The Ad Hoc Committee on General Education
Western Michigan University

Report to the Faculty Senate and University Community

February 15, 2016

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Bruce Ferrin, (co-chair) – faculty member, Department of Marketing
Dan Jacobson, (co-chair) – faculty member, School of Music

Elizabeth Blasko – undergraduate student, WSA senator
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Eli Collins-Brown – Director of the Office of Faculty Development
James Cousins, Interim Associate Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences
Jim Butterfield – faculty member, Department of Political Science
Linda Dove – advisor and faculty member, Family and Consumer Sciences
James Dunnigan – (past Graduate Research Assistant) – Department of Anthropology
Marcia Fetters – Interim Associate Dean of the College of Education and Human Development, and Director of Teacher Education
Leigh Ford – Director of the School of Communication
Luca Funk – undergraduate student, WSA senator
Deveta Gardner – Career and Student Employment
Harold Glasser – faculty member and Executive Director, Office for Sustainability
John Geiser – faculty member, Department of Biological Sciences, and Chair of COGE
Decker Hains, (past chair) – Chair of the Dept. of Military Science and Leadership
Duane Hampton – faculty member, Department of Geosciences
Sarah Hill, (past co-chair) – faculty member, Environmental and Sustainable Studies
Kevin Knutson – Director of Advising, College of Arts and Sciences
Molly Lynde-Recchia – Chair of the Department of World Languages and Literatures
David Paul – faculty specialist, Department of Philosophy, and also representing part-time instructor and graduate teaching assistant perspective
Staci Perryman-Clark – faculty member and Director of First Year Writing, Department of English
Deanne Puca – Office of University Relations
David Reinhold – Associate Provost for Assessment and Undergraduate Studies
Dianna Sachs – faculty member, University Libraries
Kevin Wanner – faculty member, Department of Comparative Religion
Carol Weideman – faculty member, Human Performance and Health Education
Brian Wilson – faculty member, Department of Comparative Religion
Toni Woolfork-Barnes – Director of First-Year Experience Programs

I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF THE COMMITTEE'S WORK

In Fall 2012, the Faculty Senate Executive Board initiated discussions in response to the 2010-2011 Higher Learning Commission's decennial accreditation finding that WMU did not adequately assess undergraduate learning outcomes in general education. In March of 2013, the full Senate empanelled the Ad Hoc Committee on General Education, with the following charges:

- Examine our current program in light of recent innovations in programs around the country in order to determine if changes should be recommended. The committee may want to consider findings from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and programs at similar institutions that have been described as innovative and effective.
- Examine the learning outcomes that should be addressed by the general education program. This includes an examination of our current outcomes and those of other innovative programs.
- Recommend ways in which to better integrate the general education learning outcomes across disciplines and curricula.
- Recommend ways in which to help students appreciate the goals of the general education program.
- Recommend a system by which the general education program can be assessed with the purpose of continual improvement.

The initial committee, composed of faculty, staff, and administrators, first met on April 29, 2013. Over the subsequent three years, the committee added membership from five out of seven colleges (minus Aviation and Health and Human Services), the Western Student Association, the Office for Sustainability, Student Affairs, University Relations, the Office of Faculty Development, and First-Year Experience. Representatives from academic units included board-appointed and part-time faculty, graduate students, advisors, and interim deans.

For three years, the committee

- Met biweekly;
- Researched best practices in general education;
- Consulted numerous experts and conferred with campuses that have already undertaken successful general education revisions;
- Brought to campus a national expert on curriculum reform, (Kent State's Trustees Professor of English, Paul Gaston), for a two-day residency that included three workshops, a university-wide plenary talk, and meetings with President Dunn and Provost Greene;
- Sent a four-member team to the 2014 *Association of American Colleges & Universities*' (AAC&U) General Education Institute in Vermont;
- Read texts (including *Revising General Education -- And Avoiding the Potholes: A Guide for Curricular Change*, by Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff) and numerous resources of the AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's promise [launched in 2005] to help American institutions of higher education retool for the 21st century;

- Hosted 11 university-wide "brown bag" discussions on learning outcomes, and two panel discussions on innovative teaching and the demographics of the student body;
- Collected data on how new student orientation introduces incoming students to General Education;
- Observed new student advising sessions;
- Surveyed Student Orientation Team members;
- Conducted a campus-wide survey of faculty, advisors and administrators;
- Gave seven presentations to critical stakeholders and decision-makers (including the President, the Provost, the Senior Leadership team, the Provost's Council, Student Affairs, Academic Forum, the Faculty Senate and some departments and colleges);
- Wrote a self-study detailing the history, challenges, and proposed solutions to WMU's general education model.

