

GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE REPORT ON EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

In January 2005, the General Education Task Force was appointed by the Provost and charged with developing a signature general education program involving a small number of measurable objectives. The 22 member Task Force was encouraged to keep the campus informed and involved throughout the process. Meeting weekly for the past three semesters, the Task Force has accomplished a great deal. This report briefly summarizes this work and the context for the Educational Goals and Learning Outcomes document.

The Current Curriculum

The Task Force began its work by setting up a website so that the public could access information and reports easily (http://www1.appstate.edu/orgs/gen_ed/). Full Task Force reports summarized in this statement can be found on our website. In September 2005, the Task Force undertook focus group research on campus to understand the attitudes of faculty and students toward the current core curriculum (*Focus Group Research Preliminary Report*, 2005). Ten focus groups were conducted with 15 students, 18 non-tenure track faculty who teach in the core, and 45 tenure-track faculty from departments with fulltime faculty who teach undergraduates.

Students and non-tenure track faculty had the most difficulty conceptualizing the goals of general education. Students said they yearn for the culture of an intellectual community and that this is incompletely captured on our campus. Faculty universally felt the need for more emphasis on practical communication skills, such as writing and speaking, and critical thinking and problem solving abilities. Students and faculty had a strong interest in fostering more study of international issues and the global system, in interdisciplinary work, and in studying diversity in all its forms. There was considerable interest in service learning, internships, and civic engagement. A number of students and faculty saw a connection to place in the Appalachian Mountains as part of the Appalachian State University experience.

Frustration was evident among both students and faculty with the difficult-to-interpret core curriculum check sheet, the designator system, and the advising process in general education. In general, assessment was poorly understood, but many felt that general education should be monitored and evaluated regularly. The Task Force concluded that the current core curriculum is not providing the best foundation for our students and that there was openness to considering a new model of general education on campus.

Upon further examination, it became apparent that numerous problems exist in the current core curriculum. These can be grouped into four areas: the core curriculum, the instructional staffing of core courses, the administration of the core, and assessment (*Critique of the Core Curriculum*, 2006).

Current Core: Our current core curriculum, with minor alterations, is basically unchanged since the 1960s. Courses are largely introductions to disciplines and do not attempt to integrate knowledge. Although the core provides a large menu of courses, the majority of core credit hours come from one science course (biology), English, history, math, P.E., eight particular social science classes, and fifteen particular humanities and fine arts classes. Also, the large number of courses in the core, along with the extensive designator structure, has created a cumbersome system that is difficult for both students and advisors to understand. Moreover, courses reflecting emerging best practices in general education, such as interdisciplinary work, international study abroad, experiential and service learning, problem-based learning, seminar work for freshman, and the development of civic engagement and social responsibility, are missing from the core.

Staffing: Instructional staffing of the current core curriculum is also problematic. The majority (56%) of SCH in the core are taught by non-tenure track faculty members, mostly part-time faculty members. As we discovered in our focus group research, part-time faculty members tend to identify, even more than full-time faculty members, with their particular department, rather than with the mission of the university or, in particular, the goals of general education. Many of these part-time faculty members have contracts and working conditions that prevent them from participating fully in curriculum development and student advising and mentoring.

Administration: The administration of our current core curriculum is poorly coordinated with insufficient interaction between the Core Curriculum Committee and AP&P. Both the Core Curriculum Committee and AP&P are reactive rather than proactive in guiding the core curriculum. No one has the responsibility for general education curriculum development and providing vision for the core curriculum as a whole.

Assessment: There is little thoughtful coordination of the core curriculum and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment and Planning. Specific learning outcomes for the core have not been articulated. Most of our evidence in support of the current core curriculum goals (see page 59 of the Undergraduate Bulletin) is based on student self-report, an indirect measure with less validity than direct measures of learning. Lastly, assessment results are not regularly used to make improvements in the curriculum.

