Introduction

The intent of this report is to share insights of the work of the General Education Design Team (GEDT) over the last two years that stem from observation and individual retrospection about the revitalization efforts. The information contained herein represents the key events and documents from our work beginning September 2006 through August 2008. This report does not include exhaustive detail since, in our view, that level of reporting would overwhelm the interested reader and fail to provide a synthesis our work. We trust that any gaps, missing detail, or unclear content will be brought to our attention so that we may clarify and expand upon the process and product of our work. We willingly and eagerly offer to serve as consultants to the ongoing work now carried forward by the General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee (GECAC).

This document is a compilation of perspectives. As we discovered in our work together as co-chairs, our priorities, philosophies, and work styles were similar with some important distinctions. Gratefully, our mutual respect for one another guided us through our differences. We found it fitting, therefore, to structure our report in similar fashion. This report is written primarily in one voice with our individual perspectives highlighted as such in separate sections.

Since our views as co-chairs do not always represent the individual perspectives of the Steering Committee members, we include one list with the understanding that it is a compilation of recommendations not collectively generated and sanctioned by the Steering Committee, as a whole. These observations, insights, and recommendations are offered to the General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee (GECAC) for the purpose of advancing the work of General Education (GE) revitalization.

The Context for the Beginning GEDT Efforts

Following the work of the General Education Reform Steering Committee functioning in 2005-06, the GEDT was charged with designing and implementing the plan endorsed by a marginal majority of faculty on April 25, 2006.

The Provost appointed the 27-member GEDT, of which seven faculty members comprised the Steering Committee and two served as co-chairs, to carry forward the work of GE revitalization with the following charge:

*The purpose of the General Education Design Team is to work with the university community in refining the “Learning Community and Effective Citizenship” general education curricular plan selected by vote of the governing faculty of the University of*
Michigan – Flint at a special assembly held on April 25, 2006, developing detailed components of that plan and a process for continual improvement, and bringing the plan to the schools and college for their consideration. The Design Team is asked to work closely with appropriate individuals, units, departments, and committees within the schools and college in their design efforts, and to consult widely with appropriate internal and external stakeholders, including Student Services and Enrollment Management, University Advancement, Administration, community colleges, and others. Three principles should guide the committee. First, our general education program must lay the foundation for our students to be engaged learners and to become effective leaders. Second, the general education program we implement must align with the mission of our institution. Third, it is imperative that our general education plan be supported strongly by our faculty, assembled within the schools and college.

The work of the GEDT was significantly different from the earlier work of soliciting and selecting a proposal for GE. The Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan had sufficient structure in some places and ambiguity in other places. Furthermore, each individual’s reading of the plan brought the expected variability in interpretation of what each component meant and how it might be designed. While some believed this variability in interpreting the plan should be resolved, we believed the individual interpretations of each component would allow the plan to function more realistically and invite faculty to make connections to the plan in ways they might not have initially imagined.

Working with the Slim Margin Vote

As many faculty members repeatedly underscored, the selection of the Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan was selected by a slim margin. Furthermore, there was strong sentiment questioning the power of such a vote since governance of the GE curriculum rests at the unit level. Regardless of the winning margin, we acknowledged the majority vote and proceeded ahead despite claims that the vote was not legitimate. A unit-level vote in October 2006 offered support so that the work of the GEDT could begin.

In direct acknowledgement that not all faculty were equally invested in the adopted plan, we chose to listen actively to all faculty perspectives, regardless of their nature, on enactment of the plan. Our work was fundamentally governed by a goal of fostering buy-in, ownership, and a spirit among all faculty members that the new GE plan was in the best interest of our students and revitalizing to their work as academics.

Philosophical Stance Guiding the Co-Chairs

We approached our work as co-chairs from a philosophical stance that the process needed to be treated as a creative endeavor, not be driven by a firm deadline, engaging of all faculty, with implementation adhering to faculty governance structures. Most significantly, we did not assign ourselves the task of designing the plan but of creating a mechanism for faculty to design the plan. Communication about all the work would be
open, reciprocal, and on-going so that the university-at-large would have ample opportunity for involvement and to be apprised of the work that others were doing. These guiding principles were closely aligned with those of previous GE reform efforts, with the exception of working to a deadline.

