To: Committee on Undergraduate Education  
From: Paul Chen, Chair, Western Study of General Education (WSGE) Task Force  
Date: 16 October 2014  
Re: Task Force Final Report

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Study of General Education Task Force was convened by the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE), in consultation with the Academic Coordinating Council (ACC) and approval by the ACC and the Faculty Senate. The Task Force’s charge states: “The [Task Force] membership shall provide broad representation of the university community, and shall include faculty, staff, and students.”¹

Following the Charge

From its inception in December 2013, the Task Force has been guided in all of its work, decisions, and actions by the directives outlined in its charge.² The Task Force has at times sought clarification from the CUE about the charge, and at key stages throughout its work, its members have consulted the charge to reorient our activities, making sure that we understood and followed its directives.

The process of the Task Force’s work has been, by its nature, slow, requiring extended discussion among its members, and even some trial and error in deciding on courses of action and then implementing them. Nevertheless, the Task Force believes that it has progressed in completing its assigned tasks as expeditiously and as reasonably as possible, ultimately agreeing

¹ A list of the Task Force members at the end of this report, and their bios are in Appendix H.  
² The complete charge is included in Appendix A.
on what conclusions to draw from the data it has gathered, and what recommendations to submit to the CUE.

The members of the Task Force have, we believe, conscientiously and faithfully followed our charge, to the best of our understanding and ability, given the constraints of limited time and other resources, to complete our assigned tasks. Per the directives of the CUE, the Task Force has completed all of the major directives outlined in the charge, the last of which is submission of this report to the CUE.

Soon after the Task Force commenced its work, questions arose around the definition of “structural change.” Although the charge explicitly framed the Task Force’s inquiries in terms of that phrase, the charge never explicitly defined it. After early consultations with CUE, it was clarified to encompass the possibility of changing the six GUR categories or the eleven GUR competencies. But as the Task Force’s work progressed through the months, the same question would recur during Task Force discussions, of whether “structural change” was necessarily restricted to only the changes just mentioned. Eventually, the Task Force thought it best—both in the interests of achieving its mission, as well as of abiding by our charge—to generally allow for a broader view of “structure,” beyond the GUR competencies and categories exclusively, and to include our consideration, or at least our collective notice, of things as the role of advising or linked courses as possible avenues of GUR revision.

**Time and Work Involved**

Every member of the Task Force has devoted nearly 40 hours in meeting time over the course of three academic quarters (not including meetings held during the summer quarter). Many members have committed a substantial number of additional hours, outside of these weekly meetings, on evening, weekends, and during academic breaks.

The data that the Task Force has gathered, analyzed, and discussed, from both faculty and students, throughout the course of its work has exceeded, in both its quality and its quantity, any data previously collected at Western on its General University Requirements (GURs). We have tried to present the data in this report, as much as humanly possible, “as it is,” and as comprehensively and as neutrally as possible, to let readers draw their own conclusions and interpretations. And even before it was determined how and what data would be collected, the Task Force decided to make whatever data it had gathered freely accessible to others, so that they could mine the data for more detailed analyses that the Task Force may have lacked the time to pursue.
The members of the Task Force are proud of our work on this important matter entrusted to us, of gathering and assessing data relevant to determining whether revising Western’s GUR structure is desirable and/or feasible, the goal of which is to improve on Western’s core mission of educating our students and serving our state.

**Task Force Conclusions and Recommendations**

Task Force members have worked numerous hours, both collectively in meetings and individually outside of them, carrying out the tasks assigned us by the CUE in the charge. Therefore, we respectfully request that all readers interested in the subject of this report read through the report in its entirety carefully. This report is the culmination of a 10 month-long process. The chair of the Task Force expresses his sincere pleasure working with the other members, who have devoted, so sacrificially, their personal time, mental energy, passion, and thoughtfulness to the task assigned them—namely, participating in the long-term process of considering how Western might improve on its core mission of educating our students and serving our state and the world.

Based on the data collected from both faculty and students, through both surveys and face-to-face meetings, on the issues of desirability and feasibility of revising the structure of the GURs, the Task Force concludes that a majority of faculty do not favor making structural changes to the GURs; nevertheless, they expressed strong support for some specific proposals—most notably, linking courses and reducing class size— which may be accomplished through smaller-scale changes, short of structural changes to the GURs. Besides these two proposals, however, the Task Force felt it was both prudent and proper for us to mention in this report other ideas, suggestions, and proposals for the consideration of the CUE, future task forces, and other interested persons.
II. SUMMARY OF DIRECTIVES FROM TASK FORCE CHARGE

The major directives of the Task Force’s charge based on the main headings in that document are as follows:

[1] The Task Force will first determine whether revision of the structure of the general education program is desirable. Should the Task Force determine that revision is desirable, it shall further consider whether such revision is feasible at this time. CUE will advise the WSGE Task Force on criteria to define desirability and feasibility of GUR revision, with advisement from ACC and the Faculty Senate…

[2] The Task Force shall consult broadly with stakeholders across the university community in examining these questions.…

[3] The Task Force shall submit a report to CUE.

