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Observations and Recommendations on the General Education Program at Wright State University

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The Problem

Dissatisfied with a quite loosely structured general education program that allowed almost any course the University offered to meet requirements, the Wright State University faculty in 1987 instituted a highly structured, 57-quarter-hour program for all students. The new program has three stated goals, one involving general educational skill development, one speaking to developing awareness of ethical and moral issues, the third to increasing student knowledge in specific content areas seen to be of central significance to educated citizens.

The faculty envisioned the courses, most of them designed specifically to meet the requirements, being taught in comparatively small sections allowing opportunity for substantial amounts of writing and class discussion. Such instructional conditions are seen to be most conducive to achieving the first two of the three program goals: developing general intellectual skills and enhancing ethical and moral awareness. With an increase in the number of students who must meet these requirements, declining or static resources, and a shortage of classroom space, it becomes more and more difficult to conduct the General Education Program as was originally intended and to teach courses in such a way as to help students achieve the goals the program sets. The difficulty of fully instituting a long planned "writing across the curriculum" program has brought all the issues surrounding General Education into sharp focus.

Most simply stated, the question I was asked to address is "Where do we go from here?" When a "small" section is 60 students and most general education courses can accommodate the numbers of students required to meet the requirements only by offering the courses in lectures of 200-400 students, it is difficult to see how faculty can work with students on enhancing such general intellectual skills as presenting ideas clearly, framing questions, solving unstructured problems or dealing with moral and ethical choices. Though lectures may present topics in such a way as to invite students to consider such matters in general terms, assessment strategies are largely limited to multiple choice examinations that test factual mastery, augmented by an occasional essay question and a short paper.

It seems unlikely that a major access of resources to support general education lies in the foreseeable future. Any new program, program element or pedagogical strategy will have to be supported within currently available resources of both funds and space. Nor does a major change in the paradigm of the General Education Program seem readily achievable. The current program represents a delicate balance of departmental political and budgetary interests whose disturbance will not be readily accepted. (Such consequences are not a sufficient reason to accept the status quo, but any plan that does disturb the balances needs to offer compensating advantages.)

Observations
Before offering suggestions for ways the University might proceed to address perceived problems with the General Education Program, I would like to make some observations about the structure of the program, the strategies used in delivering it, and the way it is administered. The observations are not intended to be comprehensively descriptive, but point to those matters I think crucial to note in strengthening the program. 1. Program Goals

The way the program is organized and presented on the printed page strongly conveys the notion that General Education is about acquaintance with a variety of kinds of subject matter. Although the requirement is for specific courses or choices from among small numbers of courses, the visible logic of the program is that of a distribution requirement. Except for the brief and bald statement of the three goals that prefaces the outline of the program, no one looking at the program would conclude that it says anything other than "the faculty of Wright State University believes that some acquaintance with these areas of knowledge constitutes a strong general education." As the master syllabi created for the individual courses reveal, the faculty means to say a great deal more than that, but the further concerns appear in no public form.

The program outline contains a brief statement of the purpose of requiring students to pursue work in each of the four areas that constitute general education at Wright State. I could not determine in the brief time I spent at the University the degree to which those purposes are understood and acknowledged by the faculty who teach the courses and made explicit to students. Some specific bits of information that came to my attention give me reason to doubt that either students or faculty are very clear on the logic of a subject matter distribution requirement.

--The few students who came to talk to me understood the program only as requiring that they have an acquaintance with some of the ideas and facts representative of the subject matters that constitute General Education. That these subject matters were representative of particular "ways of knowing," which might be made explicit and contribute to a more abstract understanding of uses of different kinds of knowledge had never been suggested to them. Their general education consisted of an accumulation of miscellaneous facts and ideas which, though they might be interesting, had been chosen for no particular reason they could discern and amounted to no more than the sum of the parts.

--Although some time is spent at freshman orientation talking about the General Education Program, it appears unlikely that any student will ever again hear anyone explain the purposes of the program. Faculty do not generally reinforce an awareness of Program purposes in their syllabi or lectures. Advisors report that they have little occasion or time to discuss these matters with their advisees.

--Those faculty teaching general education courses to whom I talked had rather different understandings of the purposes of courses they taught in common. Three faculty who teach courses that meet the "Regional Studies~ requirement each had a different "take" on the purposes of the course.

On the other hand, the current efforts of the science departments to re-examine the goals of the natural science requirement suggests that at least one group is currently determined to clarify purposes.

The Wright State Faculty has been admirably specific in saying exactly what fields of knowledge it
collectively believes students ought to know about. It has been less clear in articulating and making clear to students and to itself the goals of that knowing.

If the third of the three goals for the General Education Program is not clearly articulated in the way the program is presented to students, the first—developing general intellectual skills—is not articulated at all. Lack of explicit statement of purpose would not matter much if the courses actually embodied that purpose. But as class sizes have grown and time has taken faculty members farther from the discussions that resulted in these requirements, the courses less and less reflect goals of "critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills as a basis for life-long learning" (Catalog, p. 62).

Students remember about a course what they are asked to do themselves. If their only active effort is responding to multiple choice questions, they will remember only (a little of) what they had to memorize for the test. I am sure no faculty member would find that result of a general education satisfactory in and of itself, though circumstances may in some cases have reduced parts of the program to just that.

The third general education goal, to cultivate a moral and ethical awareness, seems never to have been consciously addressed in the offering of the program.

2. Program Administration

Since nearly all the courses, except "Regional Studies," fall under the aegis of a specific department, administration of the courses lies largely with the departments. Associate deans in the three colleges that offer courses have some undefined responsibility for seeing that departments meet their obligations and helping them find the resources to do so. They have specific responsibility for scheduling the courses, an increasingly difficult task. A General Education Review Committee has been appointed every two years to report to the University Curriculum Committee on the condition of the General Education Program. The nature of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs' responsibility seems not to have been clearly defined, although that office clearly has a general concern for curriculum and instruction.

