REPORT
GENERAL EDUCATION REVIEW COMMITTEE

Context

On January 14, 1998, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Barbara Burch established the General Education Review Committee to study the university’s general education program and to make recommendations. Several elements sparked the appointment of this committee. Universities are facing more questions about the goals of general education and how we can demonstrate that students are reaching those goals. In Kentucky, higher education policy makers are paying increased attention to general education. Recently, the Council on Postsecondary Education, acting at the behest of the General Assembly, directed institutions to assess incoming students in math, reading, and writing and to place them in courses accordingly. While universities have some latitude about how they implement this policy, they are required to give the Council information about how students perform in math, English, and reading. Council staff members have also initiated discussions with the chief academic officers about institutional assessment strategies for academic programs and for general education.

On our own campus, the 1997 Institutional Review (Fisher Report) raised several questions about the university’s general education requirements, including assessment. The report advised the university to “narrow its General Education course options and insist that specific outcomes be realized by limited courses that the institution can guarantee are rigorously developed and rigorously evaluated.” It also criticized the lack of a computer literacy requirement and a thin foreign language requirement. Three of the report’s fifty-seven recommendations speak to general education. The Board of Regents has asked the university to respond to all fifty-seven recommendations, and the work of the General Education Review Committee is part of that response.

Accordingly, in conducting its work, the committee has been mindful of several considerations. First of all, we have been guided by Vice President Burch’s initial charge:

Specifically, the committee should seek to clarify the goals of the program, ensure clearer connectedness between goals and requirements, and develop effective measures of accountability to document student achievement of the goals. In addition, the committee should consider a reduction in the total number of credit hours required for general education as well as the possible need for narrowing the range of choices for fulfilling general education requirements so that students will have a more common learning experience that can be defined, communicated, and assured. There have been some observations that suggest the present range of options for completing particular requirements is so extensive that it is almost impossible to be definitive in communicating or assessing core outcomes for all students. Another observation I have received is that the number of hours required for general education at WKU is the largest among the universities in the state.
We also considered Institutional Review Recommendations 10, 11, and 12 which state:

10. The President should charge a reexamination of the University's General Education Program. The current program suffers from a "cafeteria" approach to courses and also lacks specific requirements that are critical to a liberal education and intelligent citizenship. The time frame should be no longer than one year.

11. Western does not have a specific, binding computer literacy requirement for all of its undergraduate students. This is a major deficiency; a student today has not been liberally educated for full participation in an increasingly technological society if he/she is not computer literate.

12. The Foreign Language requirement should require the completion of at least two years of college level language (or equivalent). Full participation in an increasingly international world requires substantive command over a foreign language, not the least because this is how we come to understand a foreign culture. Students that do not have substantive foreign language abilities will have seriously narrowed their career options in addition to compromising their understanding of the world.

Finally, while listening to critics of the present curriculum, we have also tried to identify and build on its existing strengths. As an extension of that approach, the committee believes that meaningful change in general education can come incrementally, and that premise undergirds our work.

The committee has sought the involvement of faculty members throughout the review and development process. In addition to two general invitations for faculty comments on general education, we distributed preliminary reports for campus consideration in May, 1998, in the spring of 1999, and again in the spring of 2000. Using the reports as a basis for conversation, we met with interested faculty in all five colleges during the Spring 1999 semester and again in Spring 2000. The Spring 2000 draft was available to all faculty, staff, and students through the Web, and we established a listserv to solicit further comments. During our process, we also involved numerous faculty members on subcommittees, we held joint meetings with the General Education Committee of the Academic Council, and we met with representatives of departments most deeply involved in general education. This report reflects our further discussions and modifications in light of the comments we received from these constituencies.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Review Committee recommends a revision of the university’s General Education Goals Statement.

   A crucial first step toward a workable assessment process is stating specific goals for general education in measurable terms. Accordingly, the committee recommends a revision of the current goals statement that extends those goals through specific, assessable objectives. Our document is very similar to the current statement of general education goals, but it is not identical. We have tried to state those goals with enough precision to permit faculty members to measure a student’s progress toward meeting them. A copy of the proposed statement is attached.