We have completed all of the major directives in our charge, concluding with this report to the CUE which, per the charge instructions, includes the following:

a) The specific criteria utilized by the Task Force to determine desirability and feasibility
b) A summary of stakeholder groups the Task Force consulted with as well as other information sources used
c) A summary of key findings
d) A recommendation regarding whether general education revision is desirable and feasible at this time, along with the rationale for that recommendation

III. DESIRABILITY

A. Data on Faculty Attitudes Toward Current GUR Curriculum and Possible GUR Revision

(1) Introduction

The WSGE Task Force was asked, first, to “determine whether revision of the structure of the general education program is desirable.” In order to fulfill its charge on this point, the Task Force gathered, analyzed, and discussed data, from both faculty and students, that exceeded, in
both quantity and quality, any data previously collected at Western on the General University Requirements. This section summarizes our findings on data collected from the faculty through a university-wide Faculty Survey, as well as a series of Faculty Forums.  

(2) The Faculty Survey  

On 22 April 2014, the Task Force emailed to all Western faculty members, including librarians, a link to an electronic survey with 39 questions. The recipients were given eleven days (until 2 May 2014) to complete the survey. The 1070 recipients of the survey included everyone on the University’s “Employee Type F1-4” and “L1-3” lists. Of the 1070 who received the survey, 213 (or 20% of the total number of recipients) completed at least part of the survey; every one of the survey’s multiple-choice questions had at least 197 responses. Of the 213 respondents, 32% identified themselves as full professors, 27% as associate professors, 13% as assistant professors, 16% as senior lecturers, and 13% as lecturers.\footnote{Percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, and therefore may not total 100%.}  

The Faculty Survey indicates that faculty members, as a whole, report a moderate to high level of engagement and satisfaction with teaching GUR courses. In Q. 18, for example, 70% of respondents said that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they “enjoy teaching GUR courses.” When asked, in Q. 19, what they “especially like about teaching GUR courses,” there were 136 responses. Of those, 43% wrote about communicating the interest, value, and relevance of their disciplines to students; 40% wrote about the variety and diversity of students in GUR courses; 15% touched on the value of providing a liberal education with an inter-disciplinary approach.  

When asked, in Q. 20, what they “especially dislike about teaching GUR courses,” the third most common response (13% of 124 responses to the question) was that there was nothing they disliked. (The two most common responses are discussed below.) On the meaning and purpose of the GURs, 94% of respondents agreed, for example, that they could explain “why the university requires students to take GUR courses as part of their baccalaureate education” (Q. 5); 59% “usually or always mention” in class “Western’s stated commitment to providing a liberal education” (Q. 12). Asked about Western’s GUR categories and competencies, 64% (Q. 7)
agreed that they are familiar with the GUR categories, and 54% (Q. 8) with the GUR competencies. With respect to training and support, 74% of respondents agreed that they are “adequately trained to teach their GUR courses competently,” and 51% agreed that they “receive adequate support.”

Based on our reading of the Faculty Survey results, the Task Force cannot conclude that a majority of respondents favor a general revision of the structure of the GURs. We note first that there was some doubt about whether “Western’s GUR courses are achieving their stated purpose (as described in the Western Catalog and other university documents).” In response to this question (Q. 6), 44% agreed or strongly agreed, while 24% indicated no opinion. However, in the section of the survey on “Revision of the GURs,” most of the suggested revisions received well under 50% support.

When asked whether the GUR categories should be revised (Q. 26), 43% agreed or strongly agreed; whether the competencies should be revised (Q. 28), 36%; whether new names should be developed for “general education” and “general university requirements” (Q. 32), 25%; whether the minimum total credit requirement for GUR courses in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities should be restored to 15 credits (Q. 35), 36%; whether there should be limits on the total number of credits that can be required for a major (Q. 36), 43%; whether writing-intensive courses at the 100-level should be developed in the disciplines besides English 101, (Q. 38), 48%. It is also noteworthy that, when asked, in Q. 20, to specify what they “especially dislike about teaching GUR courses,” the most common response (38% of 124 responses) was some variation on a perceived lack of student motivation and/or preparation, while the least common response (2% of 124) was that the GUR structure needs improvement.

It is clear, however, that a majority of respondents favors change in two specific areas. First, 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “class sizes should be reduced in GUR courses” (Q. 34). This is consistent with answers given to Q. 20 (“What do you especially dislike about teaching GUR courses?”), where the second most common response (35% of 124 responses) was that class sizes are too large—to large for, among other reasons given, holding meaningful discussions, for getting to know students, and for assigning significant written work. This is also consistent with the responses to Q. 25 (“…what support would you need to improve your teaching in your GUR courses”), where 39% of respondents (14/36) mentioned smaller class sizes, and 36% (13/36) mentioned the need for more teaching assistants. Second, 64%
agreed or strongly agreed that “Western should invest in a greater number of multi-disciplinary and/or thematically linked GUR courses” (Q. 37).

