

## **FINAL REPORT**

**General Education Program Assessment: Results and Recommendations  
Submitted to the Associate Dean of Curriculum and to the Faculty**

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## **I. PURPOSE**

In the fall of 2009, Academic Standards (AS) was charged by Associate Dean of Curriculum Zahia Drici to initiate a review of the General Education Program (Gen Ed). Associate Dean Drici cited the following reasons for requesting the review of the Program: first, that the program had not been evaluated or assessed in any way since its implementation in 1997; second, that the Strategic Curricular Review Task Force<sup>1</sup> convened in 2006 strongly recommended that such a review take place based on their findings and third, a general sense the program is not working. In addition, at the 2010 Spring Faculty Conference, faculty reiterated the importance of assessing the Gen Ed Program.

The goals of the General Education Program Assessment were to:

- Take a snapshot of the Gen Ed Program category goals as they currently stand
- Gather feedback from the faculty around three broad areas of concern: values, structure and communication
- Explore different means of assessment to inform future curricular assessment methods

A full description of the assessment plan, including methodology and a bibliography of sources used to create a framework for our efforts is located in Appendices A and B. Notes, summaries, presentations and more information related to the Gen Ed Assessment are posted online at <http://www.iwu.edu/melloncenter/support/intra/General-Education.shtml>.

The goals of this report are as follows:

- Summarize information collected in each phase of the assessment (category workshops, student category surveys, faculty forums and student focus groups)
- Synthesize the data collected and present observations and recommendations regarding General Education Program Values & Goals, Structure, Specific General Education Categories and Improved Communication regarding the General Education Program
- Inform the next phase of assessment of the General Education Program
- Catalyze discussions at the Fall 2011 Faculty Conference

## **II. GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM VALUES & GOALS<sup>2</sup>**

### **A. OVERVIEW**

In the course of the program review, faculty affirmed that the values and goals stated in the *General Education Handbook* continue to resonate strongly fifteen years after their development. However, there were a few suggestions for strengthening the language of both the introductory paragraph and the overall goals of the program. The 2009-2011 Curriculum Council (CC) intends to present the recommended changes to these sections at the 2011 Fall Faculty Conference and discuss them at the September Faculty Meeting. AS aims to have a vote to approve the revisions take place at the October Faculty Meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Curricular Review Task Force: General Education Report (Summer 2008), [http://www.iwu.edu/provost/facgov/curricular/General\\_Education\\_Final.pdf](http://www.iwu.edu/provost/facgov/curricular/General_Education_Final.pdf) (proxy needed for off-campus access.)

<sup>2</sup> General Education Values and Goals are posted online at <http://www.iwu.edu/melloncenter/geneduc/goals.shtml>

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

We recommend the following changes to the *General Education Handbook*:

- Incorporate *intellectual integrity, historical awareness and an enthusiastic spirit of inquiry* in the introductory paragraph on page 1
- Delete *sensitivity to others* from the introductory paragraph on page 1
- Delete the first bulleted list item as it simply re-states the values listed in the introductory paragraph to connect them with active learning; in addition, active learning is mentioned in the introductory paragraph. (“To develop students’ capacities for critical thinking, intellectual independence, and imagination by creating opportunities for active learning”)
- Change the third bulleted list item from “methods of reasoning *in* problem solving” to “methods of reasoning *and* problem solving.”
- Include *creativity across the disciplines* as a bullet list item
- Delete the final bullet from the list as it is broader than just General Education (“To bring the world to campus and students to the world through varied combinations of co-curricular programming, travel and service to the community”)
- Streamline the bulleted list of the goals on page 1

These changes, including changes to the introductory paragraph, are presented in Appendix C.

In addition, **we also recommend that the *General Education Handbook* include a statement regarding the procedure for amending the Handbook.** Our proposed language is presented in the form of a Preamble to the *General Education Handbook* in Appendix D. It is our intent that the proposed language in Appendix D also be discussed at the September 2011 Faculty meeting and voted upon at the October Faculty meeting.