2. The Review Committee recommends that the separate non-categorical requirements be deleted and that the writing, ethics, and environmental components be addressed in other ways.

   We have serious reservations about the effectiveness of the non-categorical requirements, and we believe they contribute to the perception that general education lacks focus. (For example, roughly 250 courses are listed in the writing component alone.)

   A. The Review Committee recommends that the university require documentation of student writing skills to be part of every program’s senior assessment. As students move beyond the basic skill level required in general education, individual academic programs are better positioned to develop and assess the writing skills within the majors through discipline-specific instructional strategies.

   B. The Review Committee recommends that ethical issues be incorporated into the categorical requirements and into the major programs where appropriate.

   C. The Review Committee recommends that environmental issues be incorporated into the categorical requirements and into the major programs where appropriate.

3. The Review Committee recommends that the university strengthen instructional and administrative support for its general education program.

   Currently administrative responsibility for the general education program is dispersed across campus. While this is a desirable arrangement in many ways, no person or committee is ultimately responsible for giving leadership to this important part of the curriculum. With the emphasis on assessment, the need to assure the development of skills, and the importance of articulation with high school curricula, the university should designate someone to take more direct responsibility for coordinating the program. General education accounts for at least a third of a student’s program, even without the non-categorical requirements. A program of this size needs more sustained leadership than the present structure provides.
We recommend that the university designate a faculty member to serve as the coordinator of general education with an alternate assignment of six workload units. This person should serve a three-year term, renewable for one additional three-year term. The coordinator should work closely with the General Education Committee of the University Senate in addressing issues pertaining to the general education curriculum. For reporting purposes, the coordinator should be assigned to the Office of the Provost.

Also, the university must make a more concerted effort to provide instructional support for the general education curriculum. The recommendations of this committee, as well as the need to assess general education, will only add to the considerable responsibilities that departments and instructors already carry. The university community must make resource commitments that support its decisions about academics. For example, too much instruction in basic academic skills is delivered by part-time faculty. We must be prepared to provide support for general education that is commensurate with its primacy in the undergraduate curriculum.

4. The General Education Review Committee recommends that the foreign language requirement remain 3 hours but that students must demonstrate a skill level equivalent to the second semester of study.

The committee agrees with the emphasis the Institutional Review places on language study in an increasingly international world. We are concerned that the present 3-hour requirement does little to build language skills. Also, many students with a good background in a second language apparently opt to take the introductory course instead of selecting a course that builds on the skills they have already acquired.

The Council on Postsecondary Education has recently made two years of non-native language study a mandatory component of Kentucky’s pre-college curriculum, a requirement which will take effect for students completing high school in 2004. Two years of high school language study is commonly considered to be comparable to two semesters of college study. Consequently, many students should be well prepared to take the second semester course or to meet this requirement through testing. The Review Committee recommends that this change in Western’s requirement take effect in conjunction with the change in the pre-college curriculum in 2004.

5. The General Education Review Committee recommends that the lower-division English courses in general education place more emphasis on developing each student’s ability to use standard written English and research and referencing skills.

Effective writing is critically important to the overall success of our students. In preparation for more advanced writing in higher level courses and in the major, students must first demonstrate mastery of standard written English (e.g., syntax, spelling, punctuation) and research and referencing skills (e.g., quoting, paraphrasing, summarizing, documenting sources). We recommend that the English Department structure a curriculum that documents mastery of these important skills within the first two years of university study. One way this could be accomplished would be to sharpen the focus of these two components in both English 100 and 200. As noted in Recommendation 2, the committee also
recommends that the university require that the documentation of student writing skills be part of every program’s senior assessment.

6. The General Education Review Committee recommends that the university identify entering students who are deficient in basic computer skills and provide opportunities for students to develop those skills.