(3) The Faculty Forums

Starting in mid-April 2014, members of the Task Force contacted the chairs of 41 departments across the university to schedule face-to-face meetings. Through April and May 2014, the Task Force was able to meet with the faculty members in 30 (73%) of those departments. (The other 11 departments were unable to meet with the Task Force because of scheduling conflicts and related reasons.) Members of the Task Force agreed that their role in these meetings was to “take the temperature” of the faculty members present on the desirability and feasibility of revising the GURs. A total of 25 departments agreed to take part in the two-part vote, of which 2 agreed to vote on the desirability question only.

As with the Faculty Survey, the voting results from the Faculty Forums do not indicate that a majority of participants favor a general revision of the structure of the GURs. In short, the temperature was lukewarm. When measured according to individual faculty members, 44% of faculty members attending the forums voted for the desirability of revision, but 25% voted against revision, and 31% were undecided or refused to participate. On the question of feasibility, 40% voted in favor, but 34% voted against it, and 26% were undecided or refused to participate. Many faculty members who chose not to vote (and some who did) strenuously objected to voting on the desirability or feasibility of revision, when no specific revisions were being proposed.

Many participants wondered what it was, precisely, that was thought to be wrong about the current structure of the GURs. Many of the Task Force members meeting with these departments tried to make it clear that no specific proposals for change were being advanced; that the purpose of the forum was simply to hear from faculty their opinions of and experience with the GURs. There was widespread uncertainty, sometimes distrust, about the motives and objectives of proponents for changing the GURs. But regardless of the thoughts or suspicions of faculty members, the clear and emphatic response from them to just the possibility of changing the GURs was that the faculty, as a whole, ought to be involved in evaluating and deciding upon any future specific proposals for revising the GURs.

If future committees at Western are given the task of developing specific proposals for the GURs, the current Task Force would highly recommend that they begin with the many good
ideas generated in Q. 39 (“What other changes would you suggest to the GURs at Western”) and other free response questions in the Faculty Survey, as well as the detailed notes compiled from the Faculty Forums.

B. Data on Student Attitudes Toward Current GUR Curriculum and Possible GUR Revision

The following analysis is gleaned from three student surveys conducted by the Task Force of second-year students, juniors, and graduating seniors from Spring through Summer 2014. There were approximately 600 responses of second-year students, 350 of juniors, and 450 of graduating seniors. Thus, what follows below must be understood as based on a sample of all possible Western students, namely those who self-selected to take the survey. Why many opted out of the opportunity to be heard on this issue is open to any number of interpretations, including apathy, satisfaction with the status quo, or lack of time because of other responsibilities.

Several questions pertained to how students value their GUR courses. The majority of students “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (second-year students: 71%; juniors: 63%; graduating seniors: 67%) that one of the purposes of taking GUR courses includes establishing an academic and intellectual foundation. Most students also “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (second-year students: 64%; juniors: 56%; graduating seniors: 63%) that they help in choosing a major or minor. A plurality of students “neither agree nor disagree” (second-year students: 31%; juniors: 29%; graduating seniors: 35%) that these purposes include succeeding

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7 Many of these ideas and suggestions are listed in Section V of this report.
8 Part of the reason why the Task Force was convened was because of survey data showing lower scores for our first-year students on certain various academic indicators, as compared to the scores for students at Western’s peer institutions. Task Force members carefully reviewed and discussed these surveys at length in our initial meetings, and continued to refer back to those survey data, especially toward the end of our work.

The Task Force noticed that, over different administrations of the survey, the scores for our first-year students on some of those academic indicators would fluctuate, down for one survey administration, then up the next administration. Further, while some indicators showed a substantially lower score for our students, which may raise questions as to why, other indicators’ scores for our students were only slightly lower, plus or minus 3 points.

For instance, one OSR survey asked students if taking GURs gave them “useful skills.” At one administration, the percentage answering that question affirmatively was lower than the previous year. But at the next administration, the percentage answering affirmatively was back up to its previous level. Such differences are sometimes due to statistical error. This did not lead the Task Force to discount the results of any surveys, but it is important to note that slightly lower scores on surveys (either from year to year or as compared to Western’s peer institutions), while prompting concern and perhaps at least some questioning, do not necessarily indicate a serious problem that must be resolved either immediately or through drastic means.

9 Besides student surveys, the Task Force also held a student forum on May 15, 2014, in which twenty students participated. Additionally, two “Conversations in Common” drop-in sessions were utilized (on 5/16/14 and 5/14/14), with the help of the Library and the Learning Commons, to gather feedback on the GURs from random students. Unfortunately, for lack of time, that information was not closely integrated into the report. However, the comments received from students basically concur with the student survey data.

10 Percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, and therefore may not total 100%.
professionally. As for GURs helping them succeed in their personal lives, 30% of second-year students “neither agree nor disagree” and 30% “somewhat agree.” A plurality of juniors (31%) and graduating seniors (30%) “neither agree nor disagree” that GURs help them succeed in their personal lives.

