REPORT OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE
Spring 2003

Submitted to
The Academic Senate Executive Board

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Submitted on
May 9, 2003
TO: Academic Senate Executive Board, Jim Scott, Chair

FROM: General Education Task Force, Melinda Kreth, Chair

DATE: Friday, May 9, 2003

SUBJECT: General Education Task Force Report, Spring 2003

Attached is the General Education Task Force Report, as requested by the Executive Board on February 21, 2003.

The members of the Task Force have worked very hard to do a thorough job of “diagnosing” problems with the General Education Program, specifically in the areas of Gen. Ed. governance, the University Program (UP), and the Writing Across the University Program (WAUP). They have also made several recommendations about potential courses of action. As chair of the Task Force, I have tried—with input from Task Force members—to write a report that is representative of our diversity of opinion.

If any members of the Executive Board have questions about the attached report, please have them contact me at x3371 or by email at kreth1ml@cmich.edu.
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ABSTRACT

This document reports on the efforts of the General Education Task Force during Spring 2003 to “diagnose” problems in three areas of the General Education Program: General Education governance, the University Program (UP), and the Writing Across the University Program (WAUP). The report provides relevant background information, stipulates scope and limitations, describes methods used, presents findings and conclusions, and recommends courses of action. The overall recommendation is that the university should implement changes in the system of governance (especially with respect to the charge of the General Education Council) and begin the process revising the University Program and the Writing Across the University Program. The Task Force recommends that the revision effort begin in the Fall 2003 with the formation of a new General Education Task Force.
INTRODUCTION

This section of the report describes the purpose of the Task Force and this report, provides relevant background information, addresses the scope and limitations of the Task Force’s efforts, and summarizes the Task Force’s recommendations.

Purpose

The purpose of the General Education Task Force during Spring 2003 has been to identify problems within the General Education Program and to recommend courses of action. The purpose of this report is to summarize the Task Force deliberations, findings, and recommendations.

Background

In January 2003, the General Education Coordinator, Melinda Kreth, was invited to meet with the Senate Executive Board to discuss problems with the General Education Council. The most serious problem at that time was the fact that the Council did not have enough members to fulfill its charge to promote and, more importantly, assess the effectiveness of the Gen. Ed. Program. (In January 2003, the Council was short five members.)

Kreth also acknowledged that gen. ed. assessment is a much more serious problem than simply a lack of Council members, that assessment problems have plagued the Council for some time and, that if something isn’t done, the problems will likely get worse given the increasing emphasis on data-driven assessment on the part of accreditation agencies. After much discussion of a number of other gen. ed.-related issues, the Exec. Board asked Kreth to form a General Education Task Force and to report in one month on the status of its formation.

At the February 21, 2003 meeting of the Exec. Board, a formal charge for the Task Force was drafted and approved. The Task Force was directed to submit a report of its findings by May 9, 2003. (See the Appendix for a copy of the Task Force charge.)

Scope & Limitations

The scope of the Task Force’s efforts during Spring 2003 has been limited to identifying and discussing problems with the UP, the WAUP, and governance thereof. The Task Force did not spend much time discussing the other competency components, which were not part of its charge.

The work of the Gen. Ed. Task Force has also been somewhat limited by its size, time constraints, and resources.

The Task Force is quite large, consisting of 22 members. An attempt was made to include at least one faculty member from each of the nine UP subgroups; volunteers from the Gen. Ed. Council, Gen. Ed. Subcommittee, and the Multicultural & Diversity Education Council; the Assistant Vice Provost and the Director of Undergraduate Studies for CEL (who served as ex officio members); and the General Education Coordinator (who served as chair of the Task Force). The large size of the Task Force limited the number of face-to-face meetings that could feasibly be scheduled, given the difficulty of accommodating the schedules of all members.
The Task Force also faced the challenge of doing a lot of work with little time. Basically, Task Force members had six weeks—from the time it was formed until it met on March 13-14—to identify, study, and discuss the relevant issues. Members did a great deal of work during that time. (See the METHODS section below for details.) Members also read and provided revision suggestions on an earlier draft of this report.

Finally, given the time constraints for fulfilling its charge, the Task Force had limited resources to draw upon. This is particularly true with respect to obtaining input from students and faculty across campus; however, most members agreed that extensive input at the problem-identification stage of the reform process was not as crucial as it will be in the problem-solving stage of the process. (See the FINDINGS section below for more information about strategies to be used in maximizing input during the problem-solving stage of the gen. ed. revision process.)

**Recommendations**

The overall recommendation of the Task Force is that both the UP and the WAUP should be revised; however, the Task Force has been unable to agree on the extent of such revision. For example, some members believe that the existing program merely needs a bit of fine-tuning, whereas other members believe the entire program should be scrapped and an entirely different program developed. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most members seem to feel that realistic change lies somewhere between the two extremes.

*However, most Task Force members believe that further substantive outcomes assessment of the existing program should be undertaken before any specific changes are made.*

Regardless of whether the UP and WAUP are revised, the charge of the Gen. Ed. Council definitely needs to be revised. Under current circumstances, the burden of assessment is far too cumbersome a responsibility for a committee with limited members, expertise, and resources and that meets only twice per month.

