

The Currency Question

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I want to spend the next 45 minutes or so sharing the tale of a journey that I have had the privilege to lead the past academic year which ultimately led to the unanimously endorsed, revised, semester-based General Education program for the College of the Arts and Sciences (ASC). This set of new General Education requirements is now being considered for adoption by other colleges on campus.

In the Beginning

Our story begins back in spring of 2008, when the University Senate established a new committee known by the acronym ULAC, functionally a subcommittee of both the Council on Academic Affairs (CAA) and the ASC Committee on Curriculum and Instruction. ULAC is the University Level Advisory Committee on the General Education Curriculum. The committee is chaired by the Chair of the ASC Committee on Curriculum and Instruction's subcommittee on assessment. It is made up of 11 voting members selected from the faculty: four from Arts and Sciences, four faculty from other colleges that offer undergraduate degrees, two undergraduates, and two *ex officio* members representing ASC advising and the Vice Provost for academic affairs, who has a multi-part charge, which includes this phrase: "To advise the council on proposal to revise the General Education Curriculum."

This select group was intended to stop the historic tendency of Provosts of the past from creating a "Blue Ribbon" panel to review and evaluate General Education on campus. These past bodies are legendary and their reports are known throughout the campus by the last name of the committee chair who ran them. They are our heritage of curricular reform and given the reverence or irreverence with which this past work is held. In essence, they are three of the four faces that would form our curricu-

lar Mount Rushmore – Babcock, Blackwell, McHale – names that are known to most OSU instructors at the time of their deliberations, but are rapidly forgotten upon submission of the final report.

The true impact of this little clause in the ULAC charge for me shifted greatly when the university elected to switch to the Semester based scheduling and suddenly someone had to determine what General Education would look like in the new semester landscape. Those someones ended up, and appropriately so, being ULAC.

Start-up and Themes

Now two points of true confession:

1. When I was named chair of ULAC for the specific purpose of semester conversion, I had a personal goal of not becoming the fourth face of the curricular monument, therefore the work about which I am speaking should not and shall never be known as the “Shanda” report, Doctrine, or Manifesto.
2. When my assistant assembled my notebook of materials to support my ULAC work, in very small type at the bottom of the front page there is small notation which still reads: “ULAC – enough sense not to chair this project!”

Nevertheless, chair I did and on September 15, 2009, ULAC met for the first time during the 2009-2010 academic year with the express purpose of developing a revised structure for General Education for Ohio State. Our goal was in fact to try to complete this task within the Autumn quarter (ten weeks). While we ultimately did not make our goal by the end of that term, with a foreshadowing of schedules to come, we did complete our proposal to the Arts and Sciences senate in just 14 weeks of work!

Starting with our very first meeting, we focused our attention on three broad themes:

- A. *Content* – What is General Education intended to achieve? What are the types of skills, knowledge, and attitudes an OSU graduate should achieve?
- B. *Structure or Architecture* – What is the manner that students and faculty engage in the receipt and delivery of General Education requirements on a semester schedule? How should the educa-

tional experience be structured to ensure students achieve what is intended?

- C. *Interpretation or Marketing* – How do we effectively describe the General Education Program to students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents and the general public? How should General Education be framed so all constituents understand and can communicate its value?

Finding and Printing the Currency

These are very much the same questions that each and every program is currently examining during semester conversion. We truly thought that these were the most critical questions that we could ask to advance our journey. Given the title of today's presentation, however, I would suggest that one more critical question was needed to be answered along the way. That question was: How do you measure General Education experiences to assure that you have achieved the goals aspired to in the entire curricular process? In other words, what is the currency by which we measure general education?

Any kind of group discussion by instructors, faculty, and administrators, rather large or small, comes up with about the same list. Inevitably, it includes: *credit hours or units; instruction minutes or days; completed assignments; homework hours; FTE (i.e., full-time equivalents); courses taken; subject matter encountered or experienced; length of quarters, semesters, and summer terms; labs; contact time; test scores; percent of's; proficiency levels; grades; competencies; licensures; fluencies; certifications; contacts; dollars; output levels; staff hours; productions, exhibits, and projects; seminars; participation, etc.*

These various measurements of “currency questions” became critical to our process. We faced the challenge of determining a common currency to enable the committee to set standards. In addition, we established 10 interrelated principles to get us moving forward:

- We wanted students to have educational experiences that would enhance their abilities as thinkers and problem solvers;
- We chose to explore other curricular structures such as theme based learning and charged ourselves to find ways to make what students were learning more relevant.
- We knew that we must begin with learning goals for General Education, that is, of Expected Learning Outcomes (ELO's), and

then determine how to structure a curriculum so those goals are achievable.

