

On General Education Requirements at Western Washington University

Adopted by the Committee on Undergraduate Education, May 23, 2013

Background

In May 2001, the Academic Coordinating Committee (ACC) of the Faculty Senate recommended the formation of a special task force to address the General University Requirements (GURs) - what the Quality Undergraduate Experience (QUE) committee had earlier (in 2000) deemed a “flawed” structure (Appendix A). The General Education Task Force formed in fall 2001. The Task Force, under the leadership of Dr. Susan Mancuso, released a draft of the purposes of general education and two proposed models of general education programs to the campus community in 2002, and on April 9, 2003 presented its final report to ACC (Appendix B). In April 2004, ACC accepted some of the Task Force recommendations, including reducing the total number of courses/credits required, the creation of First-Year Experience courses, and the addition of eleven learning competencies (outcomes). The new GUR program went into effect in fall 2005. While this revision initiative did succeed in trimming the overall general education credit load and introducing the role of learning outcomes, it had limited impact on clarifying the connection between the GURs and a liberal arts and sciences education or on creating more coherence across the GURs.

In 2009, partially as a result of an Accreditation report that urged a tighter committee structure, three groups (the Committee on General Education Requirements, the Committee on the Assessment of Teaching and Learning, and the Writing Assessment Group) merged to form the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE). For the past two years, CUE has 1) engaged in an assessment and review of general education at WWU and 2) studied national improvements and revisions to general education programs nationwide in an effort to provide a rich, engaging, and life-changing experience of the liberal arts and sciences in our core GUR courses. As we state in our academic catalog:

Western believes that liberal education enables people to lead fuller and more interesting lives, to perceive and to understand more of the world around and within themselves, and to participate more intelligently, sensitively, and deliberately in shaping that world. This belief reflects a long tradition in American higher education. In this tradition, the bachelor's degree includes specialized study, the major, together with study over a range of human inquiry, expression and accomplishment. Broadly, the liberal education component of a bachelor's degree deals with issues of truth and falsity, with expressions of what is possible for humans to do and be, with things that bear on choices that we make about what in life we consider important. This broader study helps people gain perspective on who they are and what they do in the world.

Issues

Unfortunately, our assessment data demonstrate that students' experiences of our liberal arts and sciences core requirements do not live up to these aspirations. Specifically, Western's Office of Survey Research (OSR) data demonstrate that, while 85% of Western students are “Satisfied to Very Satisfied” with the quality of instruction in their majors, they are much less satisfied with their GURs and they are becoming increasingly less satisfied. For example, in 2010, 58% of students reported that they were “Satisfied to Very Satisfied” with the quality of instruction in their GURs; by 2012, that number had dropped to 55%. Similarly, in 2010, 62% of surveyed students reported that their GUR courses had

broadened their perspective of the world; by 2012 that number dropped to 59%. Finally, by 2012, the number of surveyed students who found that their GURs had provided them with “useful skills” was below 50%.

Western students also report lower levels of satisfaction with their general education experiences than do students at other comparable master’s level universities. More importantly, our students also report that their liberal arts core experience is less engaging and less academic than that experienced by students at peer institutions. Specifically, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Western freshmen report fewer interactions with their professors, fewer instances of active learning, fewer enriching educational experiences, and a lower level of academic challenge than is reported by freshmen at other master’s-granting universities. They also report that they write fewer papers, read fewer books, and find the campus to be less supportive academically than do freshmen at other comparable master’s granting universities.

These local assessments and nationally benchmarked data support what we hear from students in sites such as the Teaching-Learning Academy’s 2012-13 focus groups on the liberal arts and sciences: Western is an extremely successful university but the majority of students approach their GURs with a sense of “instrumentality,” i.e. getting them “over with.” The majority of students, as well as many faculty, report not being able to articulate the overall purpose of the GURs or any connection between the GURs and a liberal education (Appendix C).

In trying to address the growing dissatisfaction students have for the GURs, for past two years CUE has focused on the need for greater communication to both faculty and students about the purpose of the GURs. Developing quarterly talking point messages to all faculty teaching GURs as well as creating Viking Landing open house sessions to provide students with strategies for choosing GURs are just two examples of CUE’s communication efforts. However, while these efforts have been helpful to some extent, they have not been able to resolve a fundamental disconnect between the existing six GUR categories and the actual learning goals we want students to achieve. These expectations include gaining both a strong cross-disciplinary knowledge base as well as acquiring intellectual and practical skills. CUE’s discussions for the past academic year have led us to believe that until the overall structure of the core requirement is simplified and its overall purpose revealed through that structure, students and faculty will become even more confounded by its role in the undergraduate experience. Moreover, we are concerned that the current structure of general education at WWU will lead to a diminished value of a WWU degree for stakeholders such as parents and the legislature. CUE has therefore concluded revision of WWU’s general education program should be seriously considered if we are to meet 21st-century challenges as critical thinkers, productive employees, and engaged citizens.

Recommendations

In order to ensure the appropriate level of commitment to the task of studying general education revision, CUE recommends:

1) Formation of a Western Study of General Education (WSGE) task force, which will report to CUE, and whose purposes will be to: a) undertake a feasibility study of general education revision, and b) if such revision is deemed feasible and desirable, to craft a new general education program for WWU. CUE recommends WSGE include 15-20 representatives drawn from the following groups:

- All seven colleges and the Library
- Associated Students of WWU
- Faculty Senate
- Senate subcommittees that make curriculum-related decisions:
 - Academic Coordinating Commission (ACC)
 - Council on University Programs (CUP)
 - Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE)
 - University Planning and Resources Council (UPRC)
- Interest/Initiative groups, for example:
 - Active Minds Changing Lives (AMCL)
 - President's Task Force on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity
 - First-year Experience (FYE) Committee
- Student support groups, for example:
 - Residence Life
 - Academic Advising

The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (VPUE) will serve on the task force as a non-voting advisory member.