A more detailed set of recommendations is presented in the CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS section of this report.

**METHODS**

This section describes the charge of the Task Force, its deliberative process, and its sources of information.

**The Charge of the Gen. Ed. Task Force**

The charge of the Task Force poses questions about the effectiveness of three areas of the General Education Program:

- General Education Governance
- The Writing Across the University Program (WAUP)
- General Education Revision

Each of these is discussed in the FINDINGS section below.
The Deliberative Process

The Task Force deliberated via email distribution list starting January 28, 2003 (when the Task Force was formed) and in face-to-face meetings held on March 13 & 14, 2003, 2 - 4 p.m. in the Lake Superior Room of the Bovee University Center. Since the Task Force is quite large, consisting of 22 members, it was thought that scheduling two meetings would best accommodate members’ schedules. The approach seemed to work fairly well, as most members were able to attend one or the other of the two meetings. Members also provided revisions suggestions via email on an earlier draft of this report.

Sources of Information

In responding to its charge, the Task Force relied on several sources of information:

- **The knowledge and experiences of individual members.** This was extremely useful. For example, some Task Force members had been involved in the development of the general education program nearly 30 years ago and were able to provide valuable information about the intent of the program, as well as how it has gradually changed over time. Other members were able to provide valuable insight into how much their own departments depend on the UP for the survival of their undergraduate and graduate programs. Still other members provided information about institutional funding and resource allocation.

- **Governance documents**, e.g., “The University Program: A Basic Documents Set” and “General Education Writing Policies.”

- **Oral and written input solicited from members’ colleagues.** All Task Force members were asked to solicit input from their departments; some members obtained quite a bit of input, while others obtained very little.

- Oral and written input from students. Two Task Force members administered informal opinion surveys to obtain their students’ perceptions about the role and purpose of general education here at CMU. This data was distributed to all Task Force members and discussed.

- **Input from panelists at the luncheon with Dr. John Churchill, Executive Secretary of Phi Beta Kappa.** Several Task Force members, as well as other interested faculty and administrators, attended this luncheon on February 19, 2003, which focused on general education issues here at CMU. Panelists included John Churchill, Megan Goodwin, Tim Hartshorne, Tom Miles, Gary Shapiro, and Jonathon Wilcox (student).

- **Input from members who attended the conference of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).** Five members of the Task Force attended this conference, held in Philadelphia PA, February 27 - March 1, 2003: Tanya Domina, Tim Hartshorne, Melinda Kreth, Jane Matty, and Tracy Olrich. They compiled a report and distributed it to Task Force members.

- **Information gathered from reading gen. ed.-related articles.** Specifically, members were asked to read three recent articles about general education so that everyone would have a common knowledge base:
Newton, R.N. (2000). Tensions and models in general education planning. *The Journal of General Education, 49* (3), 165-181. This article describes and analyzes the three most common models of general education here in the U.S. (See the FINDINGS sections below for a more detailed explanation.)


Several Task Force members commented on the usefulness of these articles, which will become even more useful if programmatic revision moves forward.

**FINDINGS**

The findings of the Task Force are presented below. This section focuses on general education governance, the Writing Across the University Program (WAUP), and general education revision.

**General Education Governance**

The Task Force discussed the roles and responsibilities of the General Education Subcommittee, the General Education Council, and the General Education Coordinator. The roles and responsibilities of the Multiculturalism & Diversity Education Council (MDEC) were not included in the Task Force deliberations because they were not included in the charge of the Task Force; however, if revision of the gen. ed. program moves forward, then MDEC’s roles and responsibilities will need to be addressed.

- **General Education Subcommittee**

  The Subcommittee has experienced few serious problems; however, some problems were noted, although not all Task Force members agree that *all* of the following are a problem:

  -- **Lack of up-to-date, readily accessible master syllabi.** This has been a serious impediment to the Subcommittee’s task of re-certification, but thanks to the Academic Senate’s initiative to collect master syllabi for all courses by April 15, this problem may disappear, or at least become less severe.

  -- **Lack of authority.** The re-certification process has also been hampered by the Subcommittee’s lack of authority (or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that it has been hampered by the *perception* among some faculty, departments, and colleges of such a lack of authority). When the Subcommittee deems a master syllabus to be out of compliance, the chair sends a memo to the department explaining in what way the master syllabus is out of compliance and requesting that the syllabus be revised and resubmitted. Such requests are commonly ignored, especially if non-compliance is due to failure to adhere to the General Education Writing Policies.
-- Ambiguities in the “The University Program: A Basic Documents Set” and the “General Education Writing Policies.” One of the virtues of clear administrative documents is that they help increase procedural objectivity and efficiency; on the other hand, ambiguous administrative documents are more open to interpretation, a situation that can be viewed as enhancing administrative flexibility. In general, it is often the case that people who desire clear administrative documents view with suspicion those who don’t; likewise, those who desire a degree of ambiguity and flexibility view with suspicion those who don’t. It should be noted, however, that insofar as policies and procedures are forms of instrumental discourse, their purposes are “the governance, guidance, control, or execution of human activities” (Beale 1987, p. 94), and they do this by limiting “the ways people interpret the texts and conduct themselves with others, with organizations, and with their environments” (Moore 1996, p. 103).