Information Gathering

Current Campus Resources: During 2005-2006, the Task Force gained familiarity with resources on campus, collecting information from a variety of units and programs contributing to the goals of general education including: academic advising; Freshman Seminar; learning communities; the Writing Center and writing-across-the-curriculum; student research; service learning; information literacy; technical and computer literacy; international programs; integrative and interdisciplinary studies in the Honors Program, Watauga College, Women's Studies, and Sustainable Development; Student

Development; the Core Curriculum Committee; and faculty development in the Hubbard Center.

External Consultations: In May 2005, five members of the Task Force attended a helpful week-long conference on general education sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Members of the Task Force also read a number of national publications on general education, including AAC&U's Greater Expectations and Strong Foundations, and hosted the President of AAC&U, Dr. Carol Geary Schneider, on campus for a workshop and public lecture in February 2006.

Campus Community Feedback: We have engaged the campus community in dialogue. Our continuing discussions are aimed at uncovering our shared educational principles: What knowledge, skills, methods, and perspectives are important marks of an educated person? Regardless of their major, what qualities do we want to cultivate in those who graduate from ASU? The Task Force has sponsored six public forums thus far attended by several hundred faculty members, staff, and students and six small discussion groups, of five to ten people each, holding "Conversations about General Education." We have also welcomed and received written comments and blog contributions from dozens of campus community members. In response to a call issued in November 2005, we received 24 statements from departments and programs on campus replying to a number of questions on general education (all available on our website). These departmental statements indicate a general support for most of the goals and learning outcomes articulated in the Task Force document that follows this report (*Summary of Departmental Statements*, 2006). Finally, we took an earlier version of the goals and learning outcomes to both the Dean's Council and the Council of Chairs in May 2006, asking for feedback. The current goals and learning outcomes statement represents the third public version and was unanimously approved by the Task Force on October 3, 2006.

External Constituency Feedback: Early on, the Task Force began to share information with community colleges and high schools in our region, as these institutions would most certainly be affected by our work. Information has also been collected from alumni and employers (all reports are available on our website). The Task Force tapped into data gathered from the Walker College of Business to gain insight into state employers of ASU students, as well as surveys from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NCAE) for employers on the national level. According to these data, the most important skills for employers in the state are: problem analysis skills, listening skills, oral communication, teamwork, persistence, leadership, decision-making skills, honesty and integrity, and reliability. Two highly ranked categories in which ASU students are judged average or below, are multi-cultural appreciation and decision-making skills.

National data indicate that employers rate verbal and written communication skills, honesty and integrity, and teamwork skills most highly. The NCAE also reports that communication skills are the very skills employers most often say candidates lack.

Task Force members also conducted focus groups with employers and alumni when they visited our campus. Employers in the focus group emphasized interpersonal skills and the ability to interact with people with ethnic, economic, and generational differences as well as good written communication skills and leadership experiences. The focus group with alumni indicated a good general education should develop speaking and writing skills and a global perspective in the students. They also felt the need for students to be exposed to a variety of disciplines (to help undecided students choose a major) and ideas that pertain to today's world, and that a rigorous introduction to college and academic life should be required.

Faculty/Alumni Survey: Finally, in the spring of 2006, we administered two surveys and received responses from 256 ASU faculty members and 484 alumni who had completed their general education at ASU (*Report on the General Education Faculty and Alumni Surveys*, 2006). There was a high degree of consistency between the two groups in the ordering of importance of 26 potential goals or outcomes of general education. The top three responses for both groups included written communication, critical thinking, and oral communication. Ethical behavior was also included in both groups' top five responses. Faculty also ranked highly the goals of problem-solving and research skills, information literacy, integrative thinking, understanding issues facing the world, and awareness and appreciation of the world's diversity. Faculty were more critical than alumni of the quality of an Appalachian education, perceiving greater performance gaps between the importance of goals and the extent to which education at Appalachian contributes to student learning in those areas. Furthermore, while the majority of alumni favorably assessed our general education, only 20% of the faculty agreed that general education courses at Appalachian are engaging.