## **III. STRUCTURE & DELIVERY OF GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

### **A. OVERVIEW**

It is clear from our observations of discussions during individual category workshops and from student survey feedback that *each category* offers a unique and recognizable value to liberal arts education at IWU. At the faculty forum that focused on values and goals, several faculty agreed that simplifying our program through either the reduction of the total number of requirements and/or categories or to move to an either/or model of selecting courses (i.e., take a course in Category A or Category B) would undermine the values and the breadth of the Program.

However, the introductory paragraph of the *General Education Handbook* states the program (as a whole) is “continuously evolving.” We know from faculty forum discussions and from the student focus group discussions that there is dissatisfaction on the part of both faculty and students around how the program is delivered. Therefore, AS recommends that the Associate Dean of Curriculum, in collaboration and cooperation with CC and the Faculty, seek out ways to insure that our actions in delivering the program reflect the idea that we “continuously evolve” to improve the teaching and learning experience for faculty and students.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS

We suggest, based on faculty and student feedback from workshops, forum and surveys, the following to guide future discussions and decisions:

- **Build in flexibility and opportunity to introduce different delivery options to the Gen Ed Program.** We recognize that to do so without creating a) an over-abundance of requirements and b) additional resource constraints while adhering to our shared values around General Education will be a challenge.
- **Support faculty who want to offer Gen Ed courses as thematic clusters between categories,** e.g., a focus on different perspectives on a broad topic from the perspective of 2-3 faculty in different departments/divisions.
- **Expand into areas that become important to faculty, students and campus.** Students who participated in focus groups expressed interest in learning more about technology for careers, financial literacy, environmental sustainability and more community involvement. An area that has been increasingly important is information literacy – how will we effectively integrate this into the Gen Ed program?
- **Examine each category to identify artificial boundaries between categories and possible overlaps between goals within categories.** For example, in the Science Lab and Science Issues category workshops, the faculty who attended noted that issues in the sciences are also discussed in Lab courses. Another observation from the Lab and Issues workshop was that there is possible overlap between the goals of Issues and Analysis of Values courses.
- **Address the *lack of course choices within certain categories*.** This was a major student concern communicated at the third faculty forum by student focus group leaders, who reported limited availability of classes within specific categories, e.g., Physical Science Issues and Life Science Lab. One specific area of concern in terms of structure and curricular sustainability is the imbalance of course offerings within the natural science rubric<sup>3</sup>. Associate Dean of Curriculum Drici will be working with faculty who teach in the Natural Science category to begin discussions on how to resolve this issue.
- **Address how to better support faculty who teach Gen Ed courses.** One common thread in the student focus groups held in the fall of 2010 was an unfavorable view of the amount of classes taught by faculty they feel are unprepared to teach or uninterested in Gen Ed. Half of the focus groups felt that majors and non-majors are treated differently in Gen Ed classes and that some faculty (adjuncts, tenured and untenured) do not take Gen Ed courses seriously.

It is worthwhile to note here that in several category workshops faculty suggested that fewer students, more time, and an experiential component would greatly enhance how students develop overall comprehension of the goals of that category.

Lastly, **AS recommends that the question of whether or not our curriculum should reflect the mission of the university be resolved as it could have implications for how faculty shape and deliver the curriculum.** It is our belief that the curriculum and the mission should be

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<sup>3</sup> 2009-2010: PSI (2), LSL (6), PSL (21), LSI (34)  
2010-2011, PSI (3), LSL (5), PSL (21), LSL (31)

closely aligned, and that the evolution of one can help strengthen the other. We strongly encourage that this debate be taken up and settled once and for all.

#### **IV. SPECIFIC CATEGORIES**

##### **A. OVERVIEW**

From the information gathered<sup>4</sup> over the past two years, AS feels confident in stating that overall, our Gen Ed courses do contribute to students' learning in relation to the goals of the categories as they are written, either by strengthening students' prior understanding or helping students to develop new understandings of the category learning goals.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a majority of the students are aware that the learning goals are goals of the specific category.