The consequences of unclear policies and procedures are evident in the deliberations of, for instance, the Gen. Ed. Subcommittee. Much time is often spent during Subcommittee meetings trying to determine what a particular part of the “Basic Documents Set” actually means or is intended to mean with respect to a particular master syllabus. In addition, interpretations vary depending on the membership of the Subcommittee at a particular time and depending on the specific issue under consideration. Effectively written policies and procedures would reduce the need for this type of extended deliberation and thus allow the Subcommittee to spend more of its time implementing policies and procedures and less time interpreting them.

Most Task Force members favor clear gen. ed. policies and procedures for the reasons cited above, but some members counter that somewhat ambiguous policies and procedures allow for more flexibility of interpretation. No one has argued that the gen. ed. policies and procedures should be completely open to interpretation. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that, over the years, repeated attempts have been made to clarify the “Basic Documents Set”; one need only note the numerous dates of previous revisions inserted at various points throughout the document.

-- Problems with the curricular process. Too often, the Subcommittee has to return new course proposals, change requests, etc. to departments because forms have not been correctly filled out, rationales have not been written explicitly or persuasively enough, or because the master syllabus is incomplete or out-of-date. Some Task Force members argue that this is not really the Subcommittee’s problem, whereas others believe that it is.

A new problem has recently surfaced involving the approval of existing UP courses for distance delivery through the College of Extended Learning. For example, a department recently submitted to the Subcommittee an addendum for distance-delivery through CEL of one of its UP courses, but the master syllabus for the course did not comply with the writing requirement. This particular course had been out of compliance for over two years, and the department had failed to revise the master syllabus to bring it into compliance; therefore, the Subcommittee refused to consider the CEL addendum until the master syllabus was brought into compliance, meaning that CEL students would not have access to this particular UP course. Fortunately, the department promptly revised its master syllabus and the addendum was then approved.
General Education Council

The General Education Council has serious problems, some of which can be solved more easily than others.

-- Lack of members. This has been the most serious problem recently. During Fall 2002, the Council was short three voting members and by Spring 2003, it was short five voting members (of these, one member was on sabbatical and another simply stopped attending meetings and was removed from the Council). Three of the vacant positions were filled by the Academic Senate, but not until the middle of March 2003, at which point the Council had only three remaining meetings. The Task Force speculated on a number of explanations to account for the lack of members on the Council:

  o Faculty may perceive that serving on the Council it too time-and labor-intensive.
  o Faculty may perceive that the assessment work of the Council is of little value. Many Task Force members reported feeling this way and stated that many of their colleagues do as well. The primary justification offered by those Task Force members who believe this is that no valid, reliable, generalizable programmatic assessment data have been obtained. This is not to say that no assessment has been conducted, because it has; rather, gen. ed. assessment to date has been rather piecemeal, each year focusing on a different subgroup, often with extremely limited participation of faculty and students. Although limited outcomes assessments have been conducted, much of the data generated has resulted from student and faculty opinion surveys. We have no valid, reliable data based on a representative sample of our student population, past or present. We also lack longitudinal data.
  o Faculty may not realize that another major responsibility of the Council is to promote general education among students, faculty, and the administration. The Council does more than engage in assessment activities. For example, three years ago, the Council developed a General Education web site, which is located on the Student Portal. It contains the master syllabi of all UP courses (though by now, many are doubtless out of date). As of April 18, 2003, the web site had received nearly 45,000 hits since becoming active in Fall 2000.

-- Lack of resources. The Gen. Ed. Council lacks resources in three areas:

  o Lack of assessment expertise among Council members. Although all members have experience developing and implementing assessment methods in their individual classes, few members have explicit training or experience in programmatic assessment. Until recently, this has not been a problem because the Council has never undertaken a learning outcomes assessment of the program as a whole.

    Two Task Force members, who had been a part of the development and implementation of the original General Education Program, noted that assessment was not originally a responsibility of the Council—that came later. In fact, outcomes assessment was not even considered when the program was developed three decades ago. However, another member has countered that assessment was always understood to the responsibility of the Council.

  o Lack of money. The Council has no fixed budget, which makes it difficult to develop, let alone implement, a valid programmatic assessment plan. In the past, the Gen. Ed. Council
has submitted proposals to the Assessment Council to fund gen.-ed. related assessment, but the amounts in question have been so miniscule as to preclude any meaningful programmatic assessment. Valid, reliable, generalizable, longitudinal assessment is expensive and takes a great deal of time and effort. The lack of funds may go a long way towards explaining why the Council has largely been limited to small-scale, periodic assessment of the various UP sub-groups.

- **Lack of faculty participation in assessment projects.** Over time, faculty have become increasingly apathetic about, if not downright hostile toward, gen. ed. assessment.
  - Some faculty distrust the administration, believing that assessment data will be used punitively, although it’s not clear *why* they believe this.
  - Some faculty are simply tired of participating in assessment projects every two or three years without ever receiving follow-up about the results of the assessment.
  - Some faculty are skeptical of the validity, reliability, and generalizability of past gen. ed. assessment.
  - Some faculty don’t believe that programmatic assessment is their responsibility.
  - Some faculty believe it is hypocritical for the administration to expect faculty to conduct assessment without adequate funding of such efforts.