- We needed to examine how our General Education requirements compared and contrasted to peer institutions in scale, scope and structure.
- Having a range of experiences that enhance learning, such as undergraduate research, study abroad, capstone, internships, and service learning was determined to be desirable in meeting the needs of the contemporary learner and in response to our modern world.
- We asked: How do we balance or emphasize adequate breadth and depth?
- We sought simplification with ease of navigation and understanding as a key to our success.
- We acknowledged that specialized accreditation demands have impacts on General Education.
- We desired a universal (B.A. and B.S. across multiple colleges) General Education program with minimum requirements that had flexibility, transparency, and simplicity.
- Finally we recognized that the skills acquired through General Education are timeless – it is the problems to which those skills will be applied that will change or vary in time.

One very specific choice that we made early as a committee was to affirm that the 1988 (Babcock) Model Curriculum and declare its goals for an educated person remained foundational. We were inspired by that committee's suggested goal of reinforcing the general education goals throughout the curriculum. Further, the task at this point in time for ULAC was not to perform extensive reviews of General Education as had been done in 2003 (Blackwell) and 2005 (McHale), but to use those findings to advance our process.

As a significant inspirational touchstone for us was our institution's motto: "Education for Citizenship," and we asked to what extent General Education should help develop values of an educated citizen. It would be good to be able to say to parents that we educate citizens, and then have examples of what an educated citizen might look like following different educational paths at Ohio State. An educated citizen might, for example, be globally aware (through course work or study abroad); have leadership abilities (through co-curricular experiences); appreciate diversity (through curricular and co-curricular activities); and/or engage in discov-

ery (through research, studio, laboratory, and library experiences). Doing so focuses General Education on a range of experiences in and out of the classroom and is then seen as a component of the overall student experience.

We also spent some time discussing the practical skills students need in our global world and what would help them adapt to the complexities of a rapidly changing world. Examples might include knowledge about and skills to address financial, health, environmental, and technical matters from a variety of perspectives.

Finally, we were very much in tune with concerns for capacity for change – not just the willingness to make changes, but the actual hours involved in light of overall semester conversion. We attempted to ambitiously drive our process with a constant eye on the workload impact that our final result and its implementation might require.

In order to set a course for ourselves, a subcommittee of our groups was splintered off and tasked with the challenge of writing a document to articulate the overall curricular experience at Ohio State. Despite the quality of the work of our ancestors, General Education had historically been treated, for the most part, in isolation from the rest of a student's classroom experiences. We felt that a framing statement that showed the inherent linkage between the General Education, the Major, the Minor, the Double Major, and even free electives would be helpful

We also examined 'roadblocks' to revision of General Education. At first we centered on overall resistance to change, the magnitude and feasibility of any large-scale change, implementation and budget matters, and issues about competing philosophies. We also knew that:

- There exists a quarter course mentality for the GEC; shifting to semester thinking with respect to a new general education curriculum is difficult.
- Many large-enrollment courses in the GEC are introductory courses for a discipline. It would be challenging to develop and implement different kinds of courses on any scale.
- Considering if and how to require sequences, ensure knowledge building, and take into account various prerequisites to majors is hard to achieve with the array of majors and requirements across the university.

- The sheer number of courses at the institution, and how courses can be part of the curriculum, is daunting. If departments were to self-identify courses for the curriculum, for example, how can the institution ensure standards and somewhat comparable student experiences across the curriculum, and what would make the GEC a distinctive program? Re-certification of new courses is either time consuming or will likely result in only minimal changes.
- Finding ways to make general education more transparent and cohesive, as with theme based courses, can be at odds with desires for a distribution model that includes faculties' own disciplines.
- External constraints, such as the Ohio Board of Regents transfer and articulation guidelines, the requirement to accept advanced placement (AP) credit at a predetermined level within the University System of Ohio, and Regents guidelines for general education can potentially limit innovation.
- The recent 'super market' mentality to 'marketing' courses for enrollments is increasingly pervasive. Certainly the group felt that the perceived potential negative economic impact at a department level was one of the real reasons that the few McHale revisions that were ultimately enacted were quite minor. Our concern for this early fiscal war caused us to immediately ask Dean Steinmetz to speak to our group as well the Provost, Joe Alutto, to declare some sort of commitment to hold harmless departments, or provide additional funds to those who willingly took creative risks within the curriculum. Fortunately, we got a two year commitment from both administrators to react to such fiscal changes. If we had not gotten that commitment, this whole project would have been a real non-starter.
- Concerns about enrollment changes and the budget remain. So what did we end up with? Before I answer that, I want to say one more thing about our process. From the third meeting on we worked from models that were developed and coded by Ice Cream names. This naming device was used in part to break any unintentional connections of the curricular samples and the college and university from which they were drawn. Second, these ever changing samples gave all of us something common upon which to react, rather than just sharing thoughts about the overall problem. By working from models, values were clarified, currency was established as units (three semester units for most all future General Education courses).

