scheduling experience

that would allow scheduling of courses within themes in such a way that would allow students to move through General Education themes and perspectives without increasing time to degree.

- 1.2. Duplication of assessment efforts is a serious workload issue, which is wasteful and demoralizing to faculty. Assessment experience at the departmental and programmatic level could be melded into General Education assessment.
  - 1.3. Discussions on a UNC Common Core are already underway at the system level. Any curricular adjustments that result will directly involve administrators in the College of Arts and Sciences.
2. Establish an administrator-level system of continuous General Education review with authority to address implementation problems immediately as they arise.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

We believe that if the recommendations in this document are adopted, the implementation of the General Education curriculum as it currently exists could be greatly improved. This was the charge of our task force.

Our charge was limited, however. There are many concerns about our General Education Curriculum that cannot be addressed without significant examination of the structure and philosophy behind it.

### *Integrative Learning*

Integrative learning is arguably the main goal of our General Education Curriculum. The goal of integrative learning led to the current structure of the curriculum, with its perspectives and themes. However, it is unclear whether the General Education Curriculum is achieving this goal, as assessment of integration has been limited and performed internally without significant peer review. Even if it is achieving this goal, it is unclear what the cost of this achievement is on student choice and important resources, such as faculty time and workload.

Survey respondents raised conflicting concerns. Some survey respondents noted that many themes had a limited number of choices with only 3 or 4 classes in a theme. This limitation makes it difficult to offer enough sections of those courses to meet student demand, and limits student choice. Other survey respondents noted, however, that in themes with more courses and sections it was difficult if not impossible to successfully integrate all sections of those courses in a meaningful way. In the larger themes, there may be 30-40 faculty teaching sections of the courses in a 3-4 year time period. Workgroups, online chat rooms, and meetings of the instructors in these larger themes can help course integration, but these solutions are time-consuming and resource-intensive.

Integration of courses in a theme can also be quite difficult if a student does not take all the

courses in a theme within a one- or two-year time frame. For example, many courses within a theme try to integrate by requiring their students to attend events out of class, such as guest lectures, exhibits, or films. These events are naturally time-sensitive and dependent. Also, instructors of the courses could change after a year or two, and different instructors often mean different topics and emphases.

Finally, if Appalachian wants to attract and retain transfer students, it is clear that significant leeway must be given in allowing outside courses to count in themes. However, this makes integration impossible.

### *The Vertical Writing Model*

The new vertical writing model, including its programs Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Discipline (WID), has created many logistical problems, some of which are listed below.

1. Most transfer students take standard freshman English courses similar to those in the old core curriculum, and these standard courses do not include a sophomore-level writing class.
2. The new WAC program has created numerous scheduling problems for the English Department.
3. Students taking sophomore-level courses that have a significant writing component have often only had one semester of college-level writing experience, and so their performance in the writing assignments in these courses has notably declined, according to some of the survey respondents.
4. Students with majors such as Nursing, Education or Pre-Professional Health, among others, have very few “elective hours” and little room for courses outside of their major. These majors grow more demanding as the student advances in the curriculum, and it is easier to fit general education courses, such as English, into the curriculum when the students are freshmen.
5. Many majors had existing courses that served as WID courses, or were made to serve as WID courses with only minor adaptation. Not all majors were this lucky, however, and resources had to be diverted to fill this new need, created by the new General Education Curriculum. The current budget crisis exacerbates this problem. The addition of WAC and WID consumes significant university resources.
6. It was originally suggested that enrollment for writing intensive courses be low and WID courses be capped at enrollments of 20-22. However, in larger majors, there are currently several examples of WID courses with significantly higher enrollments. Given the current budget crisis, it is also likely that pressure for English courses to have ever-higher enrollments will continue.

If the Vertical Writing Model truly produced better writers, then overcoming these obstacles would be a worthwhile endeavor. However, it is unclear whether the Vertical Writing Model achieves its goals. Assessment of student writing has been very limited and performed internally without significant peer review.

### *Final Recommendation*

In addition to the changes detailed in the main body of the document, we feel that a full review and assessment of the new General Education Curriculum should be conducted. This review should consider not only the implementation of the new curriculum, but also its core mission, goals, and structure.