State and National Contexts: General education reform has been a state and national concern for a number of years, both within universities and in the public arena. For the past decade, the transformation of general education has been the primary focus of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which has issued a number of influential reports (see especially *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College*, 2005). National advocates for reform in higher education have weighed in with books (Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 2005) and reports (Spellings Commission Report, *A National Dialogue: the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education*, 2006). The State of North Carolina has commissioned reports on higher education (Pappas Group Report to the NC General Assembly *Developing Regional Educational Networks*, 2006). On our own campus, general education reform was listed #3 in ASU's Top Ten Objectives written in response to University President Bowles's recent request for information on the major concerns/directions of UNC campuses. Clearly, the impetus to revise Appalachian State University's general education curriculum comes from all directions, and the Task Force has sought to remain faithful to the principles of general education reform throughout the country.

The Process

There are four phases involved in developing a revised general education curriculum: (1) establishing educational goals and learning outcomes, (2) designing a model for the general education curriculum, (3) creating an effective administrative structure for the process, (4) implementing the model by selecting courses that fulfill the new educational goals and learning outcomes and (5) implementing internal and external assessments of the program to facilitate improvement.

The Task Force has completed the first phase in developing a set of goals and outcomes (see attached). We hope to have a preliminary version of the model by December 2006. Minimally, this will include required courses or course clusters and student credit hour distribution requirements. As a means of encouraging innovative courses that might fit the developing model, the Provost has provided a \$40,000 initiative for Summer Faculty Grants for General Education Curriculum Development (guidelines, application form, and assessment information are on our website). The Task Force plans to bring the general education curriculum model and these course initiatives to AP&P in the spring of 2007. Approval will allow implementation to begin in 2007-08. The Task Force also plans to make recommendations regarding the administration of general education and assessment in its final report to the Provost.

Guiding Principles

The Task Force has a developing vision of general education that includes a number of guiding principles. The first of these is the need to focus on the development of students' capacity for skills, competencies, and an understanding of concepts that might be useful in many different situations. In other words, we value above all the ability to transfer learning to new situations. Of course, students will be gaining many forms of knowledge in the process, but our priority is the development of skills and fundamental competencies that will be useful as students become life-long learners.

The Task Force realizes that in order for general education to be most effective, these skills and competencies must be practiced by students many times over during their university career. Above all, they must be practiced throughout not only general education core courses, but also in the major. This means that all disciplines and faculty must be stakeholders in general education goals. This is one of the reasons the Task Force has tried to incorporate flexibility in the language of the educational goals and learning outcomes so as to be applicable across disciplines. One common means of creating a more vertical model of general education that goes beyond the first two years of college is through the major.

The Task Force has also attempted to be inclusive rather than exclusive in its work by reaching out beyond the classroom to other units on campus that are also significant in the development of students. There are many extra-curricular contexts in which students might practice our educational goals both on and beyond the campus. For the sake of

efficiency, every opportunity should be taken to use the university's resources to reinforce these goals. At the same time, of course, faculty will have the primary responsibility of ensuring the learning outcomes are achieved by guiding the curriculum and classroom activities.

Terms and Concepts

The Task Force has received considerable public comment indicating the need to clarify certain terms and concepts that shape our understanding of general education and a core curriculum. The following have provoked the most comment and misunderstanding.

Liberal Education

The term liberal education is used in the mission statement of the Educational Goals and Learning Outcomes to indicate something broader than the term liberal arts (as it is in the current core curriculum description on page 59 of the Undergraduate Bulletin). The term liberal arts (*ars liberalis*) was used in the medieval university to refer to the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). In modern usage, liberal arts education is often contrasted with vocational education, and the term has become strongly associated with the humanities. The term liberal education traces its history to John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University* (1852) in which it refers to education in which the mind "is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its highest culture" instead of "being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science." The term has been taken up in the 20th and 21st centuries by organizations such as the AAC&U to refer to "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement" (<http://www.aacu.org/issues/liberaleducation/index.cfm>).