In 2013, the committee began by developing a four-phase plan of attack:

- Phase I: Establish a working definition of general education
- Phase II: Develop student-learning outcomes
- Phase III: Develop a structure to accomplish the student learning outcomes
- Phase IV: Develop a communication and marketing plan

In 2014, this plan was modified to reflect expert and peer counseling received at the June 2014 AAC&U General Education Institute:

- Phase 1: Gather input
- Phase 2: Develop a structure for a revised general education program
- Phase 3: Prepare for implementation of the revised program

Throughout 2014-2015, the committee solicited input though presentations, brown bag sessions and panel discussions. At the same time, it launched a self-study to better understand the weaknesses and strengths and basic character of the existing program.

In Fall 2015, the committee focused its attention on researching best practices and the effectiveness of innovative models at other institutions and expanded its deliberations to include viewpoints of more stakeholders. The resulting MOA and recommendations emerged from the input of faculty, instructors, students, alumni, administrators, employers, and outside experts.

II. FINDINGS

To meet the needs of our 21st century students the WMU general education program requires significant redesign and refocus. Several key issues emerged from our self-study:

A. The university community (students, alumni, faculty, instructors and administrators) finds our current program unsatisfactory (see Self-Study for details).
B. The current menu-driven structure encourages students to think of General Education as a random set of courses to “get out of the way”:

1. Students often express the view that the courses are meaningless requirements that could be better dispensed with elsewhere, at less cost.
2. Some students have stated that the most important consideration in choosing a distribution course is its scheduled time/day, rather than what the course offers.
3. Many students strive for the path of least resistance in their course selection (ease, rather than challenge; and assurances of good grades that take little work).

C. Our current program goals as articulated in our present General Education Policy are not widely known.
   1. Many faculty with whom we met could not, for example, articulate published learning outcomes for the distribution area of their courses.
   2. Many syllabi do not include published learning outcomes for a proficiency or area.
   3. Our conversations with students have led us to the conclusion that they do not know their General Education courses' learning outcomes and, more problematically, they are unaware of the purposes of general education and its relationship to their major area of study and to their future learning.

D. Cohesive interrelationships between General Education courses are lacking because neither the program structure nor, typically, the instructors teaching in it make explicit the point(s) of integration between courses.

E. Assessment of learning outcomes requires strengthening and consistent practice.

F. The separation of knowledge (Distribution Areas) from skills (Proficiencies) in our current structure is out-of-date and does not compare favorably to the integration model that is increasingly being adopted by colleges and universities across the country, as advocated by the AAC&U and articulated in the Liberal Education and America's Promise (L.E.A.P.) initiative.

G. Our program insufficiently develops students' intellectual curiosity or a 'quest' for understanding beyond the content of particular courses or the practical appeal of a major. Both students and instructors believe that this is a fundamental feature of a four-year degree. Indeed, many have expressed interest in "Big Questions" courses that expose students to the kinds of issues that require integrated, interdisciplinary and collaborative problem solving.

H. Our General Education program does not sufficiently integrate with the student's major through a capstone or similar requirement.

I. Institutional incentives for ongoing faculty and instructor development of general education courses are needed.

J. The name "General Education" lacks meaning for the members of the university community and should be changed to reflect the goals and outcomes of the reformed general education curriculum.

III. CONCLUSION

The purpose, policies, and academic goals of our current program are vague and unclear; therefore, its outcomes are unachievable.

The general education curriculum is the only element of a WMU education all of our undergraduates share. This general education curriculum is the central point of encounter with WMU for most of our students during the first two years of their education. This curriculum then defines our university in many ways and has the potential to distinguish our university from our peers. To achieve that distinction, a clear and meaningful purpose for this critical aspect of our baccalaureate education is required. The purpose should align with the university's mission, vision and Strategic Plan and should embrace best practices for student learning as current research and innovative general education models demonstrate. Through a "Learner-Centered" approach, WMU's revised general education curriculum should achieve for our students the essential student learning outcomes of a 21st century liberal education — outcomes that provide them with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives that will enable them to succeed, adapt, and continue learning throughout their lives.

