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Reforming General Education: A Departmental Experience With Mission and Assessment

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Abstract

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Reforming General Education: A Departmental Experience With Mission and Assessment

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ABSTRACT: Changes to general education curricula are taking place across the globe. From the Bologna Process in Europe to the Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative in the United States, colleges and universities are reforming what constitutes general education for their students. At the University of Dayton, such reforms took the shape of a massive overhaul of general education to the new, student learning–driven Common Academic Program. The Department of Communication at University of Dayton was forced to fundamentally change its basic course in communication, formerly delivered in three separate one-credit modules, to a three-credit course with a different focus. This article details the story of how the Common Academic Program unfolded, what effect it had on the Department of Communication, and what process of reform was undertaken by the department to ensure that the new course remained a core aspect of the new Common Academic Program. This experience offers lessons to departments and administrators at institutions everywhere on how to effectively reform a general education course to accommodate a student learning focus, fit to university mission, and address the needs of the campus.

Change remains the one constant in any educational endeavor. Throughout the history of formal education, schools, colleges, and universities have constantly sought to respond to the times in which they exist by adapting both the delivery mechanism of education and the content they deliver. National and international education associations, organizations, and accrediting agencies seem to constantly push and direct pedagogical efforts in different ways. These efforts belong not to one particular country but rather have been undertaken across the globe.

In Europe, for example, recent years saw the development of the Bologna Process, which effectively set in place mechanisms designed to transform the face of higher education throughout Europe. In 2009, European ministers set four main goals for changing higher education in Europe: structural reform, connecting research with lifelong student learning and employability, increasing diversity in student populations, and ensuring a study-abroad experience for all undergraduates.[1] Although there remain distinct differences in the educational experiences encountered at institutions across the continent, the theme of updating the lecture model to a more contemporary experiential

pedagogical approach serves as the foundation of this latest round of reform efforts in Europe.

In the United States, higher education entered a period of reform aimed at achieving similar goals. In 2009, a report by Hart Associates commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) found that an astounding 89% of member institutions were "in some stage of assessing and modifying their general education program."[2] The focus on general education programs is not new, but the program launched to help promote significant changes to general education—namely, Liberal Education and America's Promise—represented a new aggressive initiative. Through the program, the AACU partners with willing institutions to focus on integrating four components into all levels of curricula: assessment, high-impact learning practices, essential learning outcomes, and inclusive excellence. In addition to Liberal Education and America's Promise, the AACU issued a call for American colleges and universities to fundamentally alter their approach to general education, from the widely used distribution model to one driven by outcomes.[3]

The University of Dayton (UD) responded to this latest push for reform of general education and, over the last several years, developed and piloted a new Common Academic Program (CAP) for its undergraduate students. One significant component of the new general education program at the UD is the replacement of the oral communication modules, whereby students take three one-credit workshop-style courses on specific communication skills, with a three-credit intensive oral communication course. The story of CAP's development provides a window into how university and college academic departments can and must play an active role in general education reform on their campuses. This article details that story—specifically, how it unfolded with regard to the basic course in communication—and it provides other institutions with a model for implementing effective educational reform at the university and departmental level. First, we provide a brief history of general education in the United States and demonstrate how it has periodically engaged in reform. We then discuss the history of general education and the development of CAP at the UD, specifically. Third, we explain the deliberate efforts of the Department of Communication to adequately reform its oral communication course to fit the needs of the university and the call of the AACU. We conclude by laying out the lessons to be learned by administrators and departments at other institutions from the UD reform experience.

General Education in the United States: A Brief History

The history of general education in the United States is best characterized by the "depth versus breadth" debate between proponents of general education and those who favor liberal education. It is also colored by the tension between required and elective course components of the curriculum. In this

section, we explain the difference between general and liberal education and explore the historical tension between curricular choice and required courses.