- **Lack of access to data collected in previous assessment projects.** This is also a serious problem. If the Council wants to review previous Gen. Ed. assessment projects, where does it go to find that information? Such information is not indexed or summarized on the Academic Senate’s web page, nor can it be found neatly organized in the Academic Senate office.

The entire history of our Gen. Ed. Program seems to be contained in one large filing cabinet and one large box located in the office of the current Gen. Ed. Coordinator, Melinda Kreth. The files were passed on to her by the previous Gen. Ed. Coordinator, Tom Miles, who presumably received them from his predecessor, Rod, Kirk, and so on. The files are haphazardly organized, with no index (this observation is not intended as a criticism of former Gen. Ed. Coordinators). Kreth would like to conduct archival research for the purpose of writing up a narrative history of the program; such a history would prove very useful to a future revision of the Gen. Ed. Program. She has requested from the Provost’s Office a research assistant for Summer 2003 to help with this task.

- **The General Education Coordinator**

  Although the Exec. Board did not specifically ask the Task Force to examine the duties and responsibilities of the Gen. Ed. Coordinator, discussion of this position arose among Task Force members, especially among the members who attended the AAC&U conference. In their conference report, Domina, Hartshorne, Kreth, Matty, & Olrich (March 2003) note as one of their key conclusions that “the director of general education needs access to the academic administration, perhaps on the level of a dean” (p. 9). Effective gen. ed. programs represented at the AAC&U conference had strong, full-time gen. ed. leadership positions. For example, at MSU, each of the three colleges with core courses in the Integrative Studies Program has a full-time Integrative Studies Director, and at Western Washington University, gen. ed. is administered by the Vice Provost. Still other schools have a separate gen. ed. college with a dean.
One Task Force member summed up the opinions of many others with respect to the lack of effective administration of the General Education Program:

To effectively administer the [Gen. Ed.] program, we need . . . a central office, staff, and budget line. As noted in [this] report, [in addition to] a lack of a place, adequate storage, and staff, there is a problem of history. . . . if you look at the CMU Telephone Directory, under 'G' you will find "Goodies to Go" but no mention of the most important single program at CMU which effectively impacts all of our students: "General Education." This program has been run on the cheap with the efforts of dedicated and committed faculty. Those efforts should not be devalued and the institution should provide needed support and structure to permit a more effective implementation of the various tasks essential to its functional utility—from assessment to promoting the program's raison d'etre and utility to faculty, students, parents, etc.

The Task Force has not reached unanimous agreement about whether the Gen. Ed. Coordinator position should be substantially changed or whether it should become a full-time administrative position, but all Task Force members agreed that there will always need to be plenty of channels for faculty input and oversight.

The current Gen. Ed. Coordinator does have one complaint—she does not have enough room in the office she shares with an English Dept. colleague in Anspach Hall. Her available space shrunk considerably with the arrival of the gen. ed. files from the previous coordinator.

The Writing Across the University Program

The Task Force exhibited a high level of agreement with respect to some aspects of the WAUP:

- **Helping students become competent writers should be a top priority at CMU.** At least one Task Force member has claimed that the primary purpose of the WAUP is to create a “culture of writing” across the university community, but as other Task Force members have pointed out, establishing a “culture of writing” is not the purpose of the WAUP as reflected in the “General Education Writing Policies.” Also, it should be remembered that the WAUP is the second part of a three-part writing competency requirement (ENG 101 is the first part and ENG 201 is the third part). If the purpose of the WAUP is not to help students become competent writers, then it should not be part of the writing competency requirement and the “General Education Writing Policies” needs to be revised to accurately reflect the intended purpose of the WAUP.

Establishing a “culture of writing” here at CMU, while certainly laudable, is not and should not be an end in itself—it is necessary but not sufficient to accomplishing the goal of helping students become competent writers. However, most Task Force members agree that one important benefit of the WAUP is that students now take for granted the fact that they will be expected to write in many other classes, not just their English classes. This was not the case prior to implementation of the WAUP.

Results of a survey of 115 CMU faculty indicate a need for writing-intensive courses in the major (Taylor, Kreth, and Brockman, 2003). Most faculty surveyed expect that, upon graduation, students should be able to write primarily research reports/papers, but also a wide variety of other discipline-specific documents; however, the writing assignment most faculty commonly give in their classes is the essay exam. About a third also assign critical analyses and research papers (albeit relatively short ones). It is not clear how students are supposed to learn to write these discipline-specific documents without
receiving explicit instruction and/or without having opportunities to write them in class.

Another problem noted by some Task Force members is the lack an explicit relationship between the WAUP and CMU’s Writing Center.

- **The Composition Program should not bear sole responsibility for helping students become competent writers.** The entire university community should share in this responsibility. In fact, in a recent survey of 115 CMU faculty, most respondents (69.5%) indicated that they believe they are responsible for helping students become effective writers (Taylor, Kreth, & Brockman, 2003).