The Co-Curriculum

The term co-curriculum has evolved in the last two decades to refer to learning experiences outside the traditional classroom. It is one aspect of a paradigm shift in general education that aims to cultivate connections between learning within and beyond the classroom and to encourage partnership between academic affairs and student development divisions within the university. With a focus on student learning, those involved in general education matters have come to recognize that students are involved in classroom-related activities for a relatively small number of hours per week. Concern only for these curricular activities ignores a large portion of students' time, much of which is shaped by other university-sponsored activities including student government, the student newspaper and radio station, the arts and lectures series, student clubs, and intramural sports. Appalachian first began to officially recognize student involvement in

co-curricular activities in 1991 by establishing the Student Record of Involvement and Honors as part of the student's transcript. By tying the co-curriculum to general education goals and learning outcomes, these activities provide additional opportunities for students to practice those life skills valued by the university and the faculty.

More specifically, the co-curriculum can include activities outside the traditional classroom that are given academic credit. Internships, service-learning classes, field schools, cooperative education, and experiential learning experiences such as the UNC in Washington program are examples of ways in which learning takes place beyond the university and often under the supervision of both faculty and non-faculty. In addition, international study abroad is recognized as a prime example of the significance of experience beyond the traditional classroom.

The Southern Appalachian Context

Reference is made to Southern Appalachia in both the mission statement and in Goal III, Making Local to Global Connections. In part, this is due to the fact that our university is located in and named after the Appalachian Mountains. Of course, it also reflects the university's mission to serve the region. More importantly, it makes clear the university's connection to "place" in the sense of understanding one's own history, identity, and cultural roots as well as having pride in that connection. Goal III does more than ask students to become aware of the world around them; it urges them to locate the self in that global context and, although it is not the only local place of importance to our mostly non-Appalachian-origin students, this region undoubtedly contributes in some way to that process. Moreover, our focus group research made it clear that our location in the Appalachian Mountains is an important part of our appeal to students and we should take advantage of this.

Sustainability

In Goal III, Learning Outcome B states that students will "evaluate community, natural, and global change through the lens of sustainability." Sustainability is a commonly accepted term in areas connected to global development and environmental fields. It refers to the nexus of ecological, economic, and social needs to be considered when seeking to ensure that prosperity in the present is not attained at the expense of future generations. The term is meant to encompass a broad approach to community, natural, and global change that is inclusive rather than exclusive and incorporates contributions from any program or discipline concerned with change.

Ethics and Social Responsibility

Goal IV, Understanding Responsibilities of Community Membership, recognizes a commitment to ethical judgment and social responsibility. Not only do we want students to learn skills and competencies; we also want them to develop independent critical judgment in their practice of these skills and competencies. The university has a commitment to educate students to become engaged and informed citizens capable of forming their own judgments about complex or controversial questions. The term moral reasoning is used in the academy to refer to this scholarly endeavor, a subject of academic rigor and not a matter of ungrounded personal opinion. Moreover, we believe that sustaining a society that is free, diverse, and democratic requires the cultivation of a strong sense of responsibility to self and others. This was confirmed in a recent joint initiative of AAC&U and the Council of Europe which stated that “Educating for personal and social responsibility is a core component of a 21st century liberal education.”

Assessment and Learning Outcomes

The new general education program will require assessment. This comes in response to SACS requirements as well as other accrediting bodies such as NCATE in teacher education and AACSB in the business college. Assessment is necessary for improving courses and programs because it is circular in design; once courses and programs are in place, evidence is gathered on the achievement of goals, and this informs decisions about and changes in the courses and programs. This contrasts with student evaluation, which promotes change in student behavior. Assessment can also be used for accountability purposes. Assessment is a process that initially includes the establishment of program goals, or the broad ideal objectives. While we might do many worthwhile things in our curriculum, we must select for our general education, a few crucial outcomes that we feel are essential for all of our students so they may thrive following graduation. The term “learning outcome” refers to a measurable piece of a goal that is specific, realistic, and attainable. These outcomes are not simply valuable on their own, but become indirect measurements of intangibles such as insight and understanding. Assessment tools include student and faculty self-reports, exams or tests that are course-based, course-embedded projects, and overall work products such as those produced in portfolios, capstone projects, or theses (see the Assessment Workshop Power Point on our website). The best assessment is faculty-driven and course-embedded with measures built into the curriculum rather than being added on later.

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