Often used synonymously, general education and liberal education in fact have distinct differences between them. On one hand, liberal education esteems the pursuit of "knowledge for its own sake"; on the other, general education focuses on a curriculum that helps students accomplish objectives such as thinking critically and making ethical choices.[4] Most colleges and universities seek to do both with their general education programs so that

> undergraduates should acquire an ample store of knowledge, both in depth, by concentrating on a particular field, and in breadth, by devoting attention to several different disciplines. They should gain the ability to communicate with precision and style, a basic competence in quantitative skills . . . and a capacity to think clearly and critically.[5]

This model, where students learn depth in a particular discipline of their choice while being exposed to the broad concerns of multiple other areas of study, exemplifies the approach to education that both the Bologna Process and the AACU are trying to change.

Such change efforts, however, are not so easy when the history of higher education demonstrates a gradual movement toward the very structure currently in place. When higher education in the United States was in its infancy, a few universities dominated its development. One of those institutions is the renowned Harvard University, which, when it began, offered no general education and no majors—every student received the same curriculum.[6] The Yale report, published in 1828, called for universities to change this approach and focus on developing students' broader appreciation of the world around them. In 1869 Charles Eliot, president of Harvard, used this report as a model for changing the structure of higher education to include an elective system for students and, in effect, broadening the number of courses and topics available to students.[7] It also had the effect of creating academic units and departments that have, over time, become the principal actors in determining university curricula.

In the 20th century, several additional important reform efforts took place—most notably, one establishing the current distribution model paradigm for general education. Eliot's successor at Harvard, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, disassembled the elective structure of his predecessor to establish a distribution model where students no longer chose whatever courses they wished to take but instead were required to complete foundational classes so that they all had a consistent experience for their degree. While it still allowed for some degree of choice, all students took classes in biology, physical sciences, and humanities to receive general minimum exposure to multiple disciplines.[8] Schools around the country quickly emulated the model that Lowell instituted, thus changing the very landscape of higher education in the United States.

In 1945 Harvard again found itself at the center of higher education reform with the publication of "General Education in a Free Society," which advocated integrating the disciplinary structure of academia with general education.[9] The report's specific recommendations were never adopted, but the spirit of the document grafted itself to the consciousness of higher education administrators. That spirit included a desire to protect students from overspecializing in a given academic area without understanding how their chosen discipline's knowledge works in other fields. Since this report, institutions of higher education have sought to maintain a balance between what students should know about the world and what they need to know regarding their specific fields.

"General Education in a Free Society" served as a precursor to more change in higher education during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1965 the government opened access to higher education to unprecedented levels with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, making millions in scholarships and loans available to students across the country. The wider the access, the more the push for higher education to offer curricula that helped prepare students to enter the workplace.[10] This increased the offerings within disciplines, reduced the foundational courses within general education, and diminished the interdisciplinary appreciation that Lowell's original design encouraged. Ultimately, this created the perception of general education as a "menu" of courses from which students chose courses to "get out of the way," essentially rendering general education an obstacle to the "important" classes within a student's area of specialization.

This approach to general education was not without its detractors. In 1977 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching attacked the state of general education, calling it a "disaster area."[11] This report encouraged significant reform efforts for higher education in the 1980s, but most of these efforts preserved the very worst aspects of the distribution model as practiced. The changes that came from this period included adding new courses and new distribution areas for required courses, rather than a complete redesign of the program itself.

In 1994 the AACU examined general education requirements at member institutions and found three specific problems that emanated from the stubborn adherence to the distribution model. First, there was no organizing philosophy for general education that students could understand. Second, there was little to no connection among the courses that students were required to take in general education programs. Third, these problems combined to create confusion in students, dramatically reducing their desire to learn foundational ideas and concepts.[12] Since then, the AACU has encouraged institutions to adopt an outcome-based model for general education.

An outcomes-based model does not necessarily require courses but rather that students effectively demonstrate the achievement of core competencies.