- **The current WAUP program has problems, and it is unclear to what extent the program contributes to helping students become competent writers.** Three specific problems have been noted:

  -- **The WAUP lacks focus and coherence.** Like the “Basic Documents Set,” the “General Education Writing Policies” is ambiguous with respect to the purpose(s) of writing in UP courses and how that writing should be evaluated. (The recent revision approved by the Senate on Sept. 10, 2002 certainly attempts to clarify the purposes for writing in the UP, but further revision is needed.) Are UP instructors supposed to teach writing? And if so, what makes them qualified to do so? Most have had no training in this area. If not, then what are the specific parameters of their responsibilities?\(^2\)

    In addition, the “General Education Writing Policies” do not address explicitly enough what counts as “meaningful” writing and what does not, nor does it specify to whom the writing should be “meaningful.” This issue of “meaningfulness” befuddled the Gen. Ed. Subcommittee earlier this year as it attempted to determine whether a CEL course with a great deal of on-line interaction among students and the instructor would count as “meaningful writing.” With limited guidelines for making the decision, the Subcommittee decided on its own (though not unanimously) that “chat discussions” did not count as meaningful writing but “bulletin board discussions” did.

  -- **The amount of writing required is burdensome for large class sections,** despite revisions to the policy that provide a new option for basing less than 50% of the course grade on an evaluation of student writing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to do even 15 pages of “meaningful” writing (however defined) in classes with 300 students. Large class size is perhaps the biggest impediment to successful implementation of the current WAUP, and unless this trend of increasing class size is reversed, no future revision of the WAUP is likely to fair any better.

  -- **Colleges, departments, and individual UP instructors routinely flout the “General Education Writing Policies.”** This is not surprising given the preceding two observations. It is estimated by the General Education Council and the General Education Subcommittee that one third of UP courses do not meet the writing requirement (this figure excludes those courses that are exempt by virtue of meeting some other competency requirement). In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that few if any UP courses taught through the CEL adhere to the writing requirement. If we’re going to have a writing policy for the UP, then it needs to apply equally to everyone. If the policy is no longer feasible, then it needs to be changed.

  -- **The WAUP lacks administrative and financial support.** As Kreth (2001) has noted, “we have no director, no central office, no staff, and no budget line” (288), a lack of resources that makes our program unique among writing-across-the-curriculum programs throughout the country.
As anyone who studies organizational culture knows, a lot can be learned about an organization and its values by examining how and where its resources are allocated. Based on our current situation, neither the UP nor the WAUP appear to be highly valued by the administration here at CMU.

-- The effectiveness of the WAUP is difficult to assess. Why? Because we cannot control the relevant variables (e.g., pedagogical strategies); however, it is possible to administer to students some kind of writing assessment instrument, but all it would tell us is how they’re doing within a limited context, not why, i.e., it wouldn’t tell us anything about what’s going on in UP classrooms that might account for student performance on the writing test, and it wouldn’t distinguish among effects (if any) produced by the three separate parts of the writing competency requirement.

Despite the fact that we do not have any valid, reliable, or generalizable data measuring learning outcomes, we do have some evidence—primarily in the form of student, alumni, and faculty opinion surveys—to support the claim that the WAUP is to some degree effective (Miles & Kreth, 2000.) This evidence is summarized below:

- 77% believed WAUP has a “positive” or “very positive” effect on their ability to communicate in writing.
- 41% believed that even more writing should be required in UP courses.

- 81% noted that UP courses played a positive role in improving their ability to communicate in writing.

1999 Gen. Ed. Subcommittee faculty survey (n = 166)
- 68% of faculty surveyed believed that the WAUP is “valuable” or “very valuable.”

Anecdotal evidence
Former Gen. Ed. Council chair, Neil Story: “most UP instructors tell us [in group forums held in 1992] that student writing does improve over the length of a writing intensive UP course, and that student writing as a whole has significantly improved since the WAUP requirement was imposed.”

Tom Miles, former Gen. Ed. Coord.: “discussions with faculty over the years show that many faculty believe that students’ writing has improved since the advent of the WAUP.”

It should be noted that Kreth is finishing up a WAUP Faculty Handbook, which will be ready for new faculty orientation in August 2003. It is not yet clear how best to make the Handbook available to other faculty (e.g., as downloaded .pdf files on the Academic Senate web site or on the General Education Web site?).
General Education Revision

With respect to programmatic revision, the Task Force focused on the University Program and the Writing Across the University Program. One thing is clear: Revision will not be easy. According to Newton (2002), “The battlefield of undergraduate education is strewn with the skeletons of well-meaning but unsuccessful reformers who attempted to stem the tide of specialization in defense of general education” (p. 165). The Task Force examined student opinions, studied various models of general education, discussed the economic implications of reform here at CMU, and studied the process of reform. (Many Task Force Members also solicited the opinions of their colleagues, and those opinions have been incorporated into this report.)