At all workshops, faculty articulated the goals of the Gen Ed category in their own words and decided that generally the goals and learning outcomes in their courses do align with those listed in the *General Education Handbook*. In addition, in describing students' work in achieving category goals by the end of the semester, faculty in 12 categories reported that students are approaching where we want them to be, are where we want them to be or are beyond where we want them to be. In PE the students were not where faculty wanted them to be and in two categories, AV and W, faculty could not categorize the progress of the students. Furthermore, on student surveys, the average responses for most goals in all of the categories are above a 3 on a 4-point scale except FR and LA.

Writing Intensive courses were an exception to the general sense that the current goals align with faculty expectations. Faculty recognized that the goals as currently written are too general and do not address goals specific to writing. However, data from the student surveys show that the current goals rate quite highly from the student perspective – all goals received average scores of over 3 on a 4-point scale. While PE did receive very high scores on the PEX survey on two of their goals (Goal 1 and Goal 2b)<sup>6</sup>, feedback from the faculty workshop, student surveys and from student focus groups indicates that PE requires extensive work.<sup>7</sup> A number of the categories could use small to significant revisions (CSI, FR, IT, LA, LIT).<sup>8</sup>

##### **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Looking forward, AS recommends the following:

- **Revise the categories listed above (W, PE, CSI, FR, IT, LA, LIT):** We propose that

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<sup>4</sup> For workshop summaries and student survey data summaries, please see Appendix F; sorted category averages and awareness averages, please see Appendix G.

<sup>5</sup> One note of interest is that the courses from the two categories we reviewed over May Term 2010 (CHC and AR) scored higher on student surveys and in awareness than the same categories in Spring 2010. We hesitate to draw conclusions based on this limited data, however; further analysis seems indicated.

<sup>6</sup> PEX Goal 1: "Did this course help you develop a kinesthetic awareness? (average=3.868421); PEX Goal 2b = "Did this course help you understand personal fitness – the principles of warm-up and stretching? (average=3.666667)

<sup>7</sup> The PE faculty have started discussions on rewriting their goals to better align with expectations, so we do not include it as a specific recommendation in this report.

<sup>8</sup> For specific changes in categories, please refer to the workshop summaries at <http://www.iwu.edu/melloncenter/support/intra/General-Education.shtml>

discussion/revisions sessions be coordinated by CC and AS and supported by Associate Dean of Curriculum Drici so faculty have dedicated time to discuss and propose revisions to present to the faculty by December 2011 in the categories identified above.

- **Identify and raise the profile of experiential learning in the curriculum, especially in specific categories:** From student survey data and from student-led focus groups, it is clear that students value any opportunity to gain hands-on knowledge and experience. While we are not recommending integrating a curricular requirement for experiential learning into the Gen Ed curriculum, AS recommends that we look for ways to include more opportunities for experiential learning components in Gen Ed, and that we better inform students when a specific course within a category will require or provide the opportunity for experiential learning.
- **Arts:** When we reviewed the student survey data from AR, we noticed there were many comments from students that their course in the category was more based in history or theory rather than in practice. We recommend that faculty who teach in the AR category discuss how to best communicate to students how a non-studio class meets the goals of the AR category, or, discuss if the category should only include hands-on courses.
- **Collaborate with the Writing Program and the Ames Library faculty to establish how best to integrate information literacy into the Gen Ed Program:** Data from the GW student survey, assessment from the Writing Program and from the ERIAL Project<sup>9</sup> all point to students needing assistance with how to navigate, search, evaluate and integrate library resources and effective research strategies into their academic work. AS recommends that CC, the Writing Program and the Ames Library faculty bring forward a recommendation in fall 2011 for how to best integrate Information Literacy into the Gen Ed Program.