The changes made several years ago to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's general education program provide a window into what such an adjustment might look like. There, faculty resolved to transition its general education program from a distribution model to a renamed Achievement Centered Education, centered on "student achievement of ten distinct learning outcomes" and a commitment "to assessing student achievement of the outcomes."[13] To graduate, students in the program must pass an Achievement Centered Education–certified course for each of the university's designated learning outcomes. This approach allows for the integration of general education into major curricula and establishes, in the words of Wehlburg, "a new and better understanding of the undergraduate educational experience."[14] There are then no required courses per se but rather outcomes for which students must demonstrate aptitude. In fact, regional accrediting institutions in the United States now are moving to require such achievement- and outcome-based models for member institutions.[15]

The University of Nebraska model for curricular reform is somewhat similar to that undertaken by the UD in the development of its program: CAP. In the next section, we detail the history of general education and the broad, university-wide efforts to replace the distribution model with the integrated, outcome-based CAP. We also pay attention to the impact that the change had on the Department of Communication, which initially encountered the calamitous prospect of losing its place in the core education for all students at the institution but managed to regroup and develop a course that the faculty supported.

General Education Reform and the UD: Developing CAP

In many ways, the history of general education reform efforts at the UD mirrors that of the development and change in general education at a national level. This section briefly describes the evolution of the general education program at the UD, from the traditional, instruction-centered paradigm to the new, learning-centered CAP.

UD's Original General Education Program: What Is Being Replaced

The roots of the general education program that is in the process of being replaced at the UD can be traced to a major revision of the common curriculum completed in 1982, just 5 years after the damning comments on general education issued by the Carnegie Foundation. The purpose of that original policy was to make "students aware of the diversity of intellectual thought and theory represented by the sciences, the humanities and the social sciences."[16] Grounded in the instructional paradigm, the program was based less on the institutional mission and more on a conception of a

liberal education. The goals of the liberal education, expressed as "needs," are summarized in five statements:

> All students need: 1. an understanding and appreciation of western civilization; 2. an understanding and appreciation of the role of social structure in personal and social development; 3. an understanding an appreciation of the role of science and technology in enhancing personal and social development; 4. an understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic dimension of personal and social existence; and 5. an understanding and appreciation of the moral and religious development of the person.[17]

Fulfilling the needs described in the document boiled down to exposing the students to course work in specific fields. Those courses included

> 1. two courses in western civilization; 2. two courses in physical and life sciences; 3. two courses in the social sciences; 4. one course in literary, visual, or performing arts; and 5. four courses in religious studies or philosophy.[18]

While there were some general guidelines suggested for sequencing, the curriculum encouraged "flexibility" to allow these courses to be taken along with courses required for a student's major. The practical result, however, was that the courses were taken by students when convenient. Some courses that were intended to be foundational were not convenient to take until the fourth year, thus undermining the ability of the curriculum to build a solid foundation.

In addition to the general education requirements, math, English, and communication knowledge and skills were addressed in a document detailing basic skills.[19] The document required one course in math, one course in speaking and listening, and two in English composition. Students would thus be exposed to content from the humanities and social sciences and taught specific skills that transcended disciplines.

The UD made many adjustments and modifications to the general education program in the years since its inception,[20] but the current program remains largely the same. One change worthy of note occurred in 1991 when the university adopted the "Thematic Clusters" requirement, which was an attempt to allow integration of courses within the general education requirements. When grouped, the courses "provide a focus on fundamental human questions which are richer and broader than that provided by individual courses."[21] Three years after the adoption of the cluster requirement at the UD, the AACU found a significant lack of student understanding of general education programs across the country. Even though the Thematic Clusters made a positive contribution to the integration of courses in the UD's general education program, many students and faculty members as well did not understand this contribution. As such, it was seen as just "one more complication" to an already confusing set of requirements.

Similar to the path taken by the University of Nebraska, the UD began to refocus its general education program in the wake of new calls by the AACU

to focus on learning rather than course distributions and instructional models. To this end, the UD attempted to redesign the general education program based on the university's mission and the explicit student learning outcomes related to that mission. These efforts began in an effort to provide "a more integrative, more reflective, and more engaging educational program for UD students in the 21st century."[22] CAP reflects the trends in higher education, moving from an instructional paradigm to more of a learning paradigm, as described by Barr and Tagg where the focus is on student learning rather than faculty teaching.[23]