Given the increasing importance of technology in undergraduate instruction, entering students need a grasp of basic computer skills such as Internet research, word processing, and the use of e-mail, skills we consider important to future study. The university should emphasize this expectation for students in its recruitment processes and in its publications, and it should provide workshops for students who need instruction in these areas. Furthermore, the university should develop a diagnostic test to be administered during the Freshman Seminar that would identify entering students who are deficient in basic skills. The Freshman Seminar curriculum should introduce students to computing resources in these areas and should identify students who are deficient in basic computer skills. The same test would be administered to transfer students within the first semester of their matriculation at Western. For both beginning students and transfer students, the academic advisor should receive the results of the test. The State University of New York at Brockport uses a diagnostic test for entering students that is well suited to our needs. Information about the test is available at the following url: http://computerskills.brockport.edu/

All undergraduates must develop skills in the use of computers and in the application of information technology to their discipline. Because these applications vary widely across disciplines, the committee is reluctant to prescribe specific coursework for all students. Instruction in computer usage must suffuse the curriculum, stressing the use of computers as learning tools and the use of discipline-specific software and services. Majors should also address pertinent ethical issues and the challenges of research in a medium that lacks the editorial oversight often associated with traditional printed sources.

7. The General Education Review Committee recommends a reduction in the university’s hour requirement for general education.

As part of its review of Western’s general education program, the committee looked at the requirements stipulated by comparable universities. With President Ransdell’s announcement that Western would focus on eight benchmark institutions, the committee especially considered the general education programs at those universities–Appalachian State, Ball State, East Carolina, Eastern Michigan, Illinois State, Indiana State, Marshall, and Northern Iowa. Among those schools, only Marshall had a requirement as large as Western’s, and only one other institution–Eastern Michigan–required as many as 50 hours. The average requirement was 46.4 hours.

The committee recommends a reduction in the general education program from its current 53-54 hours to 44 hours. The university should accomplish this through a 3-hour reduction in the Category A-B combination, additional 3-hour reductions in Categories C and D, and a one-hour reduction in Physical Development which we propose to re-label Category F and rename Health and Wellness.
The purpose of the reduction is to allow students greater freedom of choice, and departments should not use the reduction as an opportunity to add hours to their majors.

Category A: Organization and Communication of Ideas
(Two English courses, a public speaking class, and a foreign language)

Category B: Humanities
(Must include a literature class. At least three fields must be represented.)

Category C: Social and Behavioral Sciences
(Must include History 119 or 120. At least three fields must be represented.)

Category D: Natural Sciences—Mathematics
(Must include a mathematics class. At least two science fields must be represented. At least one course must have a laboratory component.)

Category E: World Cultures and American Cultural Diversity

Category F: Health and Wellness

8. The General Education Review Committee recommends a General Education assessment program. We are proposing that the university establish a course-oriented assessment process that focuses on the development of basic skills.

A. The university should continue its current process of reviewing the courses offered in general education. In the past, the General Education Committee of the Academic Council reviewed the courses in each general education category on a rotating basis. We recommend that the General Education Committee of the University Senate continue this practice. This process should require departments to demonstrate that each course supports the goals and objectives of the university’s General Education Program.

B. The departments most directly involved in developing Academic Skills, Communication, English, Mathematics, and Modern Languages, should develop assessment mechanisms to determine the success of their courses in achieving student learning in these fundamental areas. The university considers public speaking, writing, mathematics, and languages to be so important that it requires every student to complete basic courses in these fields. The institution’s commitment to developing academic skills was recently reaffirmed in the strategic planning document, Challenging the Spirit. These four departments should establish on-going processes for assessing their effectiveness in meeting course goals and assuring that those goals are reflected in student performance. Departments should provide a summary of the results annually to the Provost and the General Education Committee of the University Senate. The English Department’s newly adopted plan, English 100 Assessment: Writing Initiative 2000, is an excellent example of such a process.
9. The revised General Education curriculum should apply to students who enter college for the first time in the fall term of 2001.
General Education Program
Goals and Objectives

The General Education Program is a set of requirements for all students seeking the baccalaureate degree at Western Kentucky University. It is an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum that both complements and supports the students' preparation in their major field or specialization.

The General Education Program helps students maximize their individual potential. Students develop understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of multiple "ways of knowing" (i.e., artistic, literary, philosophical, historical, scientific) through the acquisition, organization, and analysis of specific bodies of knowledge. They are encouraged to acquire aesthetic and appreciative faculties, to explore and test their own values and ethical frameworks, and to demonstrate sensitivity to diverse perspectives and cultures.