Working without a deadline was a fundamental distinction from the previous reform work. While we respect that letting time drive the process is a common way of accomplishing a task, instead, our commitment to building trust and ownership in the plan drove our work. In our experience, trust and ownership cannot be mandated nor are they built according to deadline. Trust and ownership take time, tenacity, and consistent steadiness - none of which is popular. We realize that the absence of a tightly delineated timeline caused a degree of frustration and discomfort to some of our colleagues. In our view, allowing ample time for faculty to become involved in GE reform efforts would allow it to be fundamentally reformed and ultimately sustained. The design work proceeded with intentional flexibility and responsiveness as each phase of the work unfolded.

Furthermore, in an effort to design and implement the new GE program, wherever possible we consciously and intentionally tried to work with the existing general education program. Our purpose in doing so was to honor the fact that while general education was in need of revitalization, there were elements worth preserving and carrying forward from the existing general education program that should neither be overlooked nor revised. For example, the previous seventeen student learning outcomes were revisited as the new student learning outcomes were written and revised. This process of comparing new to old, in our view, was not only intended to find links between the old and new learning outcomes so that a final document was coherent and purposeful but to help faculty appreciate what was common to both. Bridging between the old and the new, we found, was the most practical way to proceed in working with what is toward what will be.

The Steering Committee

By design, the Steering Committee was a microcosm of the university in its representation across academic units and disciplines. While committee size would not allow for every discipline to be represented, the committee included a range of disciplinary perspectives such that divergent viewpoints would likely be present. As a university-level committee, each member was both representing his/her unit while simultaneously transcending unit-level identity to that of the university. Navigating loyalty to the unit and the university was evident throughout the committee’s work.

Early on, the Steering Committee discussed what decision-making style we would follow. Some felt strongly about majority voting, others preferred consensus style decision-making. The fact that this question was raised underscores a fundamental difference of belief among faculty in how a group governs itself. While there is merit and weakness in both styles of decision-making, the committee did not commit to one style over another. While this did not pose significant difficulties to the work of the
Steering Committee, it did present challenges at times. The decision to convey individual perspectives in this report, rather than a committee perspective, was made in order to represent all perspectives that might otherwise have not been included.

Conducting Pilot Courses

The decision to conduct pilots of the FYE and suites was made for the purpose of involving faculty, rather than the members of the GEDT, in designing the courses. We were consistently warned of the dangers of the GEDT designing and then presenting its work to the faculty for adoption. The prediction expressed was that faculty would likely reject a design created solely by the GEDT. We expected that by fostering involvement in the creation of pilot courses, ownership and sustainability of GE reform would widen. Pilots, then, would provide a process for involving faculty in course design while producing a tangible product for the university-at-large to examine.

First Year Experience Courses

The piloting of First Year Experience (FYE) courses provided tangible experience with the designing, teaching, and taking of such courses. A study of the FYE pilots was conducted to provide evidence of the experience while conveying to the university-at-large that the pilots were, indeed, being thoughtfully undertaken and studied to ensure that GE reform was real and sustainable. The full study is appended to this document.

Two proposals for FYE were received and both were awarded. Working with the theme of “Citizen and the City,” each FYE pilot provided a distinct design and structure to the course representing the creativity the FYE course allows. The intent of these courses in involving faculty in a multi-disciplinary endeavor met the goal of providing students an introductory course centered on the theme of “Citizen and the City” while engaging faculty in collaborative work that each group was willing, of their own accord, to continue in the fall 2008 semester.

Observations and Insights Regarding First Year Experience Courses

The apparent willingness by faculty to mandate the FYE course for all First Time in Any College (FTIAC) students beginning in fall 2009 pending further refinement of Student Learning Outcomes that meet with each unit’s approval suggests progress toward implementing this component of the Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan.