### C. GATEWAY

Through the Gen Ed review, we continue to see issues with GW. In the student-led focus groups, the wide range of quality in GW experiences was criticized, especially with the inconsistency among GW sections in terms of the writing workload. The students did express a desire for some kind of common experience for First Years, especially ones perceived to adequately prepare them for college level work. However, students responded to the GW survey quite positively – goals had an average rating of 3.06 – 3.20 on a 4-point scale. AS also asked students if the course helped them to “read a text critically” and “learn strategies for effective library research,” which had an average rating of 3.09 and 3.11, respectively. AS surmises, then, that the *content* of Gateway is helping students reach or exceed the goals of the category, but that infrastructural issues persist. For example, students from the focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with how students are assigned to GW courses. AS speculates that the way we inform students about their GW options and how their choices will be taken into account may be misleading. **We strongly encourage that these issues, well documented in other past reports<sup>10</sup>, be resolved. We also recommend that the wording in regards to how students are assigned to GW courses be clarified so students understand *all the variables* that go into placing them in GW sections.**

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<sup>9</sup> Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries, <http://www.erialproject.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Reports about Gateway are online at <http://www.iwu.edu/instres/assessment/writing.shtml>. The Strategic Curricular Review Task Force Report on Gen Ed is also online at [http://www.iwu.edu/provost/facgov/curricular/General\\_Education\\_Final.pdf](http://www.iwu.edu/provost/facgov/curricular/General_Education_Final.pdf).

## **V. IMPROVED COMMUNICATION REGARDING THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

### **A. STUDENTS**

Students who participated in the focus groups held in the fall of 2010 do know Gen Ed is at the heart of the IWU liberal arts experience. They did seem to understand and see the value of Gen Ed, and students completing the category surveys reported a high level of awareness of the category goals<sup>11</sup>. The issue seems to be the execution of the program in addition to some of the misunderstandings, misperceptions and unfulfilled expectations.

Students perceive courses with a Gen Ed category designation as easy courses outside of their major or minor with light workload. Further, some students stated that Gen Ed courses should focus on career preparation. Further, Writing Intensive courses mean there is “more” writing and the course is “more difficult.” Students also expressed the concern that taking multiple courses with same category/flag is a waste of time and believed that if they didn’t have to take Gen Ed courses they could graduate faster or experience more topics that interest them.

It is apparent that we are not communicating the purpose of Gen Ed clearly as it relates to the liberal arts, major requirements and students’ future careers. Our recommendations to help mitigate these misperceptions, strengthen students’ understanding of the program and its value, and help students take more ownership of their individual general education programs are as follows:

- **Involve students in writing parts of the *General Education Handbook* with faculty supervision.** The *Handbook* itself was written for faculty proposing courses, not for students who are new to the program. The students are using the *Handbook* for very different purpose - to seek out courses to fulfill their Gen Ed requirements. AS is confident that students could contribute to the *Handbook* if given specific parameters and with faculty supervision. Alternatively, we could create and distribute a separate handbook for students written for and by them with faculty input.
- **Give students an opportunity to reflect on their Gen Ed experience and explain how they accomplished or went beyond the goals of the program or conversely, what they were missing from the experience.** This could be integrated into specific courses and/or categories, or be part of a portfolio requirement, or CC could perform “Gen Ed exit interviews” with students every few years to help us with ongoing assessment of the program.
- **Recommend students spread out their individual Gen Ed program more evenly across the four years** – this would allow them to take major/minor courses as well as

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<sup>11</sup> Student responses to the question of whether they were aware that this was a goal of the Gen Ed category mirrored, for the most part, their answers to the question of how well the course contributed to their learning in relation to the goal. In other words, the higher the average score for the latter question, the more aware students tended to be that this was indeed a goal for the Gen Ed category. Their answers to the awareness question, however, were never as high and were definitely more varied, ranging from 43% to 87%.

Gen Ed courses, and perhaps help students to see that Gen Ed is core to the entire educational experience, not just the first two years.