- **Student Opinions**

Two Task Force members surveyed their students about CMU’s General Education Program (although most students’ responses focused on the UP). While the results certainly aren’t generalizable to the larger student population, many Task Force members believe they reflect perceptions that would likely be identified by a representative sample of students, while others believe there would be more positive responses. Below is an alphabetical list of the types of responses provided by the students surveyed:

-- Good to develop “well-rounded” students
-- Inconsistent application of WAUP requirement
-- Inconsistent level of pedagogical expertise among UP instructors
-- Many UP courses are not useful—busy-work
-- Many UP teachers seem “uninterested” in what they’re doing, as if they resent having to teach a UP course.
-- Need fewer choices
-- Need more choices
-- Purpose of the writing in UP course not clear
-- No problems—the program is fine as it is
-- Some UP courses are too broad in scope, others are too in-depth in coverage
-- Some course titles and descriptions are inaccurate
-- Too much teaching-to-the-majors in many UP courses—defeats the purpose of “general” education
-- Unevenness in the degree of difficulty, the amount of work, the rigor of grading, etc., *from section to section of multi-sectional courses*; once again, a perception of unevenness and even unfairness.
-- UP classes are less rigorous (which most students see as a positive feature!)
-- UP classes are too large
-- UP has problems with transfer credits and inconsistent time limits for testing out of competency requirements (the Board of Appeals has also cited this as a problem!)
-- UP is a waste of money
-- UP lacks a clear purpose (e.g., Why are we taking UP courses?)

- **General Education Models**

There are three models of general education that are currently in place in colleges and universities across the country (Newton, 2002). Table 1 on the following page compares the three models. CMU’s University Program contains aspects of all three models.
Table 1: Three Models of General Education

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<th>Great Books</th>
<th>Scholarly Discipline</th>
<th>Effective Citizen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Insight</strong></td>
<td>Focus on the perennial human questions</td>
<td>Disciplines as the accumulated wisdom and ways of understanding the world humankind has developed over the centuries</td>
<td>Education in the service of self-reforming democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of university</strong></td>
<td>Handing on the tradition</td>
<td>Vigorous developer/extender of the knowledge and methods of the academic disciplines</td>
<td>Progressive force of democratic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substance of curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Pivotal ideas/author of Western tradition</td>
<td>Key concepts and methods of inquiry as defined by the disciplines</td>
<td>Knowledge/skills vital to living in and improving modern society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal graduate</strong></td>
<td>Classically educated through encounters with classic works and authors</td>
<td>Beginning practitioner of the disciplines</td>
<td>An effective citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis</strong></td>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breadth/depth</strong></td>
<td>Broad review of the substance of the Western tradition</td>
<td>Sharp introduction to the range of basic disciplines</td>
<td>Comprehensive introduction to current knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of coherence</strong></td>
<td>Unified by a historical review of key responses to the perennial questions</td>
<td>The individual student piecing together the mosaic of the disciplines</td>
<td>The focus on preparing graduates with skills/knowledge for modern society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty</strong></td>
<td>Broadly educated generalists</td>
<td>Disciplinary experts</td>
<td>Instructors committed to educate nonspecialists in their areas of specialty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likely locations</strong></td>
<td>Liberal arts colleges/special programs in larger universities</td>
<td>Research-oriented universities with strong departments</td>
<td>Institutions with strong client-centered orientation and sense of public mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Looks to the past for enduring ideas and values to form and guide students in the present</td>
<td>Instills an understanding of the intellectual treasures and scholarly methods that are society’s intellectual heritage</td>
<td>Develops tools and commitment needed to shape the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inspiration/advocates</strong></td>
<td>Hutchins, Adler, Bennett, Cheney, Bloom</td>
<td>Bruner, Phenix, professional disciplinary societies</td>
<td>Dewey, Childs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The UP contains a few individual courses (e.g., in English and Humanities) that reflect some aspects of the Great Books Model, but the Task Force believes that, as an overarching framework, the Great Books model would not work here at CMU. On the other hand, many Task Force members value the model’s element of interdisciplinarity and believe that a larger portion of our Gen. Ed. Program should be interdisciplinary, but they also acknowledge that we currently lack the political and economic incentives for such a change.

The UP possesses several characteristics of the Scholarly Discipline model, many of which are
embraced by some Task Force members (especially the extent to which it values disciplinary expertise and focuses on disciplinary methodologies), but other members criticized the model, noting its lack of underlying unity and coherence and questioning the validity of the model’s basic assumption that “the students themselves who, with a solid grounding in the fundamental concepts and scholarly methods of the individual disciplines, can reflectively make their own connections” among the various discipline-based courses (Newton, 2000, p. 172). This lack of overt connections among the various discipline-based courses seems to be what some Task Force members mean when they complain that the current UP lacks coherence.

Actually, the UP goes well beyond merely offering rigorous introductory courses in the disciplines, for it also includes numerous upper-level courses in the disciplines, and several Task Force members noted that the presence of so many upper-level courses actually exacerbates the validity problem cited above, and other members have noted that there is nothing “general” about discipline-specific, upper-level courses.

Several Task Force members found the Effective Citizen model rather appealing, at least in theory, especially if were to include a set of core courses that would be taken by all students. But many of these same members were also concerned about the economic impact of such a major change. Another concern is that faculty who would teach these core courses might become marginalized in their own departments.