The value in the FYE courses to students and faculty provides a momentum for reform efforts in that faculty, in particular, can experience the benefit of designing and teaching in a multi-disciplinary method. Since the concept of multi-disciplinary knowledge runs through the Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan, the FYE courses now provide evidence of the variability with which these courses may be conceived and taught.
Eventually, policies may be required to address the factors that will come into play in implementation, including:

- Implications for faculty over-load versus in-load teaching of the FYE course
- Student transcript designation and credit assigned for the FYE

**Suites of Courses**

The component of the new GE plan that involves the bulk of the credit hours – and hence, is meeting with the most substantial hesitation on the part of the faculty – is the component that calls for Suites of Courses. The concept of Suites, however, is not entirely new to the campus. The previous GE plan included Area Options in Analytic Reasoning, Foreign Language, Foundations of Western Civilization, Cultural Studies and Social Studies. The purpose of these area options was to build depth in a focused area. However, without a strong, consistent university-wide mechanism for monitoring courses once they had been approved for inclusion in an Area Option, the initial purpose was subverted. The proliferation of courses fed the perception that “anything would do.” Furthermore, students (with or without the advice and approval of their advisors) “double-dipped,” and were able to satisfy substantial portions of the area options with courses in their major or minor courses of study. Then, too, the division of individual area options into sub-groups resulted in a system that both faculty and students found lacking in coherence. The concept of Suites of Courses was developed to remedy the apparent randomness that had accrued to Area Option and to replace it with intentional connectivity, designed and monitored regularly by faculty.

The new plan calls for two types of Suites: groups of two or more courses drawn from a single discipline; and interdisciplinary groupings of two or more courses. The initial RFP was issued in April, 2007 with a June 1 deadline for “intent to submit” responses, followed by an August 31 deadline for complete proposals. The RFP asked faculty to propose Suites that could be offered in a single semester, Winter, 2008 – not as a permanent feature of the Suite component, but as a device that would allow us to evaluate the offerings in pilot form. A modest financial incentive of $1000 per faculty member or $3000 per Suite was offered to faculty whose Suites would be selected and developed.

Two open forums were held in April to provide detailed information and to respond to faculty questions and concerns. We received fourteen intent to submit responses representing twelve departments and twenty faculty. It was apparent from the range of proposals that faculty had disparate ideas about what Suites were designed to accomplish, and that faculty were confused about the expectations for coordinating the offerings within the Suite. Of the fourteen intent-to-submit responses, we ultimately received four, all of which we accepted. All of these proposals were CAS initiatives. We solicited and received addition Suite proposals from the other units for Spring/Summer/Fall, 2008.

To support the work of faculty developing the pilot Suites, we invited consultant Bill Newell to campus on November 14th. Newell presented a model of interdisciplinary teaching – backed by substantial research – that went far beyond the initial ambitions of the Suite component, as conceived by our plan's creators. As presented, the material
inferred that, though we were far behind the curve in this area, we were in a good
good position to benefit from the mistakes of others before us. Unfortunately, Newell also
inferred that the teams working on the Suites were heading in the wrong direction.
Faculty who had intended to forge ahead by lightly linking two or three already existing
courses were daunted at the prospect of starting over. As it turned out, virtually no
students enrolled in full Suites for Winter, 2008, and the problem of developing Suites
that could flourish at the University of Michigan-Flint was postponed.

The problems associated with the notion of Suites are manifold, but the major ones are
focused around the notion of the "boxes" delineated in the Learning Communities and
Effective Citizenship template and the credit hours tentatively assigned to them:

1. Humanities, Society, Culture and the Arts* (9 cr.)
2. Economics, Finance and Quantitative Reasoning (6 cr.)
3. Health and Well-Being (6 cr.)
4. Science and Technology (8 cr.)

*and the Arts was added by vote of the faculty in December, 2007

While the categories 1 and 4 are largely familiar in concept from the existing GE plan,
categories 2 and 3 represent substantially new mandates. The grouping of humanities,
social sciences, and the arts into a single "box" was perceived by many as an
irresponsible erosion of the 21 credits previously allotted to Humanities, Social Studies
and Fine Arts to a mere 9 credits in the new plan. The "new" mandates were viewed in
some quarters as over-weighted or non-essential categories that reduced General
Education's lofty goals in critical thinking to the "mere" acquisition of pragmatic skills.
The shift of Economics from the category 1 to category 2, and the addition of
"technology" to the credits in category 4 with its implications for the laboratory sciences
alarmed others. Still other faculty approached the "boxes" with a more generous mindset,
seeing possibilities for interesting new ways of connecting their disciplines with other
bodies of knowledge in compelling ways.