## B. FACULTY & STAFF

Our recommendations specific to faculty and staff are as follows:

- **Collectively acknowledge that advising comes from several different groups** – staff, upper-class students, even families are part of the advising equation for students, especially First Year students. Extending the invitation to be involved in discussions of how to improve communication and advising practices will strengthen the program and help all parties become more informed.
- **Develop a series of discussions for faculty (tenured, tenure-track, visiting and adjunct) and staff to learn more about the program**, exchange strategies for effective communication to students about Gen Ed, help faculty/staff who advise learn more about categories and the program as a whole.
- **Improve First Year Advisors' knowledge of and discussion about the Gen Ed Program.** Students from the student-led focus groups noted that First Year advisors' knowledge of the system is an issue, as is some of their seeming lack of interest in guiding students without prejudice for the faculty member's own discipline.
- **Include information and discussion regarding the importance of the Gen Ed Program in job interviews and first-year faculty development**, especially if the faculty member is teaching a Gen Ed course.
- **Encourage faculty who teach in each category to meet at least once or twice a year and discuss the category**, if the goals still apply, if there are common issues or patterns, if the number of courses are adequate for demand, provide support for those new to teaching in the category, etc.
- **Include Gen Ed goals in all syllabi for Gen Ed courses, and discuss the connection in class between course goals and Gen Ed goals throughout the semester**, perhaps even drawing connections between specific assignments and Gen Ed goals.
- **Discuss changing the name of the program:** Perhaps renaming the program using the term "Liberal Arts" would help to express our collective philosophy about the Gen Ed program.<sup>12</sup>

## C. CAMPUS

To make the conversation about Gen Ed a more central part of the community faculty made the following suggestions:

- Sponsor a Liberal Arts Festival in the spring
- Create a series of short videos or commercials about Gen Ed featuring students and faculty about specific categories, groups of categories, or about the program as a whole for Titan TV or for the IWU website via a student video competition
- Hold Gen Ed sessions for first year students several weeks before registration for the spring and/or following fall semester
- Showcase titles online of outstanding papers that were complete in a Gen Ed courses, or create a new online journal specific to Gen Ed that would feature both student writing

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<sup>12</sup> We would caution the faculty to beware the temptation to re-name the program something along the lines of "Liberal Arts Core" or "Liberal Arts Foundation," as the resulting acronyms may detract from the well-intentioned change.

from Gen Ed courses and faculty writing about teaching, assessing and advising for Gen Ed courses and/or programs

## **VI. ONE FINAL RECOMMENDATION: SUSTAINABLE ASSESSMENT**

AS expended a significant amount of energy and time on the planning, execution, analysis and recommendations for the assessment of the Gen Ed Program. We all felt the work was necessary and that the information gained will contribute to improvements in the various areas we outlined above. However, we also felt that assessing fifteen distinct categories over essentially 15 months time (Category workshops/surveys/focus groups January – May 2010, September – December 2010, January – April 2011; report creation May – July 2011) is not a sustainable model for future Gen Ed assessment efforts. **We urge the incoming CC to create a sustainable and iterative model and timeline for future Gen Ed Program assessment efforts.**

## **VII. NEXT STEPS**

At the Fall Faculty Conference in August 2011, AS plans to provide an overview of the recommendations outlined in this report and will also report on any progress made towards those recommendations. The incoming CC, in collaboration and cooperation with Associate Dean of Curriculum Zahia Drici and incoming Provost and Dean of Faculty Jonathan Green, will ensure that our recommendations are prioritized, discussed with the faculty, and when possible, enacted.

## **VIII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

- All participants of category workshops, faculty forums, student surveys, and student focus groups
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- Patti Henderson, Senior Administrative Assistant, Office of the Provost
- Trisha Lee, Senior Office Coordinator for the Associate Dean of Curriculum
- Heather Lindqvist, Lecturer in Anthropology, Bates College
- Michael Thompson, Assistant Provost and Director of Institutional Research and Planning
- Frank Boyd, Interim Provost and Dean of the Faculty
- Carolyn Nadeau, Chair of Curriculum Council, 2009-2011
- Jean Kerr, Chair of Curriculum Council, 2011-2012
- Scott Sheridan, member of Academic Standards, 2010-2011
- Joerg Tiede, Chair of CUPP, 2009-2011
- Sodexho

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