A model that might be a good compromise for us is one recently implemented by the University of Arizona (Domina et al., 2003, p. 8). UA had a distribution system such as our UP, one that was largely based on the Scholarly Disciplines model. After revising its gen. ed. program, UA now has a three-part system:

1. Foundational (competency) courses completed during the freshmen & sophomore years.
   --Mathematics (1 course)
   --English Composition (2-3 courses)
   --Second language (1-2 courses)
2. Tier 1 courses to be completed primarily in the freshmen year from 3 interdisciplinary areas.
   --Natural Sciences (2 courses)
   --Individuals and Societies (2 courses)
   --Traditions and cultures (2 courses)
3. Tier 2 courses to be completed during the sophomore year.
   --Arts (3 units)
   --Humanities (1 course)
   --Natural Sciences (1 course)
   --Individuals and Societies (1 course)

Such a system might work well here at CMU. In particular, the “Tier 1” courses offer the kind of interdisciplinary, core course options that many Task Force members find desirable, while the “Tier 2” courses maintain much of the existing discipline-based, methodological approach of the current UP.

At any rate, the lack of agreement among Task Force members about the underlying purpose of the UP is itself a strong indication of the need for further, expanded discussion of this issue among all stakeholders, but especially among CMU faculty.
• Economic Considerations

One impediment to any revision of the UP and WAUP that has been noted by several Task Force members is the fact that many colleges and departments have come to rely on University Program courses for their economic welfare: UP courses are sometimes used by departments and colleges as cash cows to fund both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Thus there is no economic incentive to reduce the number of UP courses, let alone to develop a set of interdisciplinary core gen. ed. courses.

Despite the fact that many Task Force members are dissatisfied with the current UP, all members recognize how deeply entrenched it is, both in terms of the sheer number of courses now included in the UP (there are 227 listed in the 2002-2003 Undergraduate Bulletin) and in terms of the economic dependence the model has fostered.

• The Revision Process

Based on information obtained at the AAC&U conference, general education revision initiatives can take anywhere from three to five years, depending on the type and extent of the revision (Domina et al., 2003, p. 10). Thus, it will be vital for any future Task Force to consist of persons willing to make a long-term commitment to the reform effort.

Smith et al. (2001) offer several suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the general education revision process:

1. Promote open discussion.
2. Establish a legitimate [revision] committee.
3. Establish an agenda and timetables.
4. Debate and design the new curriculum.
5. Create clear criteria for course approval.
6. Establish a role for assessment.
7. Anticipate program changes and concerns and set up information channels.
8. Schedule periodic review.

For any revision effort to be successful, strategies must be implemented to maximize input from all stakeholders: faculty, students, administrators, trustees, alumni, parents, etc. Such strategies would include the following:

• Open forums (scheduled two or three times per semester)
• Opinion surveys (for faculty and students; conduct at least twice, i.e., at the beginning of the process and again toward the end; less expensive to do these electronically via a CMU web site)
• Focus groups (for all interested stakeholders, but especially faculty)
• Written progress reports from the Gen. Ed. Task Force (made available on the Academic Senate web site)

If the above strategies are implemented, stakeholders are less likely to feel that the revision process is being imposed on them and are more likely to feel that they are active collaborators in the process.
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section summarizes the findings and recommends courses of action.

Summary of Findings

Below is a summary of the findings of the Gen. Ed. Task Force with respect to the three areas of its investigation.

- **General Education Governance**
  
The charge of the Gen. Ed. Subcommittee is reasonable and the workload is not unmanageable. Most problems noted should be relatively easy to solve; others, such as revision of the “Basic Documents Set” will be more difficult to resolve, especially since some people don’t believe the document needs to be revised. Of course, such a revision should probably fall under the purview of a new General Education Task Force rather than the Gen. Ed. Subcommittee. That’s a decision the Academic Senate will need to make.

  In contrast, the charge of the Gen. Ed. Council is no longer reasonable. *It is absurd to expect the Council to conduct valid, reliable, generalizable programmatic assessment given its current limitations.*

  The Gen. Ed. Coordinator position is probably fine for now but may need to be radically changed in the future, depending on whether and to what extent the General Education Program is revised.

- **Writing Across the University Program**
  
  Most, though not all, Task Force members believe that the WAUP lacks focus and coherence (e.g., in terms of its purpose), is difficult to implement and assess, and lacks sufficient administrative support. However, most Task Force members believe that we should continue to have some kind of writing-across-the-curriculum program and that we should continue to foster a “culture of writing,” not as an end in itself but as a way of helping students become competent writers.

- **General Education Revision**
  
  There is little agreement among Task Force members about the types and extent of problems that plague the General Education Program.

  Consider an analogy between our Gen. Ed. Program and a tire. Some Task Force members believe the tire is in good shape; sure, it has lots of miles on it and has been retread a few times, but the tire is essentially as good as new and is still perfectly functional. Other Task Force members believe it’s irresponsible to drive around on a tire that’s been repeatedly retread, especially when the tire itself has an underlying design flaw; these folks naturally worry that the tire will blow. Some members believe that not only is the tire old and worn out, but that the vehicle (i.e., students) to which the tire is currently attached is very different from the vehicle for which the tire was originally intended (e.g., perhaps the tire was made for a 1973 Chevy Impala, but now it’s on a 2003 Ford Expedition). Still other Task Force members believe that the tire actually blew out a long time ago and that the vehicle has already crashed and burned.
The truth is we know very little about the effectiveness of the UP as a whole because we don’t have current, valid, reliable, representative programmatic data on student learning outcomes. Few of the UP subgroups have specific, measurable learning objectives. Many Task Force members, though certainly not all, believe the following about the UP:

- it lacks adequate focus and coherence
- it is not administered effectively (some believe this is due to its large size, while others don’t believe the size of the program is a factor at all)
- it lacks sufficient administrative support (i.e., funding)
- it is difficult to assess (again, some members believe this is due to the large size of the program, while others disagree)

Revision of the UP will be difficult and will take a long time, but if done responsibly, it will be well worth the effort.