The GE Steering Committee reviewed a number of alternative configurations for the
Suite component of the plan, including proposals to eliminate the boxes altogether,
allowing for a free-flow of Suite configurations across all disciplines. The Committee
discussed at length whether courses in the major should continue to fulfill some GE
requirements, of how and if the Suites would incorporate the plan's call to Civic
Engagement, how and if the faculty might encourage writing across the curriculum
through Student Learning Outcomes in Suites. These discussions, though spirited, were
inconclusive.

As of this writing, faculty are continuing to develop pilot Suites, but the spring/summer
pilots also failed to enroll students. The result is that we have no hard data about the
effectiveness of this component of the plan:

Why did no students enroll in the Suites? A number of reasons influenced this outcome.
• There was confusion about how the pilots would fit within the current GE plan, though any individual course in the Suite carried whatever attribute had already been assigned to it.
• Changing the culture of advising is no easy task and requires long-range planning and education of faculty, staff, and students.
• In addition, asking students to enroll in multiple courses in the same semester, automatically eliminated students whose schedules would not permit such a luxury – namely, most students who had already declared a major. Thus, our prime audience was the group of new freshmen who would enroll for the second semester, a limited group at best.

Why were/are faculty reluctant to move forward with the concept of Suites?
• Some faculty are philosophically opposed to the direction of the proposed changes to GE.
• Some faculty are still unclear about the concept of Suites and the expected outcomes.
• Some faculty see no flexibility in their teaching schedule.
• Some faculty perceive the development of a Suites as too onerous.

Observations and Insights Regarding Suites of Courses

One of things we have learned from our work with Suites is that piloting Suite configurations without mandating them for students is ineffective. If we are to move forward with this component of the new plan, faculty must have a certain level of assurance that there will be a stable and long-term "market" for them.

Potentially, this market is huge since every student who has not completed GE here or at a previous institution would be required to enroll in one or more Suite of Courses. This fact necessitates the development and “release” of multiple Suites when and if the faculty determines to move forward with this component of the plan.

Continuation of the work on Suites will require GECAC to:
  ➢ Resolve the credit hour debate in the best interests of all of our students, and attend to the implications for faculty, departments, programs and academic units as important, but secondary concerns.
  ➢ Consider the potential for Suites to provide a GE program that is perceived as valuable learning integrated throughout a student's university experience.
  ➢ Further clarify logistics of Suites, particularly the recommendation that they be offered over multiple semesters. While such an arrangement is not necessarily optimal, it appears to be necessary given our student population.
  ➢ Understand that "best-practice" in interdisciplinary teaching may be an impossible model for the University of Michigan-Flint at this time. We should proceed with more modest expectations that build on existing courses, and actively encourage and support those faculty who are motivated to design Suites from the ground up that are more fully integrated.
Clearly define the minimum level of integration between courses and determine the mechanism for evaluating the value-added outcome in each Suite category.

- Encourage Suite formation in both single disciplines and between disciplines.
- Actively solicit faculty whose existing courses would create logical Suites.
- Determine how Suites could enhance Writing across the Curriculum initiatives.
- Investigate the potential of all or some Suites to fulfill the civic engagement commitment we have made as a University community.

As stated earlier, should GECAC require more detailed information on any aspect of the GEDT's work on Suites, we would be happy to comply.

