

Notes from the Faculty Forum on General Education Reform – September 24, 2008

(Many thanks to Evelyn Stiller and Rebecca Noel for taking notes!)

Kate Donahue (representing the Social Science Department): In the process of revising majors - need to make them timely, give students choice and electives, allow them to fully participate. Gen Ed requires too many credits. Anecdotal evidence is that number of minors is down. Goal – to straighten the path. Possible solution: reduce the number of Directions to four (one per Direction). That would reduce our credits from 54 GenEd credits to 41.

Wendy Palmquist: Current Gen Ed is barely over the minimum number of credits required by NEASC?

Cathie LeBlanc: not quite fair to include Connections since they may be double-counted.

Cynthia Vascak: Are there different credits required by NEASC for different types of degrees (BA, BFA, BS)?

Gary McCool: Bob Fitzpatrick sent an email Nov. 8, 2007 – GenEd accreditation by NEASC (Section 4.17) requires at least 40 credits in Gen Ed with breadth and balance.

Liz Ahl: Perception issue: difference between students and teachers viewpoint regarding number of credits. External reviewer viewed Connections as part of the major and considered the major (too) large. Connections are interesting from a double-counting standpoint.

Dennis Machnik: In Sciences, don't have enough faculty to offer enough Gen Ed. Lack of double-counting Directions courses a problem. Lack of mix of majors and non-majors in intro classes. Would propose dropping non-double-counting provision.

Paul Fedorchak: seconds Dennis' comments. Comments on prohibiting Gen Ed from counting in major.

Barbara Boschmans: Where can we find a statement of philosophy of new Gen Ed?

Robert Miller: Philosophy online under Undergraduate Studies page. Also read goals of the new program. Includes a thorough analysis of old program – that led to new one. Trouble for majors should only happen at Connections level. If reduce number of Directions courses, wouldn't affect majors.

Len Reitsma: Notes inconsistency. Undergraduate Studies does a great job with transfer credits. Works less well for our own students. Students can't be waived from Directions when they change majors.

Wendy Palmquist: Philosophical perspective of Directions to move away from discipline specific content. National direction of GenED

Liz Ahl: Enjoyed shift away from disciplines' hold on elements of Gen Ed.

Dennis Machnik: Would be nice if students had option of using intro courses. Wouldn't require other [Directions] courses to go away.

Cynthia Vascak: Admires conceptual framework. Implementation sometimes points out weaknesses. How can we maintain the integrity of the system and solve the problems?

Julie Bernier: A stunningly good program. Other administrators admire it. Does what it set out to do. We could tweak while maintaining ideals. Problem with old program was only a problem if a major prescribed Gen Ed. Same is true now with intro courses. Departments should not prescribe Gen Ed. Other issue – intro to major as Gen Ed shouldn't pass as a GenEd.

Kathleen Arcchi: Co-chair of GenEd Task Force. Here 30 years – seen 3 GenEds. Old program was cast in granite. No modification in 15 years until it was impossible to make small changes. A Gen Ed program needs to be vibrant. We should adjust program as needed. Should be reviewed.

Sheryl Shirley: problem with program's sustainability. Excessive size of the program. Gen Ed's perennial problem – always understaffed. Don't have enough faculty. Should be a heads-up that something needs to be fixed. Also, more difficult to minor (drop in Women's Studies and Social Science discipline minors).

Dennis Machnik: Takes a different view point. Should review program with an open mind. Science faculty are not happy with the program. Passed by a slim margin. Isn't serving its purpose.

Linda Levy: Directions courses outside the usual intro courses; PE faculty want to teach Gen Ed – leaving adjuncts teaching the major courses. Stretched hard to find adjuncts. Students get a lot of adjuncts; parents aren't happy with that. Hard to staff FYS. How can we solve the problems shared by all departments?

Bob Egbert: asked his Constitutional law class (juniors and seniors) to explain the Gen Ed program. No students could. Said Gen Ed program is incomprehensible. Get four different answers (advisor, department chair, Advising Office, Undergraduate Studies) to the same GenEd question. Suggestions: more double-counting, simpler, clearer. How much does it cost us for overloads, how many adjuncts, how much faculty support? (rhetorical questions)

Wendy Palmquist: Curriculum Committee has always heard there's not enough time for GenEd because need time for majors. Accreditation says majors are bloated. Perpetual discussion – casting GenEd as enemy of majors.

Mark Turski: If majors prescribe GenEd courses for their majors, courses morph away from GenEd. Look at the feedback process. 98% of his students are Gen Ed. Believes double-counting has merit.

Barbara Lopez-Mayhew: language skills are not included in Gen Ed. 25% of students (BAs) take language. 75% can avoid a language. Questionable in light of internationalization.

Robert Miller: not included because faculty voted not to include (though lobbying intense).

Pat Cantor: On original task force. Assessments showed not all beliefs borne out. Thoughtful critique must be evaluated. If we want a dynamic program, we need a sound feedback mechanism.

David Zehr: Time to degree very important. Student requests are most often relating to major courses – and advising errors – not trouble meeting Gen Ed requirements.

Khuan Chong: Has been at Plymouth long enough to see 3 ½ GenEd programs – as well as none at all. Thanks to a multiplicity of disciplines, Social Science Department sees all the problems. All agree that there needs to be GenEd – but agree that there needs to be reform.

Liz Ahl: are we asking the right questions concerning assessment?

Evelyn Stiller and David Zehr: Every course assesses, but broader assessment of program is very difficult. CLA test of critical thinking. Pilot with 100 students/semester.

John Kulig: No systematic feedback? Only student feedback? Any questions covering Gen Ed systems?

Julie Bernier: Students don't see the value in GenEd. until 15 years after graduation. Student satisfaction survey. Feedback used in developing the GenEd program. NSSE, Foundations of Excellence, FYS, questions about higher-order learning vs memorization – not very good. We've measured for 4 years. Those measures are improving.

Art Fried: FYS classes are too large to call them seminars. He has two sections with 27 in each. So many students is a problem.

Kathleen Arecchi: Task Force looked at planning issues during transition to new program. Always a huge challenge to make changes. Now we need to improve the interface between GenEd and majors. And ask how we've done.

Len Reitsma: Much effort going into content delivery. Their department is going to increase class size through course redesign. This may help with implementation issues that Sheryl brought up. Have to be practical.

Marcia Blaine: Conversation may be continued on the blog found at the faculty website.