In terms of what benefits students gleaned from their GURs, the majority of second-year students (50%) “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that taking GUR courses gives them useful skills. Among juniors, 47% ”somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that taking GUR courses gives them useful skills. Most second-year students (51%) “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that they use GURs to explore potential majors. 46% of juniors “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that they use GURs to explore potential majors; on the other hand, 42% “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree.” The majority “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (second-year students: 51%; juniors: 53%) that completing courses in a broad range of disciplines is something they would choose to do themselves even if it were not required. Most students “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (second-year students: 63%; juniors: 57%) that their GUR courses have broadened their perspective on the world. The majority of second-year students (55%) “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that the GUR courses they have taken at Western have helped them make connections or see relationships between different subject areas. 48% of juniors “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” with this statement, while 27% “neither agree or disagree.”

These findings are consistent with those of previous OSR surveys of second-year students in Spring 2010, 2011, and 2013.

When students chose how many and which of the eleven GUR competencies their GUR courses addressed, the majority of students chose “analyze and communicate ideas effectively in oral/written/visual forms” over the others (second-year students: 76%; juniors: 60%; graduating seniors: 66%). The second most chosen competency ranged between student groups. Second-year students chose “understand and evaluate assumptions, values, and beliefs in context of diverse local, national, and global communities” (73%). Juniors and graduating seniors chose “analyze and interpret information from varied sources” (juniors: 55%; graduating seniors: 59%). On the other hand, the competency that was the least represented was the same for all students: “apply tools of technology with an understanding of their uses and limitations” (second-year students: 44.5%; juniors: 30%; graduating seniors: 38%).

When asked how many of their GUR professors mentioned (either in the syllabus or during class) the ways in which their GUR course relates to either the “liberal arts and sciences,” “a

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11 These questions were unintentionally omitted from the OSR survey of graduating seniors.
liberal education,” or “general education,” most students reported “one or two” or “I don’t recall.” The percentages between the two answers were almost even for second-year students (30% vs. 30%, respectively) and juniors (31% vs. 30%, respectively), while more graduating seniors answered “I don’t recall” (39%) than “one or two” (25%).

The majority of second-year students (53%) were “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with GUR course availability, while these responses for juniors equaled 47%. While a plurality of students was “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the size and structure of most GUR classes (second-year students: 49%; juniors: 37%), a significant number were “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” (second-year students: 29%; juniors: 25%). Most second-year students (52%) were “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the quality of instruction in GUR courses outside their major; just 46% juniors felt either “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied.” Most second-year students (55%) were “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the quality of instruction in GUR courses generally, while for juniors this number was 47%.

In rating the quality of instruction in GUR courses within their major, the majority of second-year students (76%) were “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied.” A plurality of juniors was split between “somewhat satisfied” and “very satisfied” (31% both) with the quality of instruction in GUR courses within their major.

All of these responses concerning student satisfaction seem to indicate a reasonable appreciation among students for how GUR courses are structured within Western’s program of study. These findings are also consistent with those of previous OSR surveys of second-year students in Spring 2010, 2011, and 2013.

When asked what they especially liked about taking GUR courses at Western, the top response across all student groups was “GURs broadened my general knowledge of subjects that interest me” (second-year students: 74%; juniors: 22%; graduating seniors: 71%). Second-year students and graduating seniors chose “Introduced me to fields or concepts I was previously unaware of” as the second most popular reason (second-year students: 70%; graduating seniors: 65%), while juniors chose this answer and “GUR courses were easy grades” in equal numbers (17% both).

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12 These questions were unintentionally omitted from the OSR survey of graduating seniors.
13 While second-year students and graduating seniors could choose more than one answer for this question, juniors (because that question was coded incorrectly) could only choose one. This explains the relatively low percentages of the juniors’ responses. However, if one compares the relative rankings of the answers for each student group, one will find a general consistency among the answers that ranked the highest and lowest across all of the student groups.
When asked what they especially disliked, the top response across all student groups was “taking GUR courses that have no connection to my major, my minor, or my interests” (second-year students: 80%; juniors: 77%; graduating seniors: 81%). In a related finding, most second-year students “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (58%) that GUR course requirements interfere with their taking courses that really interest them, while most juniors ”somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” (70%). These answers are worth unpacking, as there are a number of ways to interpret them. Some of the free responses to “other” dislikes (than those listed in the survey) are helpful in interpreting how students might qualify “interference” or “having no connection…etc.” Students complained that GURs are “a waste of time and money,” “in the way of my major/slow time to graduation,” and just plain boring.

What emerges is a sense of students’ resentment at having to take courses they find boring or difficult, when they are facing significant economic pressure to pay for college, keep up their grade point average, and find employment after graduation. In a related finding, a plurality (45%) of second-year students and of juniors (48%) reported that most of their GUR courses were as difficult as expected. 36% of graduating seniors rated them as “somewhat more difficult than expected.” Other dislikes expressed, including in free responses, were more or less evenly distributed, and did not strongly indicate other significantly common complaints among the students surveyed.

The students’ number one suggestion for improvement was “Individual GUR courses should be integrated with each other by linking courses along similar themes or disciplines,” (second-year students: 43%; juniors: 44%; graduating seniors 50%). The second most common suggestion chosen by second-year students and graduating seniors was “Professors should explicitly state the competencies that their course provides students opportunities to develop” (37% and 31%, respectively). For juniors, the second most common suggestion was “I see no need to change the GUR curriculum” (20%).