**Overall Observations and Insights**

In many ways, each phase of our work unearthed more obstacles to be overcome. While this could be discouraging to some, it suggests that the GE reform work is occurring at a level sufficiently deep to be bringing about real change. The following commentary addresses those areas we found to be most compelling:

**The Role of Faculty Governance**

While the GEDT was assigned responsibility for design and implementation, it did not hold authority to carry out its mission. The reality of faculty governance structure is such that the GEDT could neither enact nor mandate the design and implementation of components of the GE plan. Unit-level authority over curriculum requires that all GE reform be sanctioned at the unit level. Adhering to this principle was cumbersome in that each unit, legitimately, had to discuss and debate the merit of each aspect presented to it by the GEDT. Campus-wide discussion and votes, while efficient in bringing together faculty from across units, hold no actual status. The confidence/no-confidence votes provided indicators of overall sentiment of those present but the effect of these votes on unit-level voting is not known.

Working within the parameters and constraints of our current governance structure underscored the growing difficulty of working within the structure as it currently exists. Clearly, a maturation of the current faculty governance structure is needed in order to strengthen and ensure its healthy functioning.

**The Complex Role of Communication**

Since communication was critical to our goal of building trust, ownership, and involvement in the GE reform work, we worked hard to keep it of sufficient quality and quantity. Communication over the two years was intentionally structured in varied forms. Written communication occurred in the form of updates written as stand-alone or in an abbreviated form for the Academic Affairs Updates. These updates were sent electronically via e-mail and then posted, in perpetuity, on the TCLT website. In response to some faculty comments that updates were not easily accessible via the website, a separate website address was created for GE information.
Video was utilized as an alternate method of communication. The purpose of using video was to take advantage of the distinctive features of the audiovisual media format, specifically, delivery of more information in a shorter time span. Unedited video documentation of focus sessions and full campus presentations is provided on the GE website. Edited video of faculty interviews during the teaching of the initial FYE pilot course was posted to provide insight from each faculty member’s perspective on the teaching of the course as it was underway rather than retrospectively.

A research study of the FYE pilot courses was conducted with full results provided in hard copy and electronically to the university-at-large.

While the call for on-going, open, and transparent communication was loud and clear, the function of such communication was not as clear. We fully embrace the need for open and on-going communication. How to foster participation in the communication is another matter. The expectation that communicating the work of the GEDT would keep all informed did not guarantee that the recipient of the communication would meet this expectation. To the extent that rumor can be trusted, we heard talk that faculty did not feel informed of the GEDT’s work. Even GEDT members indicated they felt uninformed.

From our perspective, we maintained open and on-going communication via multiple formats and multiple venues. We appreciate the time required to stay informed and acknowledge the many competing priorities faculty face. We suspect that the problem of being uninformed is due less to an absence of information and more to the many competing priorities that limit the amount of time one can devote to attending focus sessions, watching video updates, and reading documentation. Should it be deemed that the communication was neither robust nor frequent enough, it was not due to a lack of effort.

The Scope of GE Reform

The pilot courses unearthed a myriad of implications that had not been anticipated. GE reform is far more than curricular revision. What was most astonishing was the reach of GE reform in transforming the work of nearly every unit on campus. While the curriculum was at the center in designing the FYE and suites of courses, there were immediate implications that affected more than the curriculum.

The non-academic units most directly affected were Academic Advising and the Registrar’s Office. As these implications became apparent, we met with representatives from both Academic Advising and the Registrar’s office to determine interim and potential long-term responses to each of the changes.

From the Registrar’s perspective, pilot courses and ultimate reform has implications for registration and student transcripts. For example, with suites of courses, if the individual course designations within the suite remain the same, what signals that the student took
the courses as a suite? If a student has taken one of the courses in a suite, are they ineligible to take the suite? If they are not ineligible, does the repetition of the course as it is taught within a suite differ significantly from the course in its stand-alone form to allow for repetition of the course?

In Academic Advising, the interim nature of the pilot courses posed the greatest challenge since advising students to take courses that may be temporary and do not carry definitive credit designation poses, if not a logistical dilemma, an ethical one. Students were guaranteed that pilot courses they took would count toward GE credit. This required a leap of faith on the advisors’ part as they work to ensure logical course choices, steady advancement toward degree completion, and timely graduation.

