

Steering Committee for Studying General Education at CMU

Progress Report to the Academic Senate

9 December 2005

Work Completed in Fall, 2005

- A. In accord with the committee charge, work focused on gathering input to identify issues and concerns regarding general education at CMU. The committee was divided into subcommittees: one to focus on input from alumni, a second to focus on input from students, and a third to focus on input from the faculty and administration. The subcommittees analyzed responses to the three surveys conducted last spring (alumni, students, and faculty & administration) and reported their findings to the full committee.
- B. The subcommittees organized campus discussion forums to explore issues suggested by survey results and to identify additional issues. No discussion forum was planned for alumni, so the alumni and student subcommittees were combined. Discussions were conducted with the following groups:
- 1) Faculty
 - College-wide discussions: CCFA (1 attended), CEHS (0 attended), CHP (0 attended), CHSBS (16 attended), and CST (32 attended). Turnout for many of the college-wide discussion sessions was low, but those who attended provided useful input.
 - Department meetings: Representatives from the committee attended departmental meetings for each department in CBA, plus ENG, HST, PHL-REL, PSY, and SASW.
 - 2) Administration

Attendees (8) represented the Provost's office, Academic Affairs, CHSBS, ProfEd, Dean of Students, Curriculum & Assessment, Admissions, and Academic Advising.
 - 3) Students
 - Residential colleges (Science & Technology, Health Professions; approximately 10 attended)
 - Larzelere (mostly Honors students; approximately 50 attended)
 - Towers (freshmen and RAs; approximately 18 attended)

Notes taken during these discussions were compiled and presented to the full Steering Committee.

- C. Issues identified: The surveys and discussions revealed several issues that are of widespread concern in the CMU community. These issues are summarized in following questions.
- 1) Are the goals of general education defined appropriately and articulated adequately?
 - 2) Do students understand and respect the goals of general education?
 - 3) Does our current academic advising system adequately guide students in fulfilling their general education requirements both efficiently and appropriately?
 - 4) Do faculty members recognize how their UP courses fit into the general education program?
 - 5) Are students learning what we believe they should learn in the general education program?
 - 6) Is WAUP feasible and can it (possibly with modifications) achieve worthwhile results?
 - 7) Does the competency program as currently defined sufficiently support students' learning in the rest of the curriculum?
 - 8) Is there a need for new competencies (*e.g.*, critical thinking) in the general education curriculum? Is there a place for them?
 - 9) Is the current menu of courses appropriate for the UP's goals? Are there too many courses? Too great a variety of courses? Too few choices? Should certain UP courses be required of all students? Should students be required to take some UP courses in their junior and senior years?

- 10) Is the current emphasis on global education in the UP sufficient and appropriate? Is diversity included suitably in the UP?
- 11) Are UP courses, including those aimed at promoting diversity and global education, too specialized? This is a common perception among students, and may result in either a lack of engagement or a perceived unfair advantage to the majors who are enrolled in a course.
- 12) Are all UP courses sufficiently rigorous? Some students view them as too difficult, while faculty members commonly perceive low academic standards in many UP courses.
- 13) Is there room in the general education curriculum to pursue other worthwhile objectives such as a foreign language requirement or information literacy?
- 14) Do general education requirements complement other degree requirements (especially the area requirements of the B.A. and B.S. degrees) in an appropriate way?
- 15) Do class sizes in general education courses, especially competency courses but also in the UP, allow adequate participation by students (speaking and writing) and evaluation by instructors so as to achieve program objectives?
- 16) Will it be possible to overcome the perceived political and resource-allocation obstacles to changing our current general education program?

D. Problems that need to be addressed: After considering the issues identified from the surveys and discussions, the committee determined that the following are problems that need to be addressed.

1. Many members of the CMU community do not appreciate the importance of general education.
 - a) Opinions and perceptions of general education—both what it is and what it should be—vary widely across campus.
 - b) An undetermined but considerable number of students display limited understanding of and appreciation for general education and a liberal education.
 - c) Newly hired faculty members may not understand the university's general education and how courses they teach should contribute to it. (The same is true for some faculty members who have been here a while.)
2. The administration of general education seems to be ineffective.
 - a) The general education coordinator position should be re-defined and provided a budget and appropriate authority. Models used at other institutions should be considered (*e.g.*, full-time director or dean of general education, or college of general education).
 - b) There is very limited assessment information about our general education program. The nature of the UP makes assessment problematical, especially with the current administrative structure (the general education council is charged with assessment of general education, an enormous amount of work for a single committee).
 - c) Students often feel that they have not received adequate and consistent guidance from our academic advising system, leading to poor or inefficient choices.
3. The competency requirements are not ideally configured.
 - a) WAUP is not functioning as intended. Among the faculty, this writing requirement was the most-often mentioned problem associated with general education at CMU. Alternatives to WAUP should to be evaluated, such as writing-intensive courses or sections for the UP, required writing-intensive courses in the major, *etc.* If some form of WAUP is maintained it should be renamed to make clear that speech and mathematics competencies are included (*i.e.*, public speaking or computation may be substituted for writing in WAUP).
 - b) The mathematics competency may not be serving students well; a quantitative literacy or quantitative reasoning competency should be considered in its place.

- c) Many students take their competency courses too late to be of much use in the rest of their curriculum. For instance, data for recent years show that perhaps 25% of students put off the mathematics competency until senior year, and a significant number of students fulfill the ENG 201 requirement late in their academic careers. A requirement for early completion of competencies (such as by the time students earn 56 credit hours) should be considered.
 - d) Requiring competency in additional intellectual skills such as critical thinking should be contemplated. How would such added requirements be incorporated into the program?
4. The structure of the UP should be re-examined.
- a) Some courses probably are inappropriate for the UP as it is defined, but (except for a few outliers) how can these be identified when opinions vary so much and interests are so vested?
 - b) The definitions of groups and distinctions among subgroups need to be evaluated, perhaps changed. A program that offers fewer courses covering broader topics rather than many courses on narrow topics should be considered. Models used by other universities should be examined as possible alternative structures.
 - c) Many students take some UP courses in their junior and senior years. This may or may not be problematic. Requiring some advanced course work as part the UP should be considered. Perhaps develop sequences of UP courses.
5. Resources to support general education are inadequate.
- a) An undetermined but considerable number of courses in the UP do not meet WAUP requirements (*i.e.*, do not use evaluation methods that require students to employ one or more of the three competencies).
 - b) Section sizes are too large unless we adopt different methods and expectations for course evaluation. Proposals to reduce class sizes in competency and UP courses should be developed, certainly for any “writing-intensive” courses that currently exist or might be created as a part of WAUP reform. What resources would be needed and where would they come from?
 - c) Other programs rely on the UP to generate revenue, and current budgeting models impede even modest changes. A proposal to address budget issues that would accompany any change must be developed.
- E. Issues to be deferred: Some of the issues that were identified do not need to be addressed immediately, but should be considered at some time in the future.
- 1) Should courses that have not been offered in a certain number of years be removed from the UP?
 - 2) Should colleges or majors be able to mandate which UP courses students in their programs take?
 - 3) Are transfer agreements for general education courses (both to and from CMU) appropriate?
 - 4) How do UP requirements fit with other degree requirements to achieve educational goals?

Work to be Done in Spring, 2006

During the spring semester, the committee will concentrate on developing recommendations for addressing the problems identified. Speakers may be invited to campus once the committee determines the nature of the changes they will recommend. Members of the committee will apply to attend the AAC&U workshop on general education in May.