Overall, the students surveyed seem to understand the benefits of, and were generally satisfied with, their GUR courses. It is worth noting, however, how few questions elicited responses with a large number of answers in any one of the multiple choices given; instead, students often spread their choices across all of the responses. This seems to indicate that there are no major problems as experienced by most students. On the other hand, these numbers can also be interpreted as a lackluster level of student enthusiasm for GURs.

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14 This question was unintentionally omitted from the OSR survey of graduating seniors.
15 Juniors could only choose one answer for this question, whereas the other student groups could check all that apply.
In this case, the impression given is that, while students are relatively satisfied with Western’s GURs, they would perhaps benefit from more emphasis (through better advising, more campus communication, and through their instructors) on hearing about the benefits (e.g. philosophic, civic, professional, educational, even monetary) of a liberal arts and sciences education, and an effort to connect these courses, both to each other and to their overall program of study. The number one suggestion for improvement from students was to better integrate GURs with linked courses. This practice is already being implemented through the FIG and FYE programs at Western; perhaps these results indicate a need to intensify such connections for all students. Neither of the above suggestions for improvement would require a full-scale “revision of the program structure.”

C. Data on Measures of WWU Student Attainment Compared to Students at Peer Institutions

In addition to student and faculty surveys, the OSR participates in administering to Western students the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE is administered to first-year and fourth-year students every 3 years to analyze student opinion about (1) the amount of time and effort students put into their studies, and (2) how the institution uses its resources and organizes curriculum to engage students. The NSSE survey contains question categories such as the supportive nature of campus environment, quality and quantity of experiences with faculty, opportunities to learn from peers in class, and academic challenge of their course load.

The data on first-year students suggest that Western’s GUR program in 2014 had significantly higher academic challenge than that offered by other master’s degree granting universities, particularly for reflective and integrative learning, which assesses student views on connecting coursework to diversity, experience, knowledge from other courses, and social problems (see Table 1). Questions on quality of total interactions (students, advisors, faculty, administration, student services) resulted in slightly stronger responses than those of other master’s degree granting universities. However, Western’s higher order learning indicators scored significantly lower than that scored by other similar universities in 2014. Higher order learning questions asked students how often they engage in applying, analyzing, evaluating information as well as forming new ideas from information.

Another negative outcome of the NSSE was the report on student-faculty interactions, which listed Western as significantly lower than other master’s degree granting universities. Student-faculty interaction questions assessed how often students talked about career plans with faculty, worked with faculty in activities outside of coursework, and discussed course topics or
academic performance with faculty. Western trailed other comparable universities in this category in both 2011 and 2014, suggesting a consistent short-fall on that indicator, which may warrant attention.

While the 2011 and 2014 NSSE reports indicate an encouraging sign that Western’s GURs have adequate rigor, there is certainly room for improvement on higher order learning and student-faculty interactions in Western’s GUR program.

Table 1. Summary of significant results from indicators on the 2011 and 2014 NSSE report (P < 0.05* or P<0.001**, effect size less than 0.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSSE Category</th>
<th>NSSE Indicator</th>
<th>Report Year</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Other Master’s Degree Granting Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic challenge</td>
<td>Reflective and integrative</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>HIGHER 38% reported a high level of reflective and integrative learning.</td>
<td>LOWER 36%* reported a high level of reflective and interactive learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic challenge</td>
<td>Higher order learning</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>LOWER 38% reported engaging in higher order learning.</td>
<td>HIGHER 39%* reported engaging in higher order learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences with Faculty</td>
<td>Student-Faculty interactions</td>
<td>2011, 2014</td>
<td>LOWER 26% (2011) and 16% (2014) reported high interactions with faculty.</td>
<td>HIGHER 35%** (2011) and 20%* (2014) reported high interactions with faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Environment</td>
<td>Quality of interactions</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>HIGHER 43% reported high quality interactions.</td>
<td>LOWER 41%* reported high quality interactions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the majority of data presented in this report is based upon descriptive statistics from student and faculty surveys, it is also important to consider quantitative evidence about student learning. Our best source of information on learning gains comes from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which is given to 100 seniors and 100 freshman every three years to measure writing, analysis, critiquing argument, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. These data do not allow us to pinpoint the learning gains to GURs specifically, because we do not know how, or at what point in their college careers, students are acquiring these skills (e.g. in GUR courses, major courses, both, or elsewhere).
However, since GUR courses are a significant part of student course load, we can assume the skill development is to some degree attributable to GUR courses. So how much value does a Western degree offer? According to the last CLA report (2012-2013), the difference between Western seniors and freshman placed our students in the 88th percentile overall, denoting greater skill development in critical thinking and written communication skills than seniors at 152 other comparable institutions. The value added by a Western degree was better than expected; Western is providing a high quality education to students.

Another source of empirical evidence about Western’s GURs is the Survey of Earned Doctorates. Although this data cannot be directly tied to the impact of GURs, the evidence suggests that Western’s GUR program is providing an educational experience of high enough quality that we rank 13th out of 560 comprehensive universities in terms of the number of students who go on to earn a research Ph.D. This indicator also suggests that Western is providing an excellent education, one that can lead to success in highly competitive fields.