Recommendations

1. Form a new General Education Task Force in Fall 2003. It should be a Senate committee, with members elected from the various departments. (One could argue that representation be limited only to those departments with courses in the UP, but that’s debatable.) The Task Force should also include representatives of the administration, perhaps in a non-voting capacity, perhaps not. The General Education Coordinator can continue to chair the committee, albeit in a non-voting capacity.

   a. Update the charge of the new Task Force. The Task Force should follow the recommendations made by Smith et al. (2001), cited above in “The Revision Process” section.

   b. Request that the new Task Force submit a plan of action (including a timetable) by November 1, 2003.

   c. Revise the plan as needed and implement the first phase by January 15, 2004.

   d. Based on data obtained during the information-gathering stage of the Gen. Ed. revision process,

      i. Revise the UP and “The University Program: A Basic Documents Set” as needed.

      ii. Revise the WAUP and the “General Education Writing Policies,” especially with respect to the purpose of writing in UP courses. Regardless of what form the WAUP takes in the future, we need to

          • develop writing-intensive courses in the major
          • establish closer ties between the Writing Center and the WAUP (in whatever its future form)

2. Administer to a representative sample of students (seniors?) a criterion-referenced, standardized general education assessment instrument (e.g., College-BASE or The Academic Profile). In fact, at its final meeting of the 2002-2003 academic year, the General Education Council approved such a plan, which will be carried out by the General Education Coordinator and the Office of Academic Affairs (the details have yet to be worked out). This data should be made available to the new Task Force as soon as possible.

3. Eliminate altogether or alter the charge of the General Education Council:

   a. Abolish the Gen. Ed. Council and do one of the following:
i. Shift the responsibility for assessment to the Assessment Council, which could create a new subcommittee specifically for this purpose (although it’s not clear whether this would actually help).

ii. Shift the burden of assessment to the departments and/or colleges that offer UP courses (i.e., make the responsibility for assessment “follow the money”).

iii. Shift the burden of assessment to the Provost’s Office, which has the resources and expertise to undertake programmatic assessment. (This option frightens people who are worried about the administration having too much control over assessment and how the data are used.)

b. Retain the Gen. Ed. Council and its current responsibilities, but require departments and/or colleges to fund the Council’s assessment activities, i.e., departments and/or colleges would pay fee to a Council cost center to fund assessment. The fee would be based on a percentage of the revenues generated by the UP courses offered by the department or college. (Obviously, the details of this alternative have not been worked out, but this is yet another version of the “make-the-responsibility-for-assessment-follow-the-money” approach cited above).

c. Retain the Gen. Ed. Council but limit its responsibilities to promoting gen. ed. and perhaps evaluating assessment data provided by others (as cited in 3a. above). The Council would also coordinate faculty development workshops with the Faculty Center for Academic Excellence.

Concluding Remarks

This report has attempted the perhaps impossible job of condensing the diverse opinions of Task Force members. It is likely that some Task Force members will still perceive this “final” draft of the report as failing in its intended purpose, in which case those members may decide to send addenda directly to the Academic Senate Executive Board. They are, of course, free to do so.

But there is one point upon which we all agree:

*Any changes to the General Education Program should be based on sound, widely accepted pedagogical theory and research and should not be based on financial or political expediency. The needs of our students should be foremost in our minds, not the needs of bureaucrats and politicians.*
END NOTES

1. The phrase “general education reform” was used in an earlier version of this draft, largely because that is the terminology used by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). One member of the Task Force objected to the term “reform” on the grounds that it is too negative; therefore, the term “revision” has been used instead.

2. For example, as noted by Kreth (2001), “I do not agree that WAC necessarily means that faculty in other disciplines can or should ‘teach’ writing. On one hand, a WAC program that emphasizes a writing to learn approach doesn’t involve ‘teaching’ writing because the focus is (or should be) on using writer-centered forms of writing to help students learn course content; such an approach is best suited for lower division courses. On the other hand, a WAC program based on a learning to write or writing in the disciplines approach might require faculty to actually ‘teach’ discipline-specific writing; this approach is best suited to upper division courses in the major and does, I believe, require disciplinary faculty to possess a meta-awareness of writing in their disciplines, an awareness not merely of genre and format, but also of the rhetoric of inquiry employed by the discipline. It also requires a level of professional commitment in time and training to improving student writing that many faculty seriously underestimate. But since most disciplinary faculty don’t acquire (for a variety of reasons) the necessary expertise to actually ‘teach’ writing, perhaps we should stop kidding ourselves that a learning to write approach to WAC will work. Instead, perhaps the best thing disciplinary faculty can do is to learn how to respond to student texts as critical readers, and as writing instructors know, this is not an easy task” (294-95).
REFERENCES


Academic Senate (rev. ). University Program: A basic documents set. Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant MI.