Individual Perspectives of the Co-Chairs

From Carolyn Gillespie:

Co-chairing is hard – harder than doing it alone. Co-chairing is necessary – one of the challenges we face as an institution is ignorance of the multiple cultures, concerns, perspectives and structures of our sister units. Co-chairing is cumbersome and, in our case, resulted in a deliberate pacing that some members of the academic community perceived as too slow, others as too fast. I thank Dr. Mary Jo Finney for the passion and intelligence she has showered on this process, and I thank Interim Chancellor Jack Kay and Interim Provost Vahid Lofti for their support of the reform process by word and by deed, and for making themselves unfailingly available for consultation.

I wish to thank the hard-working General Education Steering Committee (Donna Fry, Susan Gano-Phillips, Yener Kandogan, Michael Pardales, Ken Schilling, Tom Wrobel, and Everett Blakely) for their constancy and effort on behalf of the institution, and to the wider GE committee of faculty and staff who offered their expertise in a number of targeted areas over the past two years. Their reports and recommendations are appended. In retrospect, my sense is that the large GE Committee, whose roster included representatives from all politically and practically expedient constituencies, was unwieldy and premature. The Steering Committee had a great deal of preliminary work to do before it could effectively utilize the larger group. The lag time between being appointed to the GE Committee and being engaging in truly useful work resulted, I believe, in a certain level of disengagement by a number of members. This outcome is no one’s fault; it was a by-product of a good impulse – that of inclusivity.

I would like to have been able to report greater progress toward the final design and implementation of the new GE plan in this report. I am accustomed to working toward a firm deadline while allowing active collaboration from all pertinent parties. We did, however, take three important steps:

- The formation of a General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee
- The successful piloting of two First Year Experience Courses
• The production of an initial Students Learning Outcomes for General Education document that has met with university-wide approval.

I am gratified that the Provost has established the General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee to continue the work of the current Steering Committee. It is a solid first step in negotiating a body that will have actual executive authority in matters of General Education. While I firmly support the notion of faculty in each unit having jurisdiction over curriculum in its areas of specialization, General Education is, by its very definition, over-arching. As such, it deserves its own regulatory body, one that has the confidence of the faculty at large, to facilitate decision-making. The cumbersome nature of our current structure has been an enormous impediment to the work of General Education reform, even as it has compelled us to meet as a committee of the whole for some important university-wide discussions.

Pilots for the First Year Experience were conducted in Fall, 2007 and Winter, 2008, and will be repeated in AY 2008-09. The faculty appears willing to formally mandate a FYE for all First Time in Any College (FTIAC) students beginning in Fall, 2009, pending further work on refining assessable Student Learning Outcomes that meet with the approval of all units. This document is intended to cover not only the FYE, but the General Education program as a whole. Though not perfect, the current document is the result of extensive collaboration and wide-ranging input, and reflects a certain tension between faculty who would favor a clear but open document, and those who prefer to encode greater detail.

I am respectful of the efficient work done by Drs. Robert Barnett and Susan Gano-Phillips in soliciting proposals for a new General Education program and piloting the faculty through to the recommendation of the Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan in April, 2006. I am perfectly aware, however, that this plan was approved by a very small majority margin and that significant elements of the faculty opposed and continue to oppose the current reform initiative. I am also aware that a significant percentage of our faculty changes annually due to retirements, relocations and new hires. The process of informing and engaging faculty in on-going discussions of the place of General Education in our over-all curriculum, must, therefore, be a constant item on the university-wide agenda.

And yes, I have a certain level of concern (not to say relief!) as we moving forward and pass our work on to the new committee. While I understand that General Education reform is not at the top of every faculty member’s agenda, I am concerned that myopia in this regard will ultimately result in yet another failed effort to bring the kind of substantive change, best practice and greater coherence to our General Education that was envisioned in the Learning Communities and Effective Citizenship plan that was, indeed, approved by vote of the faculty in April, 2006. I respect the reluctance of faculty to jump on a bandwagon of change for the sake of change, but I had hoped to see a higher level of creative engagement in the reform process by a larger proportion of our tenure track faculty. My fear is that many faculty are waiting for this current initiative to “blow over,” are adopting a wait-and-see strategy, or are content to play Monday morning
quarter-back without ever putting themselves on the line. Our students deserve our best efforts on General Education, and I think we can do better.