Based on the objective measures of Western students’ attainment tested by the CLA, and the self-reported activities of Western students on the NSSE, it appears that, overall, Western offers students a high quality educational experience that can be measured at least in terms of the percentage of its students that go onto doctoral study. Nevertheless, despite these relative strengths in comparison to its peer institutions, Western’s first-year students, on some academic attainment measures as well as on self-reported activities, score noticeably lower than their peers at comparable institutions. Although Western is doing well, it may wish to do better, specifically with regard to the experience of first-year students.

D. Conclusion regarding Desirability

As the data collected from faculty and students discussed above shows, the Task Force concludes that there is no widespread desire expressed among either faculty or students to change the GUR structure as it pertains to the GUR categories or competencies. Nevertheless, many other proposals for changing the GURs arose in face-to-face feedback received from faculty and students.16

16 Readers should note that, in the faculty forums led by Task Force members, Task Force members did not prompt or prime the feedback given by faculty. Task Force members rarely, if ever, suggested what possible proposals might later be considered, despite the other faculty repeatedly requesting that they do so before voting on the issue of desirability and feasibility of changing the structure of the GURs. The main reason Task Force members refrained from suggesting possible proposals for GUR revision is that the CUE had clearly instructed us
IV. FEASIBILITY

The major directive in the charge, outlining our task regarding the second issue of feasibility, states as follows:

2) Should the Task Force determine that revision is desirable, it shall further consider whether such revision is feasible at this time. This determination shall be guided by the following questions, in addition to any others determined by the Task Force:

a) To what extent has a broad base representation of faculty, as well as staff and students, articulated a desire to engage in a restructuring of the GUR program?

b) To what extent does there exist evidence that restructuring is sufficiently important and urgent relative to other university goals to spend the time and energy, and financial resources that revision will require?

c) Could such restructuring be accomplished without undue negative impact (e.g. loss of SCH or increased workload) on departments, programs, initiatives, or groups?

d) Are there opportunities for synergies with other departments, programs, or initiatives that would not be available if revision occurred at a later time?

Task Force members agreed that the feasibility questions as formulated above are, to a large extent, unanswerable. For instance, regarding 2(b), a question of that depth and breadth requires a determined judgment by the university administration, which has the requisite knowledge of all the programs, their relative importance, and the budgetary resources available to incur that costs of going forward with proposals for changing the GURs. Additionally, regarding 2(c), whether impact is negative or not, is in the eye of the beholder. If changes to the GURs require fiscal expenditures, programs receiving new funding will view the change positively, while programs that may lose funding will view the change negatively.

But further, because the Task Force agreed that, based on the data presented so far in this report, there is no strong or clear desire on the part of faculty to change the GURs’ structure, it was unnecessary for the Task Force to proceed to inquiring about the issue of feasibility.

not to discuss or consider specific proposals, which were reserved for the next stage in the process, and only if the CUE, ACC, and Faculty Senate approved moving forward with any proposals for GUR revision.
V. IDEAS, SUGGESTIONS, AND PROPOSALS

A. Context of Task Force’s Ideas, Suggestions, and Proposals

Although initially the charge frames the Task Force’s inquiries explicitly in terms of the desirability and feasibility of changing the GURs’ structure, question 2(a) asks: “To what extent could issues with the above [i.e. possible problems with the GUR curriculum] be effectively addressed without a revision of the program structure?” That question permits the Task Force to pursue other lines of inquiry in addition to what structural changes might help improve the GURs. Toward that end, the Task Force has sought to include more information than less, that is in terms of proposing ideas and suggestions of ways that might improve the GURs without needing to alter its structure.

Many of these proposals are not the peculiar brain-child of this Task Force. We did not devise them on our own. Indeed, many of them have been suggested—for years, even decades—by faculty members and task forces that preceded us. More importantly, we are predominately, if not entirely, reporting back to the CUE what we heard from faculty in the course of our data-gathering.

Further, most of the suggestions below were not strictly endorsed by, e.g., a threshold vote of 51% of Task Force members, so as to determine which ones should be included in or omitted from the report as recommendations. What we do recommend, however, is that any future committees or task forces charged with carrying on the important work of GUR reform and long-term curriculum development consult both our more current data gathered via our survey and faculty forums, as well as older sources of GUR-related data that were made available to us throughout our ten-month investigation.

B. Suggested Ideas

The Task Force’s investigation into the world of GURs was driven by a genuine curiosity about Western’s current academic culture of liberal arts and sciences education. While the Task Force does not view the statistical or other evidence suggesting that structural changes are desired, it is not surprising that faculty and students, throughout the course of the Task Force’s data gathering, made suggestions on how the GURs might be changed for the better.
Following that curiosity, the Task Force gathered information using surveys (included in the Appendix) and face-to-face forums, with both faculty and student groups, that explored areas of concern that might lead to possible revisions. What resulted was a wide range of reactions and suggestions. Many of the topics below were partially guided by questions from CUE (on the desirability and feasibility of GUR revision), while other topics were raised following open-ended queries posed to faculty members and students.