Sticking to Mission: Moving to Learning-Centered General Education

The mission statement of the UD reads, "The University of Dayton is a comprehensive Catholic university, a diverse community committed, in the Marianist tradition, to educating the whole person and to linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service." As with many mission statements, there is often a good deal of latitude for interpretation, and this one is no exception. However, after a lengthy process, a faculty committee articulated seven learning outcomes that should be realized by all students at the university. These outcomes were expressed in a document entitled "Habits of Inquiry and Reflection"[24] and consist of the following:

1. *Scholarship*: All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate advanced habits of academic inquiry and creativity through the production of a body of artistic, scholarly, or community-based work intended for public presentation or defense.
2. *Faith Traditions*: Students' abilities should be developed sufficiently to allow them to examine deeply their own faith commitments and also to participate intelligently and respectfully in dialogue with other traditions.
3. *Diversity*: All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate intellectually informed, appreciative, and critical understanding of the cultures, histories, times, and places of multiple others, as marked by class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and other manifestations of difference.
4. *Community*: All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate understanding of and practice in the values and skills necessary for learning, living, and working in communities of support and challenge. These include accepting difference, resolving conflicts peacefully, promoting reconciliation, and respectful collaboration with persons from diverse backgrounds.
5. *Practical Wisdom*: All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate practical wisdom in addressing real human problems drawing upon advanced knowledge, values, and skills in their chosen profession or major course of study. Students should be able to diagnose symptoms and construct, evaluate, and implement possible solutions.
6. *Critical Evaluation of Our Times*: Undergraduates will evaluate critically and imaginatively the ethical, historical, social, political, technological, economic, and ecological challenges of their times in light of the past.

7. *Vocation*: All undergraduates will develop and demonstrate ability to articulate reflectively the purposes of their life and proposed work through the language of vocation. They will examine both the interdependence of self and community and the responsibility to live in service of others.

The faculty felt that every course should not try to address all seven learning outcomes but that, taken as a whole, a UD undergraduate education should address all the learning outcomes and students should have had curricular experiences that cover all seven by the time they complete their degrees. To facilitate this achievement, all courses in the new CAP must address at least *some* of the outcomes.

CAP and the Oral Communication Requirement at the UD

One of the first casualties of the move to CAP was the oral communication requirement, previously delivered in three one-credit workshops, or modules. The modules were designed for students to take on a time-as-needed basis, with group communication taken in the first year and informative speaking in the second or third year, when students begin to deliver presentations; finally, the interviewing module was left for seniors, as they would be on the job market and thus need those skills. When the university made the decision to move to CAP, the modules were eliminated, and the Department of Communication sought to develop a new oral communication course that addressed the needs of the university community, adhered to the mission, and addressed several of the seven student learning outcomes in the "Habits of Inquiry and Reflection" document.

The provost charged a committee in the Department of Communication with surveying the faculty to determine if there should be a university-wide requirement for the basic course in communication and, if so, what the content and focus of the course should be. This was an unnerving position to be in because the current university-wide requirement was being called into question as the CAP was being developed. The good news about this situation was that every department received the same charge. The provost wanted to start with a "clean slate" and require all departments to make a case for its courses to be included.

The committee interviewed faculty members and administrators in more than 30 departments spanning all the academic divisions. They decided that trying to "sell" a course would not be the most effective approach. If the basic course was to survive and thrive in the new CAP, it must be that it fulfills a genuine need as perceived by the constituent departments and supports the mission of the university. The decision was made to simply have conversations with faculty members to gather information on what they perceived were the oral communication needs of their students.

A significant challenge came in the form of how to begin that conversation. Perhaps the most obvious approach was to ask, "What do you perceive to

be the oral communication needs of your students?" But it was decided that few faculty members could give a meaningful answer to that question. Many believe that "oral communication" means to "give a speech" and perhaps to use a visual aid such as PowerPoint. To counteract the perception that this would be the focus of the course, the committee asked the questions in terms of specific skills, knowledge, and learning outcomes. Some of the questions asked included the following:

Is it important for your students to be able to *explain* specialized concepts to either other specialists or to nonspecialists who have a need for the information?[25]

Is it important for your students to be able to *synthesize* or bring together disparate information or concepts, distill them into a coherent perspective, and be able to effectively explain it to people who have a need for the information?