I urge the new General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee to move more swiftly now, confident that many voices, both pro and con, have been heard over the past two years in multiple forums. Mary Jo and I strove to be as inclusive as possible in our efforts, to hear concerns and questions without prejudice. But at some point, and I think it may be now, we have to begin implementing aspects of the plan officially. What we implement will not be perfect at first, but we must not fear that imperfection. If we envision General Education as a program like any other, we know that it can be revised and tweaked and expanded or contracted in response to the way it is used by students. The important thing is to keep the higher goal in our sights and try not to get mired down in minutia at the outset. That is not to say that we need not consider the practicalities of our decisions. Indeed, the Registrar, who is on the front lines with our students, will continue to ask the questions that require detailed logistical responses, but it must be our concern for educating students to thrive in and contribute to this multicultural, global community that drives our work, not the fear of losing credit hours here or being inconvenienced there that prevents us from embracing change.

From Mary Jo Finney:

Co-chairing is a difficult task. Theoretically, it creates a balance of leadership. Practically, it requires time and effort to both establish and nurture that balance. Ideally, co-chairs must first understand one another in order to function as a productive unit. The nature and timing of our charge was such that we were simultaneously coming to know one another as we worked together. Carolyn is an extraordinarily creative individual who was open to exploring all avenues that might lead to involving faculty in GE reform. I found my work with her to be stimulating and, even in times of disagreement, inspiring. We had a mutual respect for one another that sustained us in times of disagreement. I appreciated her patience with me as I remained eager and optimistic about exploring the benefits and promise of truly interdisciplinary teaching.

We both, on numerous occasions, lamented that we were not charged with designing the courses and suites ourselves. We imagined completing that task with relative ease. Remaining focused on how to enlist others to design courses and suites was often challenging. I admired Carolyn’s efforts in identifying the conundrums that we encountered and drafting potential solutions. [If you wish to see the drafts, they can be provided.]

While the appointment of a large design team made perfect sense, I wish we had been able to utilize this team of talented and dedicated individuals in grander ways. It was essential, at this stage of the revitalization work, to involve many individuals from each of the academic and non-academic units. My hope is that they did not lose interest and have come to an appreciation the complexity of the task. In any event, I feel gratitude for their interest in and dedication to GE revitalization.
The Steering Committee was comprised of a fascinating group of brilliant individuals with whom I felt honored to work. The range of philosophy about GE represented in this group was invigorating and, for that alone, I am grateful.

Cultivating connection to and participation in a marginally-accepted plan in an environment of philosophical differences about the purpose of general education, varying levels of commitment to reform, a governance structure that places decision-making at the unit level, along with a certain level of suspicion and distrust within and between units and faculty members is an invigorating task. At times, we disagreed about whether to reach out directly to those faculty members at odds with reform efforts or to work only with those most favorable to reform. This, undoubtedly, was rooted in our individual experiences within our own units. Knowing one’s unit as an insider, however, is different from knowing a unit as an outsider. Being open to another’s perception that differs from one’s own is both challenging and refreshing. I believe this is the heart of our challenge as an institution.

What I found most enlightening about our work together was the on-going discovery that we, as co-chairs, represented a microcosm of the university. Our professional disciplinary knowledge and approach to co-chairing came through every decision we made. Knowing this deepened my awareness that we, as faculty, are our disciplines.

It was an honor to be able to discover that the academic units have much in common with one another as well as some significant and essential differences. Not unexpectedly, I found there to be more within-unit differences than between-unit differences. This makes for a vibrant and essential mix of ideologies. My hope is that, for our students’ sakes, we avoid trying to choose a single ideology and, instead, have patience to do the work of designing general education that allows competing ideologies to co-mingle.

The philosophical differences about what GE should provide our students run deep. The debates over teaching content versus skills, unit autonomy versus collective university identity, specificity versus flexibility in course design, alignment versus fluidity are but a few of the dichotomies we face. I don’t believe each of these dichotomies must be resolved as much as defined and held in a healthy kind of tension and balance.