These data are presented below in hopes that they will provide evidence that may guide the CUE as it explores the possibility of revising the GURs.

**Should class size be reduced?**
- 40% of 124 faculty members, in response to an unprompted, open-ended question, specifically wrote that they especially dislike class sizes when teaching GURs (FSQ 19)
- 56% of 202 faculty agree or strongly agree that “class size reduces the quality of the GUR courses that (they) teach” (FSQ 21)
- 67% of 200 faculty agree or strongly agree that “class sizes should be reduced in GUR courses” (FSQ 34)
- 12% of 76 faculty members who wrote open responses thought class sizes should be reduced (FSQ 20)
- 35% of 360 students were satisfied or very satisfied with “the size and structure of most GUR classes” (SSQ 15)
- 41% of 328 students especially disliked that “GUR courses were too large” (SSQ 20)
- 19 out of 36 faculty members, in response to an unprompted, open-ended question concerning “support needed to improve teaching,” wrote something about reducing GUR class size (FSQ 25)
- This topic was mentioned in student and faculty forums

**Should more linked courses be offered?**
- 44% of 279 juniors said that GUR courses should be linked “along similar themes or disciplines” (SSQ 23a)
- 42% (187) second-year students and 50% (162) graduating seniors agreed with the above statement (SSQ 23a)
- 64% of 198 faculty members agree or strongly agree that “WWU should invest in a greater number of multi-disciplinary and/or thematically linked GUR courses” (FSQ 37)
• 13 of 76 faculty members, in response to an unprompted, open-ended question, specifically encouraged more interdisciplinary courses (FSQ 27)
• 30% of 328 students dislike “taking course that have no connection with each other (SSQ 20)
• This point was mentioned in faculty and student forums
• Evidence of success and satisfaction with current linking practices

Should competencies be simplified?
• 15% out of 279 Juniors say that the “competencies need to be revised” (SSQ 23a)
• 18% of second year students and 19% of graduating seniors agree that the “competencies need to be revised” (SSQ 23a)
• 36% of 198 faculty agree or strongly agree that the “11 GUR competencies should be revised”; but 50% marked “no opinion” (FSQ 28)
• 39 out of 64 faculty who wrote open responses shared that the competencies have a variety of coherency issues, with the largest number (20) asking that they be simplified (FSQ 28)

Should faculty communicate to students the value of Liberal Arts Education?
• There were many varieties of faculty and student responses in faculty and student forums that encouraged engaging students in a conversation about the value of a Liberal Education
• 50% of 340 students say at least one of their GUR professors “mentioned, either in the syllabus or during class time, the ways in which their GUR course relates to either the “liberal arts and sciences,” a “liberal education,” or “general education” (SSQ 22)
• 4% of 279 juniors say “Professors should explicitly state the value of a liberal arts and sciences education” (SSQ 23a)
• 20% of second-year students and 20% of graduating seniors say “Professors should explicitly state the value of a liberal arts and sciences education” (SSQ 23a)
• 53% of 203 faculty agree or strongly agree that they “mention to (their) students the value of taking” their course as a GUR (FSQ 10)
• 48% of 203 faculty agree or strongly agree that they mention “the value of GUR in general” (FSQ 11)
• 59% of 204 faculty agree or strongly agree that they “usually or always mention” to their students “Western’s slated commitment to providing a liberal education” (FSQ 12)
Should professors state the competency of the courses they teach?

- 15% of 279 students say faculty “should explicitly state the competencies that their course provides students opportunities to develop” (FSQ 23)
- 45% of 203 faculty members say they “mention the specific competencies” that they intend students to develop in their courses (SSQ 9)

Should professors share the course’s relevance to the major?

- 68% of 203 faculty members say they “try to help students see the relationship between the GUR courses (they) teach and other courses taught in (the) department” (FSQ 15)
- 70% of 200 faculty members say they “try to help students see the relationship between different subject areas or academic disciplines” (FSQ 16)
- 48% of 202 faculty members say they “try to help students see the relationship between GUR courses in their department and in other departments” (FSQ 17)
- 77% of 328 students dislike “taking GUR course that have no connection to my major, my minor, or my interests” (SSQ 20)

Should the writing requirements be changed?

- 48% of 200 faculty members agree or strongly agree that “writing-intensive courses at the 100-level should be developed in the disciplines as an optional substitute for English 101” (FSQ 38)
- 22 out of 76 faculty members, in response to an unprompted, open-ended question, specifically asked to increase the quality or rigor of the writing requirements (FSQ 39)

Should the Title of the GUR’s be changed?

- 25% of 197 faculty members agree or strongly agree that “new names should be developed for what WWU currently calls “general education” and “general university requirements” (FSQ 32)
Reduce the size of the GUR Program

- 7 of 76 faculty members who wrote open responses thought the program should be reduced or removed (FSQ 39)
- This point was mentioned in faculty and student forums

Importance of Academic Advising

- No specific survey question was asked to probe the relationship between advising and GURs. Nevertheless, a significant amount of discussion on the topic arose in both faculty forums and other GUR discussions.
- We agreed that advisors need to help students link GURs, although this is not something advisors could do on their own—help from departments would likely be necessary. Faculty should be encouraged to tell more of “the GUR story” in classes.