IV. ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

The essential learning outcomes the Ad Hoc Committee recommend are fully aligned with AAC&U's L.E.A.P. initiative (Liberal Education and America's Promise). Universities in 12 states (Michigan, California, Texas, Massachusetts, Indiana, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, Virginia, Utah, Kentucky) have endorsed L.E.A.P, and are leading the way in the reform and modernization of general education curricula. Institutions such as Grand Valley State University and University of North Dakota – Grand Forks (a WMU peer institution) have already implemented innovative and successful 21st-century general education revisions based on these L.EA.P principles; Michigan State has adopted L.EA.P. outcomes and is in the midst of implementing them. The new general education curricula at these institutions focus on (1) developing meaningful curricular paths for students, (2) incorporating clear learning outcomes, and (3) employing valid assessment methods that allow students to demonstrate what they can do and what they know.

V. PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENT

The Ad Hoc Committee believes the following proposed *Statement from the Faculty to our Students*, appropriately disseminated, will help students appreciate the goals of the general education program. This responds to the fourth of the Ad Hoc Committee's five charges.

> *The hallmarks of an educated person are intellectual curiosity and adaptability. The WMU General Education program strives to awaken that curiosity while giving you the adaptive skills that will help you achieve your full potential. When you successfully complete our General Education program, you will have a knowledge base, critical thinking skills and the ability to communicate your ideas with clarity and precision both in writing and speaking. You will possess knowledge of the physical and natural world and human impact on it. You will be able to apply the scientific method of inquiry and to work with quantitative data and technology. You will possess a historical*

perspective and an appreciation of the diversity of human cultures and their varied expressions. You will be able to apply the knowledge and skills necessary to promote your own wellness, and to be a fully engaged and responsible citizen in a diverse and multi-lingual global society. If you have not yet chosen a major, our General Education program will help you explore the many possibilities we offer; if you have already made this decision, the program will help you reflect on your current aspirations and expand them. Our goal is not to complete your education, but to ensure that you will have the necessary information, skills, and perspectives to adapt to change in a self-directed learning process throughout your life, in whatever you choose to do.

Once we focus on these outcomes, a dedicated Design Team can devise and propose models that (1) can work here, (2) are practical and assessable, and (3) provide the general education component of a fully-integrated WMU university education of which we can all be proud.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ad Hoc General Education Committee recommends that the Faculty Senate officially recognize the need to revise and refocus WMU's current general education curriculum and initiate this revision with the following priorities:

In order to give the general education curriculum a clear and meaningful purpose that aligns with WMU's vision, mission and Strategic Plan, the Faculty Senate should

1. Endorse a learner-centered approach to general education that balances learning of essential skills and content while prioritizing student learning outcomes that prepare our students to succeed in an ever-changing 21st-century world.

2. Adopt the following university-wide set of essential learning outcomes that can be traced across the curriculum:

   WMU Essential Student Learning Outcomes

   Through learner-centered approaches, the WMU General Education program will enable students to:

   a. Expand their understanding of human cultures and the physical/natural world
      - Increase their foundational knowledge of the sciences, social sciences, humanities and the arts
      - Apply different methods of intellectual inquiry, investigation and discovery
      - Develop awareness of how everyday actions affect quality of life for all
   b. Enhance intellectual and practical skills
      - Demonstrate effective and appropriate oral, written and digital communication abilities

- Develop creative and critical thinking
- Demonstrate and apply information literacy
- Analyze and interpret quantitative data

c. Exercise personal and social responsibility
   - Practice sensitivity to diversity and inclusion
   - Develop global awareness
   - Gain familiarity with a language other than English
   - Exercise civic responsibility and become engaged in their communities at the local level and beyond
   - Develop practices for personal wellness and planetary sustainability

d. Exhibit integrative and applied learning
   - Apply ethical, critical, and informed thought within and across disciplines
   - Work both independently and in collaboration with others to achieve goals
   - Become lifelong learners

3. Adopt a curriculum structure that supports essential learning outcomes, and that simplifies and refines the menu-driven structure of the existing general education curriculum. The new structure should merge proficiencies with content knowledge by scaffolding intellectual and practical skills across disciplines and curricula:
   - Build foundations;
   - Integrate and apply them through additional content courses — some of which will address "big questions" and real-world problems;
   - Use these learning outcomes as a means to enhance and support students' successful work in their chosen major(s) and/or minor(s), culminating with a capstone;
   - Make appropriate connections with relevant programs such as the First-Year Experience, Broncos First, and the WMU Signature initiative.

4. Ensure the ongoing assessment of essential learning outcomes across the undergraduate curriculum for the benefit of our students, and to remedy concerns raised by the Higher Learning Commission.

5. Appoint a Design Team with a minimum of two charges: a) to create (an) alternative model(s) of a revised general education curriculum based on the recommendations outlined in this MOA; and b) to engage the university community in the naming of the new general education curriculum.