We wrote and endorsed the “Curricular Experience” document which we looked at earlier and speaks to the content of General Education, building upon the original “Babcock” report and links between General Education and specialized study programs, including majors, minors, certifications, and other advanced curricular combinations. We also developed a “Requirement Sheet” which articulates a semester-based delivery scheme that (in our opinion) provides sufficient breadth and enables some depth to align with student and advisor needs for the multiple majors available across the university. Further, the combination of these two statements provided a framework for interpretation of the General Education requirement that is less complex than our current quarter-based model, yet contained greater flexibility and student choice.

So let’s look at the backside of the Curricular Experience statement and see our recommended program. Some aspects of the proposed model that we felt were particularly helpful included:

1. The ability of the “Open Option” courses to align mathematics and science foundational experiences for B.S. students without the need for General Education exceptions.
2. For both B.S. and B.A. students, the opportunity to make curricular choices that can nearly complete a minor in a wide variety of disciplinary areas.
3. The option of the “Education Abroad” experience to serve as a component of General Education.
4. The option of “Service Learning” courses to serve as a component of the General Education.
5. Here is an issue that we had to change or adapt our standard currency to reflect the goal of requiring ten units of science for all students (B.A. and B.S.) as the minimum requirement. These ten units must come from a student taking both Biological Science and Physical Science courses; B.A. students must take at least one lab, B.S. students must take two labs. This change addresses concerns about lowering the science requirements to an unacceptable level for B.A. students and enables greater flexibility to the sciences in the delivery structure of future courses (3-unit courses, 4-unit courses, 5-unit courses, 1-unit labs, 2-unit labs). The result of this change will mean that all BA students will be required to complete ten units of science, instead of the originally proposed eight units.
6. A hopeful reduction in the need for “lucky charm” identifiers

with the proposed structural combinations of Social Science courses into two rather than three categories, and the Global Studies course requirements into one rather than two groupings, with the goal of having one set of GE requirements across the university.

What Is Ahead?

We need to continue to monitor the impact of the state mandated acceptance of the level “3” score on advanced placement exams. We discussed whether the AP test information should be used to solely “place” students rather than have specified scores count toward either elective credit or a specific General Education credit. It was pointed out that the intent of the State Legislature and Ohio Board of Regents was clear: institutions in the University System of Ohio were required to accept AP credit scores of ‘3’ or better so that the credit could be applied to General Education requirements in order to expedite student time to degree and reduce student costs. We are certain that this conversation will continue.

We plan to consider additional skills and knowledge areas that had been raised for possible inclusion in the General Education requirements. The skills areas were technological literacy, visual literacy, and moral reasoning, and the knowledge / thematic areas were sustainability and health. We refer to these as our aspirational goals for the curricular experience and plan to both assess the present status of student learning in these content areas before adding them as requirements to develop appropriate expected learning outcomes for these categories in concert with various groups on campus.

Expected learning outcomes are also in process for the two new categories of service learning and education abroad. The service learning roundtable has already proposed the language for appropriate ELO’s for that category and ongoing talks are continuing with the Office of International Education to develop appropriate outcomes. Please note that not all service learning, nor all education abroad courses will be General Education approved. Only those that align with the specified outcomes and are certified through the curricular process will be granted that status. As well, all current ELO’s are being reviewed for completeness and relevance in the newly structured General Education.

Finally, after all of this processing of the currency questions, enrollment pattern concerns, fiscal impact, and aspirational goals, the real key ele-

ment in all of the delivery and instruction of the General Education is the talented faculty and staff who teach in all of these courses. With the overall goal being the development of an educated citizenry, each faculty member must understand the overall curricular matrix for undergraduates and commit to having the most positive impact on students as possible. As teachers we have both remarkable power and obligation to recognize our impact on those whom we teach.

After all of this work, I am reminded of some things from the musical *Wicked*. For some unexplainable reason, the song, “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished,” keeps ringing in my ears over and over again. Also, Ohio State has several things in common with the mythical land of Oz and the educational system that is explored in this musical. Both, so it would seem, are lead by a mysterious, diminutive male wizard who inspires one and all while wearing a bow tie. Both educational systems struggle with how to best teach their students. And finally, in light of the critical role that we as educators play in teaching our students, we would all do well to remember these words from the song “For Good” as we stand in front of classrooms full of students and participate in the delivery of General Education Courses.

*I've heard it said
That people come into our lives for a reason
Bringing something we must learn
And we are led
To those who help us most to grow
If we let them
And we help them in return
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true
But I know I'm who I am today
Because I knew you, for
I have been changed for good!*