C. Conclusion regarding Ideas, Suggestions, and Proposals

None of the specific suggestions and proposals listed above was prompted by Task Force members at the faculty forums. The purpose of the Task Force was not to gather data to show either support or opposition to any of these specific proposals. But we include this information in this report for the benefit of those interested in the long-term development and improvement of Western’s GUR curriculum. Not all of the things mentioned in this section were supported by survey-based data. But many faculty members felt they were important aspects of the GUR curriculum, and so we include that information here.

VI. Conclusion

The Task Force has sought to carry out all the directives in its charge to the best of its members’ collective understanding and ability, given the constraints of limited time and resources. Submission of this report fulfills its final directive.

The Task Force concludes that certain changes ARE in the best interest of Western’s constituents, and will improve its GUR curriculum. However, these changes can be made without changing either the GUR competencies or categories. Herein lies the struggle that manifested within the Task Force: what does “structural change” encompass? The Task Force
devoted a significant portion of time to exploring the full scope of “structural change.” But in retrospect, Task Force members recognized that this initial confusion was a necessary and unavoidable part of the process, and was a critical component to any long-term path to helping Western fulfill its core mission of educating our students in service to our state, our nation, and the world.

The Task Force concluded that looking beyond simply GUR competency or category changes was in the best interest of the Task Force’s mission, while also staying true to its charge. In fact, the members of the Task Force believe our work over these past ten months has benefited from broadening the scope of structural change, so that it was not restricted exclusively to only changing the six GUR categories or eleven GUR competencies.

A lack of visible and perceived coherence is the theme that defines most of the negative opinions of faculty and students toward the GURs. Students and faculty members do not have an accurate vision of the coherence of the GURs’ structure. When students complain about taking GURs that they feel are unrelated to their major, minor, or interests, it is because they do not see how the GURs are connected with other GURs, their major, or into their overall liberal arts curriculum. Hence, the discrepancy between why so many students say that, while they appreciate the value of being broadly educated, so many students also say they fail to see the value of taking GURs. The structure of the GURs may actually be, or is just perceived to be, loose, or for many students, non-existent.

Creating a visible coherence in the GURs entails helping all constituents— instructors, students, faculty-advisors, academic-advisors, alumni, lawmakers, and others who are impacted by the output of Western’s institutional mission—to see and appreciate that coherence for themselves. Such a visible coherence must first be cultivated among the faculty, who can then communicate that coherence to students not only through the courses they teach (e.g. in their classroom instruction, in their syllabi) but extending that vision of coherence through informal advising outside of class.

But faculty and academic advisors cannot stop at merely telling students about that coherence. We must also show what that coherence entails: how the courses in our own department are connected; how the disciplines and subjects that we teach are also connected and

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17 Indeed, one could say that the ambiguity surrounding the phrase haunted every stage of the Task Force’s work—from trying to operationalize it in survey questions, to soliciting and then interpreting feedback from faculty, and finally to deciding what conclusions to draw from the data, as well as what recommendations to make in this final report to the CUE.
related to other disciplines and subjects; and ultimately, how what they are learning in class is also connected to what lies beyond college. Ideally, revealing or highlighting those connections for our students must involve showing—not only in how we teach a class (i.e. within a single course or subject), but also through what courses we teach (i.e. across different courses and subjects), and what courses we require students to take. The Task Force believes that efforts to build this type of coherence into the GUR curriculum, whether they may involve structural change or non-structural change, is favorable for the education of Western’s students, and favorable to Western’s broader institutional mission.

This report is submitted by the

Western Study of General Education Task Force

Roger Anderson (CST, biology)
Amber Bone (CFPA, music)
Patrick Buckley (Huxley, environmental studies)
Paul Chen (CHSS, political science; WSGE Task Force chair)
Georgianne Connell (CST, biology)
Angela Harwood (Woodring, secondary education)
Monique Kerman (CHSS, liberal studies)
Mark Kuntz (CFPA, theater arts; ACC chair)
Daniel Larner (Fairhaven)
Sean Murphy (CHSS, liberal studies; WSGE Task Force vice chair)
Emily Owens (student delegate, Winter 2014)
Maya Price (student delegate, Winter and Spring 2014)
Jaleesa Smiley (AS VP for Academic Affairs; student delegate, Fall 2014)
Elizabeth Stephan (Library)
Phil Thompson (CBE, economics)
Steven VanderStaay (Provost, Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education; non-voting member)
APPENDICES¹⁸

A. Task Force Charge
B. Office of Survey Research (OSR) Student Surveys
C. Forum Feedback Reports
D. Faculty and Student Surveys (past and current), including data compilations created for Task Force use
E. Other Past Student Surveys provided to the Task Force
F. Reports of Past Western Gen-Ed Task Forces
G. Miscellaneous materials
H. Task Force member profiles

¹⁸ Readers can access the Appendix to this report online via this hyperlink, which will connect you to a libguide website: http://libguides.wwu.edu/WSGE.