The General Education Program provides a foundation for professional success. Students learn to think critically, make rational decisions, and communicate effectively. These skills support their ability to acquire, evaluate, and use the specific knowledge in their major field or specialization and also ensure that they will be adaptable and flexible in the face of changing career plans and requirements. Students' explorations of their own values and perspectives and those of other social groups and cultures prepare them to live in a culturally diverse, globally competitive, and technologically complex world.

The General Education Program prepares students for active membership in society. It is a broadening experience that helps them acquire the shared skills, knowledge, and values that promote the well-being of society. This experience nurtures their capacity for leadership and service and helps them learn to adapt their skills and knowledge to changing societal needs.

In sum, the General Education Program gives meaning to the motto of "Life, More Life" by promoting intellectual growth, lifelong learning, and informed citizenship for all Western graduates.

A student completing the general education program at Western Kentucky University will have:

ACADEMIC SKILLS

the capacity for critical and logical thinking;

uses investigative, analytical, and critical thinking skills to acquire information, evaluate alternatives, and make decisions

evaluates the accuracy, authority, bias, and relevance of information sources
proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking;
derives meaning from various texts, evaluates arguments, recognizes explicit statements and inferences, reaches conclusions, and makes generalizations

uses oral and written language to create a text with a clear and significant thesis, adequate and relevant supporting evidence, appropriate documentation, and clear and valid assumptions and conclusions
demonstrates mastery of such essential practices as planning, invention, arrangement, revision, and editing
develops clear and effective prose through attention to style and grammar
uses rhetorical strategies appropriate to purpose, audience, and content

competence in a language other than the native language;
demonstrates basic facility of the vocabulary and grammar of a second language
demonstrates basic communication skills in a second language
comprehends the various forms of communication in a second language

the ability to understand and apply mathematical skills and concepts;
uses the fundamental principles of reasoning that are involved in mathematics
uses graphical, symbolic, and numeric methods to solve practical problems
interprets data presented in tables and graphical displays
KNOWLEDGE, PERSPECTIVES, AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

an informed acquaintance with major achievements in the arts and the humanities;

uses appropriate vocabulary and concepts for the description and critical analysis of literary and artistic works

identifies important ideas and achievements in philosophy, literature, and the arts

identifies various forms of literature and artistic expression

identifies and analyzes similarities, differences, and interrelationships among the arts

evaluates the contributions of philosophical, ethical, or religious systems to human life

attends cultural events and visits sites of historical significance

a historical perspective and an understanding of connections between past and present;

analyzes historical patterns and their contemporary significance

identifies interrelationships between historical events and artistic, literary, philosophical, religious and scientific works and movements

identifies historical developments and cultural traditions in western civilization

demonstrates a critical perspective on one's own culture by studying other historical periods and other cultural traditions

an appreciation of the complexity and variety in the world's cultures;

recognizes the contributions of the various world cultures to humanity and identifies the ways in which these cultures are interrelated and interdependent

identifies differences and similarities among the world's cultural traditions and social organizations
an understanding of the scientific method and a knowledge of natural science and its relevance in our lives;

explains how scientific knowledge is created, developed, and changed through experimentation and reasoning

demonstrates knowledge in one or more of the sciences, including theories, concepts, and principles that explain observations and make predictions

locates and evaluates reliable resources to acquire information about scientific developments

outlines the reciprocal relationship between humans and the rest of the ecosystem

an understanding of society and human behavior;

describes methods of inquiry appropriate to the scientific study of societal institutions and human behavior

identifies social processes and structures from local to global levels

explains how cultural, political, and economic forces affect society and individuals

describes basic social problems and issues, potential solutions, and their impact on people and institutions

identifies and evaluates the behaviors that contribute to effective political participation in the United States

recognizes the contributions of the diverse cultures in the United States and identifies how these cultures are interdependent

examines patterns of interaction pertaining to race, gender, ethnic identity, class, community, and other forms of social grouping

evaluates the impact of heredity and environment on human development and individual behavior

an understanding of factors that enhance health, well-being, and quality of life.

critically examines personal behaviors as related to health and wellness