Is it important for your students to be able to *advocate* a position using credible evidence and sound logic; To be able to conduct research with a keen eye to evaluation of sources?

Is it important for your students to be able to *collaborate* with others both inside and outside of the profession? In a face-to-face setting? In a mediated setting? Across racial, cultural and/or national boundaries?

Is it important for your students to be able to engage in *civil discourse*? (*Civil* was defined as the ability to respectfully participate in a discussion in which participants thoughtfully, and with an open mind, examine a variety of opinions, including their own; exchange diverse ideas; and commit to listening attentively to the perspective of the other.[26])

Is it important for your students to be able to *listen* and be actively engaged in communication events?

The interview questions inspired lively exchanges and engaging conversations. Most faculty members who were contacted thanked the committee for consulting with them before proposing a course for CAP. Many offered to continue to supply feedback during the development and pilot testing of the new course. In addition, many expressed an interest in regular and ongoing consultation with the communication department. Briefly, the skills and knowledge that raised the most interest were the ability to explain specialized concepts to nonspecialists, the ability to advocate a position using credible evidence and sound logic, the ability to engage in civil discourse and true dialogue,[27] and the ability to research and evaluate sources and evidence. These principle behaviors became the crux of the course designed by the OCWG. **[Q1]** With these goals in mind, the department felt that the new oral communication course could address four of the seven university learning outcomes:

Scholarship: The scholarship outcome specifies that the work of the students is intended for public presentation and defense. Some departments, such as chemistry, require a public defense of senior projects, and the School of

Q1: **Please expand OCWG to full formal name.**

Engineering requires public presentations of projects and proposals in the second year. The course will provide instruction in public presentations and will develop the students' ability to articulate and defend a position using logic and sound evidence.

Diversity: The diversity outcome requires that students appreciate and understand diverse others. Critical for engaging diverse others is the ability to engage in conversation that enhances understanding, which requires skills in dialogue and involvement in the communication event. Involvement necessitates an awareness of, and a respect for, the other/audience in communication interactions.

Community: The community outcome specifies values and skills for living, learning, and working in communities of support and challenge; resolving conflicts peacefully; and respectfully collaborating with persons from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. All these outcomes require dialogue. These skills are also necessary for global citizenship.

Critical evaluation of our times: The advocacy assignment and the final dialogue/debate project will focus on critical evaluation of our times.

The goals identified through the conversations with faculty across campus and the links to the student learning outcomes established by the "Habits of Inquiry and Reflection" helped the department create new, more appropriate, and clear learning outcomes for the new basic course—namely, the ability to explain complex ideas to nonexperts, the ability to advocate a position using credible evidence and sound logic, the ability to engage in civil discourse and true dialogue about controversial ideas, and the ability to analyze and evaluate the oral messages of others.

The next stage in the development of this new course involved determining how to design a course that accomplished these learning outcomes. To that end, the department began identifying possible material, piloting different versions of the course, and soliciting feedback on those labors. In the next section, we detail this next step in the process and explain how the Department of Communication at the UD made specific choices regarding the content and delivery of this new required oral communication course that maintained a focus on student learning and achievement of the core elements of CAP.

Reforming the Basic Course for CAP: A Process Model

The process of creating a course that fulfilled a university need for oral communication instruction as identified through the cross-campus interviews unfolded in several stages. In this section, we detail that process of curricular reform, illustrating a model that other universities or colleges could adopt to develop courses that fit their learning objectives and missions. We begin by describing the first step following the identification of the four specific learning objectives for the UD's new oral communication course: identifying course materials. Once the department identified mate-

rials, the second step involved limited but varied pilot tests with robust data collection to measure effectiveness of course materials and delivery formats. The next step closed the loop of assessing those limited pilots by determining the best way for the course to proceed on the basis of the pilots' results. Finally, before fully offering the course as part of general education at the UD, the department created a mechanism for campus feedback on the course so that it could determine if the course fit the perceived needs that the campus initially reported to the department.