2) CUE further recommends a two-phase process, each lasting two years, with the first phase dedicated to studying the feasibility of reform and, if appropriate, designing a new general education program. If a new program is created, the second phase will involve enacting it with enhanced curriculum and pedagogy:

Phase 1: Design

In order to ensure that the re-design is at once efficient, inclusive, and careful, CUE recommends a layered process that includes creating cross-disciplinary subcommittees that will report to the task force. These subcommittees will focus on various issues relevant to general education reform, and would ultimately forward multiple proposals to the task force to review. In order to complete this first phase in a timely way, CUE proposes the following timeline:

- **Spring 2013:** CUE will issue a call for volunteers to serve on WSGE.
- **Fall 2013:** The task force is charged and begins convening. A series of forums are held to introduce the task force and gather feedback from faculty, students, and other university constituents. The task force continues to gather data from stakeholders and by the end of the quarter provides a written report to CUE outlining whether general education restructuring at WWU is feasible and desirable and providing a rationale for their determination.

- If the WSGE concludes that restructuring is not feasible, not desirable, or both, the initiative stops here.
- **Winter 2014:** Should WSGE deem general education revision feasible and desirable, it will form cross-disciplinary subcommittees which will meet on topics relevant to the core curriculum.

Examples may include:

- first-year experience
- beyond the first year
- written, oral, and visual literacies
- educating citizens
- the co-curricular experience
- education in the 21st century

WSGE participates as a team at an AAC&U institute General Education and Assessment February 27 – March 1, 2014 in Portland, Oregon. It also studies models of general education restructuring at other comparable institutions.

- **Spring 2014:** Subcommittees develop and submit multiple proposals to the WSGE for consideration.
- **Summer - Fall 2014:** WSGE reviews and synthesizes proposals and then submits one final proposal, including an implementation plan, to faculty governance committees.

Phase 2: Implementation (Years 3 & 4)

A high-quality general education program relies on sound curriculum and effective pedagogy.

Therefore, CUE recommends the creation of a General Education Faculty Fellowship program that will provide support to general education faculty to refine existing and/or design new general education courses, as well as to learn about effective instructional practices. General Education Faculty Fellows will then become leaders in their departments and colleges to catalyze additional curricular reforms and instructional innovations. In order to implement the new general education program in a timely way, CUE proposes the following timeline for phase 2:

- **Winter - Spring 2015:**
 - CUE advises academic departments on the new general education program and begins accepting and reviewing proposals for courses.
 - Faculty Fellows learn about approaches to curriculum and instruction and begin to refine existing and/or develop new general education courses.
- **Fall 2015 - Spring 2017:**
 - The new general education program advances in stages, per the implementation plan developed by the WSGE.
 - Faculty Fellows continue to refine existing and/or develop new general education courses, guided by targeted professional development goals.

- Faculty fellows provide leadership to their departments to ensure high-quality implementation of their general education courses.

Finally, CUE recommends the following **charge** for the WSGE and subcommittees:

- The Western Study of General Education Task Force (WSGE) shall gather data from university constituents by canvassing as many stakeholder groups as possible to determine the feasibility and desirability of restructuring WWU's general education program. At the conclusion of this study, it will forward a report of its findings to ACC and Senate including a recommendation about whether or not to restructure the core curriculum.
- Should WSGE determine restructuring is feasible and desirable and if that determination is endorsed by ACC and Senate, it will then craft a general education program designed to provide all WWU graduates the knowledge and skills to participate meaningfully as citizens and professionals in a 21st-century society. This new core curriculum should provide for genuine coherence and substantive integration across courses and frame the requirements so that the overall purpose and value of the core is clear to WWU students, faculty, staff, and administration as well as to public stakeholders.
- As part of the process of crafting a new general education program, WSGE shall appoint subcommittees representing different stakeholders across the campus community, which will study the problem of GUR revision from a particular perspective or theme (suggestions outlined above). In order to encourage a process that is as collaborative as possible, these themes shall not be defined around disciplinary lines. Subcommittee chairs will be members of the task force, to guard against isolation of subcommittee work. Each subcommittee shall provide the task force with three proposals for a new general education program that the task force will subsequently use to craft a final proposal.
- WSGE will forward its proposal for a new general education program to the ACC and Senate for review. In order to ensure substantive changes to curriculum and pedagogy across the new general education program, this proposal should include not only a description of the program itself, but also a plan for implementation. This implementation plan should outline a faculty professional development program, as per the recommendations above.
- In order to ensure the design of a program that will have sufficient levels of support, WSGE leadership shall work closely with the university and/or provost budget offices to project cost implications while crafting a proposal for a new general education program.

Appendices

- Appendix A: Quality Undergraduate Education Committee (QUE) Spring 2000 Final Report: <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/gened/que.htm>
- Appendix B: General Education Task Force April 2003 Final Report: http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/gened/task_force/Gen_ed_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf
- Appendix C: Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) 2013 report on the Liberal Arts at WWU: http://www.library.wvu.edu/sites/library.wvu.edu/files/wis_tla/tla/docs/Resources/la_legacyproject_2013.pdf