How to communicate matters of GE remains a challenge. The extent to which we attempted to include all faculty in all discussions was designed to directly address this concern. Given that twice-weekly focus sessions resulted in an average of 2-3 faculty members in attendance means something. What it means is not clear. Some believed low attendance was the result of fear in openly sharing one’s thinking at a meeting. Others speculated it was due to apathy about the reform process. Still others imagined the lack of attendance to signal stalemating. What is important is that we remain open to the fact that participation takes many forms and lack of participation can mean many things.

The challenge in GE reform remains how to honor individual and unit differences, how to bridge those differences in ways that accommodate unit-level parameters, deciding when
individual differences must be reconfigured into a collective purpose, and how to do so. While syllabi, learning outcomes, and student work products provide tangible evidence of GE reform, building trust and shared commitment to a collective GE experience will sustain that change.

Recommendations from Individual Steering Committee Members

Kenneth Schilling
Mathematics, CAS

- Resist the urge and pressures to think provincially. (I suspect this will be far more difficult for an elected committee than it was for us as an appointed committee.)
- Create an ambitious timetable for implementation of the full plan. You won't be able to follow it, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't a useful exercise.
- Lots of flexibility and lots of communication are essential. Seek out the most recalcitrant faculty members for conversation; don't sit back and wait for them to resist. (Note that in CAS we have managed, despite all of our differences, to come together, have productive conversations and move the process forward. It can be done!)
- In particular, we do have, or will soon have, an agreed-upon set of learning outcomes. Work out the details of the program from there.
- Finally, Carolyn and Mary Jo have shown remarkable patience and tenacity in the face of enormous difficulties. Try to do as well as they have.

Yener Kandogan
Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Business Economics
School of Management

- There needs to be flexibility all around. It must be recalled that the most appealing feature of the general education that was second most preferred in April 2006 meeting was its flexibility. For example, requirements such as all courses within a suite need to be taken in one term should not be imposed.
- The goal should be meeting the learning goals of the general education curriculum. It should not be interpreted as taking the same set of courses by all students; it should be the same set of learning outcomes achieved by all students. Each school should be able to tailor it according to their needs, or what is more consistent with their major curriculum
- There should be multiples of suites within each box available for students to choose from, and units should be allowed to restrict the choices to a few that make appropriate sense for their students to take. Furthermore, each unit should
be allowed to waive their students out of one of suites, if they wish to do so. (e.g. SHPS students should be allowed to waive out of Health and Well-being suites)

- There should not be a requirement such as engaged citizenship component in EVERY part of the general education curriculum. There can be some suites that may not address this. As long as students, in parts of their curriculum, are exposed to what citizenship means, and may be do something about it, that should satisfy this component. Likewise, we should not be carried away with the interdisciplinariness. That should not be a requirement feature of every component of general education. Varying degree of interdisciplinary approach should be allowed, even the least integrated versions. For example, in suites, it should be possible to have two courses from two disciplines that are only connected through topic form a suite.

- Units/programs that already have a capstone should not be required to have another one for the general education curriculum.

- There should be ENG 111/112 sections specifically addressing the needs of certain majors, and students in these majors should be required to take those sections.

- Transfer students with associate degrees should not be required to take the suites, but only the first year experience and the capstone courses. MACRAO agreement should be signed without many provisions to make it effective.

- In considering the proposals, and monitoring the curriculum thereafter please make sure that the courses within the general education curriculum meet its learning goals and does not deviate from its purpose towards being treated as if they were part of the curriculum for a major.

Donna Fry
School of Health Professions and Sciences

- Recognize the contributions of all the units to general education because that is a key element to making this a cross unit general education program.

- Retain the UNV designation.

- Utilize the report on how to deal with transfer students.

- There was creative discourse, at least in SHPS, on how to work cooperatively other units of the FYE and the Suites. We need further opportunities in 2008-09 to extend this dialogue and share ideas.

Susan Gano-Phillips
Psychology, CAS

- It is essential that the FYE Outcomes and assessments be approved during Fall, 2008 so that faculty teaching these courses in Fall, 2009 have a firm structure to work from.

- I believe wholesale rather than continued incremental implementation is preferable. Currently, we have to entice students to participate in the program.