The First Stage: Identifying Course Materials

Once learning objectives are established for any class, the next step for an instructor is to find the materials that will help achieve those outcomes. This is the same for an elective course as it is for a general education course, such as the new basic course at the UD. To the end, the department created an ad hoc committee of three faculty members who solicited and reviewed textbook materials, identified potential supplemental readings, and generated possible assignments that might accomplish the learning objectives in the course. The results of these reviews informed the initial three pilot sections launched the following semester.

There is a plethora of textbooks available for the basic course in communication from numerous publishing outlets, making a substantive review in such a short period challenging. Additionally, given the learning outcomes for the new basic course, the committee quickly realized that no textbook existed that would adequately address the learning goals for the course. That said, there were books that could potentially address some of the needs of the course. So, to facilitate a fair and extensive review of books and readings, the committee reached out to every publishing group that listed books that might work in the new course. It met with representatives from eight publishing outlets early in the semester and shared the learning objectives with them, making clear that the committee was not expecting books to fit the course perfectly but rather wanted to see creative solutions for developing materials for the class.

Each publisher was asked to submit a proposal for providing reading materials and support for the new basic course. In the proposal, the committee requested that the publishing house explain how it would use its book listing to create material that would achieve the learning outcomes of the new basic course. The committee ultimately received proposals from each of the eight publishers originally contacted. The proposals included some suggesting a single-book solution; others provided a plan for a custom textbook that combined elements from multiple books, including trade books; and some floated the idea of the department writing an original book for the course.

The departmental committee reviewed the proposals and determined what it would test in the pilot sections the following semester. One faculty mem-

ber elected to use a public speaking textbook from one publisher and a trade paperback from another. A second faculty member chose to use the same trade paperback while assigning various chapters and journal articles from different publications. The final faculty member opted for a public speaking textbook from one company and a custom combination of chapters from three books from another publishing company. All told, content from more than 10 sources provided by four publishers were selected for the initial pilot phase. Those companies whose materials were not selected for use were told that their materials would be held in the event that the pilots did not find acceptable content.

Concurrent with the course material review, the committee worked to determine assignment structures that would facilitate the achievement of course learning objectives. All the classes contained a midterm exam and a final exam but also presentation assignments that differed from usual first-year communication classes. A traditional course in public speaking requires students to deliver anywhere from three to six speeches, whereas a typical hybrid introductory course in communication asks students for one speech and perhaps a group project. The course at the UD is neither of these, and the element of dialogue made it particularly difficult to determine assessable performative assignments. Ultimately, each instructor settled on different assignments in the hopes of finding some acceptable presentations to incorporate in the final course.

One of the instructors chose to use the typical public speaking model and require students to deliver three speeches: one informative, one persuasive, and one "invitational" whereby the student engaged the class. A second model elected a variation of the public speaking model; however, the presentations were themed. In this class, the first speech informed the audience about a controversial event that recently occurred on campus; the second presentation persuaded the audience about an evaluation of the response by the campus community to the event; and the third required students to respond to a speech delivered during that second round. The final instructor opted to use digital delivery for one of the speeches, an in-class model for the second, and a roundtable-style discussion for the third. In each class, the third speech represented an attempt to infuse dialogue into the course assignments, as called for by the course learning objectives.

Additionally, two sections tested a different classroom pedagogy in the hopes that it would embed dialogic activity throughout the course. This *Q2:* **Edit** teaching style *interteaching* came from an examination of educational litera-**alright for** ture, and it began in psychology departments several years ago.[28] Briefly, **"Briefly"** interteaching involves students completing preparation questions on their **sen-** assigned readings before coming to class; then, in class, each student is **tence—** paired with another classmate, and the two are asked to teach each other the **did I infer** answers to those preparation questions without the aid of books or notes. **that cor-** **rectly?** **[Q2]** In these interteaching sessions, the instructor serves as a guide or

coach when the groups encounter difficult material. At the end of the class, the students fill out a form that identifies what they would like to have the instructor cover in the next class based on the experience of teaching each other. At the UD, one instructor used interteaching for 22 class sessions, while the other used it for 10 sessions.

At the conclusion of the semester, the committee reviewed materials, discussed assignments, and determined the structure for the three pilots, and it identified a plan for assessing the results of the pilot sections in the spring. The results of those assessments would help finalize what materials to select and what assignments to incorporate into the final design of the course. In the next section, we detail the various procedures for assessment used to determine the way forward for the course.

Assessing the Pilots and Closing the Loop

The committee established a robust plan to assess the various readings and assignments tested in each section of the pilots. These included quantitative measures as well as qualitative efforts to gather information on student performance and satisfaction. Each measure helped provide clear data on how to proceed and what to include in the final version of the course.

The first assessment measure used was a pretest/posttest based on aspects of the learning objectives. The test contained questions directly related to the student learning objectives and thus did not depend on the texts used in the course, something necessitated by the use of different materials in each section. This 20-question multiple-choice test was administered in the first week of the class; then, at the end of the term, it was delivered as part of the final exam for the course. Embedding the posttest in the final exam ensured that students took it seriously. The pretest/posttest was designed to help determine whether the course objectives were achieved and which section accomplished those goals better than the others.

The second measure used to assess the pilot sections was a survey to assess the quality and clarity of each reading in each section. This nine-question survey asked students to rate the difficulty and clarity of each reading assignment; it also gathered demographic data regarding gender and major. In addition, students were asked to explain, in a few sentences, whether or not the reading should be included in the basic course going forward and why they thought the way they did. The survey was conducted with SurveyMonkey.com, and students received extra credit for participating in as many of the surveys as they could. This helped the department gather data on how students felt about the readings being tested in each section.

Third, the department enlisted the aid of the campus's Learning and Teaching Center to conduct a "midterm instructional diagnosis," which is conducted by a faculty member or facilitator who visits the class halfway through the term and discusses with students the course structure and the

instructor to identify how the class is proceeding. This process helped provide some qualitative data in the middle of the term regarding how students received the pilot courses.

The next assessment measure used to gather data from the course involved interviewing students in the pilots at the conclusion of the term. These interviews allowed students to articulate how they felt regarding course content, assignments, and structure. Students were required to meet with one of two graduate students, who conducted the roughly 10-minute interviews, which amounted for 5% of their grade in the course. These qualitative reports were collated, and the graduate students reported to the faculty themes of responses on content, delivery, and assignments.

Finally, student responses to interteaching days in the two sections that employed this approach were examined to see how students felt about this instructional technique. These qualitative responses helped the department determine whether this approach worked to facilitate dialogues within the classroom and whether students enjoyed this style of learning within the basic course. These data were reported and analyzed on a continual basis, as the three instructors met each week to discuss the progress of the pilots.

All data allowed a robust assessment of the pilot sections, thus enabling the department to make informed decisions regarding the constitution of the new basic course. The student feedback and performance measures, as well as the faculty input into the development of the learning objectives, presented the opportunity for a course in which faculty and students invested time and effort creating. When all the data were collected and reviewed, the committee made specific decisions regarding what materials would be selected for use and what assignments would be included in the final course, thus closing the loop on the assessment portion of course development. The purpose of this article is to describe the process rather than report the results of the assessment, but suffice it to say, the final course product kept portions of each pilot section but does not look like any one of them.

Campus Feedback: The Final Pilot Phase

The final phase of development for the new basic course involved the solicitation of campus feedback on the final version of the course. At this point in the development timeline, 1 year remained before all incoming first-year students would be required to take the class, so time existed for minor changes to the course. Unlike the effort to gather feedback at the start of reforms to general education, interviewing was not used this time; rather, select faculty members were brought together.

This group, termed the Basic Course Advisory Board, was selected by the administration in consultation with the Department of Communication. The board contains senior and junior faculty from all the divisions of the university. There are members from the business, engineering, education and

allied professions, the social sciences, the natural sciences, the humanities, the university library, and the Learning and Teaching Center. These faculty members were provided the syllabus for the course and assignment descriptions and were asked to observe a session of one section of the class. They will then provide feedback as a group and, ideally, serve as promoters for the class to the rest of the campus.**[Q3]**

Ultimately, these efforts helped the department create a course that fulfilled the oral communication needs of the students as identified by the faculty, and it did so in a manner consistent with the university's mission. This process took several years to complete, but the fruits of that effort are significant. The campus has a course that suits its needs; the faculty from around campus had input in its creation; and student feedback influenced its design. The final section of this article explores some of the lessons that administrators and educators from around the world can take from this experience in curricular reform at the UD.

Conclusion: Reform Process Lessons

The UD has engaged in reforming its general education program periodically over the past 40 years, but this most recent change in its structure represents the most robust and comprehensive effort to date. The scope of the change affected departments across campus, none more so than the Department of Communication, which found its module course stripped from the required curriculum. In an effort to return oral communication to the new general education program (CAP), the department initiated a deliberate step-by-step process to develop a course that fit university mission and campus needs. The story of how this successful plan unfolded contains several lessons for administrators and educators at schools around the country that are engaging in similar curricular reform efforts.

First and foremost, departments who depend on courses included in a university-wide curriculum should always maintain a dialogue with other faculty and administrators across campus. One of the reasons why the oral communication modules were stripped from the first iteration of CAP was due to a perceived lack of interest in general education by the Department of Communication. Specifically, the department felt that the reform movement to CAP was simply an exercise that would not have any impact or effect, and so it elected to not get involved. This created an impression of the department where it seemed not to care about the basic course as part of the general education curriculum, thus leading others to argue against its inclusion. Once eliminated, the department made significant and successful efforts to engage in the reform movement, and its solicitations engendered broad support in a new course for CAP. Put simply, the takeaway is that departments should remain engaged in efforts that they perceive as perfunctory, because if they do not work with the campus, they will be reformed by it. That said, the story

Q3: **Did I read that right in terms of chronology? The members have been given the syllabus and the request to observe, but they have not yet provided feedback? If they have provided feedback, perhaps update sentence?**

of the UD's Department of Communication also shares positive aspects of dialogue with the campus.

Once the modules were removed from the curriculum, the Department of Communication committed to maintain consistent dialogue with the rest of the campus community. These conversations were not designed to be self-promotional but rather to engage others in discussions about what their students needed. These conversations continued throughout the course development process, thus creating an opportunity for faculty and students to have "buy-in" with regard to course construction. The channels of communication remained open throughout the process and showed a deliberate desire to establish goodwill with the rest of the campus. It also demonstrated to them what the class contained, thus making them proponents of the course with their colleagues.

The second lesson to take away from the UD's story relates to the importance of the university mission. Faculty should always be familiar with the mission of its school or university and able to articulate how its courses relate to that mission. The mission is what drives each institution, and all classes should, in some way, connect to that mission. Inability to connect to mission will invariably create problems for a department and jeopardize courses in the general curriculum that do not forward the goals of the institution.

Third, departments should appreciate the importance of assessing student learning objectives within all courses, especially those within the general education program. Assessment is often viewed as a chore and is not taken very seriously by faculty and departments; however, the AACU and regional accrediting agencies now push for assessment of student learning objectives. Assessment, when done properly and efficiently, not only provides clear details on how courses affect students and how they can be improved but also generates a rich amount of publishable data. Assessment data can help departments defend their courses' inclusion in general education, demonstrate development of students over time, and provide important information on how classes can be improved. Such data can also serve as an additional incentive for faculty members to pursue assessment, as they can be encouraged to publish the results of their efforts in academic outlets.

Assessment of student learning objectives can and should be done throughout the course development process. Such an involved effort will ultimately inform the creation of a class that fits the needs of the students and faculty. It also illustrates a department that is interested in achieving results in the classroom. This article provides several useful ways in which assessment measures can be employed to make decisions regarding course content and assignments, but by no means should they be understood as the only measures for determining this information.

The most important lesson to learn from the UD experience and the national efforts at improving higher education is that general education reform should not be understood as singular events that occur every few decades but

rather as continual efforts at improving the quality of education offered to students. General education courses are not static, and they should be continually monitored through assessment and interactions with the campus community to make necessary reforms to the curriculum students receive. Thus, reform becomes a part of the course and not a task undertaken at timed intervals. At the UD, the new basic course will be continually reviewed and reformed to best facilitate student growth and learning. IJER

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