It appears, then, that the University has no formally specified mechanism for coordinating administration of the General Education Program and no permanently established group, faculty or administrative, actively promoting the program's welfare. The ad hoc Task Force on General Education is, however, currently reviewing the Program to determine what aspects of it, including its administration, need modification.

Since the sole responsibility for course content lies with departments, no generally responsible group or individual can hold the departments to account for teaching the courses in ways that are appropriate to the purposes of a general education program, even to the degree that the goals can be met within current constraints. No one, as far as I was able to tell, reviews course syllabi, visits classes or talks on a regular basis to the faculty who teach courses in the program about what they are doing with their courses and why.

Indeed, it seems unusual for the faculty who are teaching the same course to meet with each other. The difficulties of holding such meetings, even once a quarter, is compounded by the large number of adjunct faculty involved in teaching general education courses.

Yet regularly assembling the staff of a course can serve many useful purposes: orientation of people teaching the course for the first time, clarification of course goals, sharing of ideas about useful texts and
media materials, exchange of teaching strategies, perhaps even developing a common syllabus or course framework. The absence of such coordination, even at the course level, means that students have a variable experience of the General Education Program. The University faculty cannot know, even on the basis of process, let alone outcomes, whether the program is likely to be achieving its goals.

In short, both the structure of the program and its administration leave students with an experience of General Education as consisting of just so many individual pieces. have no experience comparing or integrating across courses. Even in the sciences, where students currently must complete a three course sequence in one discipline, the courses are, according to the Dean, taught independently of each other, without a conscious effort to link them. If, as seems to be the current leaning, the science requirement is changed to permit students to take any three courses, even this possibility of an integrated experience in science will disappear. And science seems to be the only area of general education in which such a possibility exists, except for the chronological ordering of the history sequence.

3. Advising

Students might have some opportunity to gain understanding of the purposes of General Education and the relationships among the courses through their advisors, but, as is generally the case in large institutions, the advising system is not suited to bearing this responsibility. Students, when they seek advising at all, do not often come to advisors with questions that would provide occasion for talking about curricular purposes, even if the students were disposed to do so. Advisors seldom have time for the thoughtful conversations these questions deserve, while students simply want information about requirements and available courses. Many advisors do not have the breadth of academic experience that would allow them to show students how they can make their education come together in meaningful ways.

Nor, except for a short time during orientation, do students experience any effort to teach them about the goals of their general education and how to approach and use the courses they are required to take. Thus the General Education Program appears to them something like a package of fruit-flavored lifesavers to be consumed one at a time: all the same size and shape, different in color to be sure but with a flavor bland and ignorable, not unpleasant but hardly exciting. One would hope for an experience more like a well-crafted Chinese meal, full of contrasting tastes and textures within and among courses, meant to be enjoyed as a rich and complex whole.

4. Upper Division and Transfer Students

For obvious and entirely understandable reasons, many students cannot take some of their General Education courses until they are juniors and seniors. Some of these students have transferred to Wright State; others have many required lower division courses to complete as part of their major programs and cannot fit in all the General Education courses until they have attained upper division status. Some simply cannot find a place in a required course until they are juniors or seniors.

The General Education courses, however, are all designed to be accessible intellectually to freshmen. None has a prerequisite, except the history and science sequences which require students to take the courses in order. Except in those cases where the subject matter is inherently difficult for individual students, juniors and seniors are not likely to find these freshman-level courses very challenging.
The problem lies with a "flat," unsequenced requirement that is fairly extensive and has no upper division component. Yet it is difficult to see how Wright State or any other Ohio university is going to get away from such a general education program, given the state "transfer module. Designed to facilitate transfer from two-year institutions, the transfer module makes it almost impossible for four-year institutions to do anything imaginative with their general education programs. The regulations supporting the module require at least 54 hours, of which any four-year institution may reserve only three hours that must be completed at that university. That leaves very little room for an upper division requirement or any sequence of courses of increasing sophistication.

5. Assessment

No one at Wright State knows whether the General Education Program is achieving its goals or not. WSU is far from alone in this matter. Very few institutions make any effort at assessment of general education outcomes and the state of the art in this area, despite the availability of nationally standardized tests sold by the major collegiate testing services, is rather primitive.

The best evidence for the quality of student general education outcomes is twofold: the institution assuring itself, through continuous monitoring, that it has a program and processes in place highly conducive to producing the desired outcomes; and regular review of samples of student work to see if it reveals student mastery of general education goals. Wright State has not organized the General Education Program to produce either of these kinds of quality assessments.

A few institutions are beginning to consider some kind of culminating, ~capstone~ general education experience. These courses or other kinds of academic activity give students an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in communicating with a general audience, solving unstructured problems, thinking critically, connecting ideas, and systematically considering moral and ethical issues. Wright State is unlikely to be able to afford the offering of such courses any time in the near future, but demonstration of some of these skills might be part of a culminating course in each major program.

Recommendations

Wright State is struggling with significant resource problems, not only of money (and thus people to offer enough courses of a suitable size) but of space. These resource problems weigh quite heavily in offering the General Education Program, but must have their effects on the major programs as well. The problems for general education manifest themselves most visibly in large classes, difficulty in addressing two of the three program goals at all, and concern that the writing across the curriculum program cannot be properly implemented. The State-imposed transfer module creates a further barrier to achieving desirable results.

The University has two general alternatives: institute improved practices that will achieve a better result with the current program; or design a new program more likely to achieve the desired results. I offer suggestions for things that can be done in developing each scenario.
A. Improved Practices

1. Whatever else the University does or does not do, all instructors who teach General Education courses need to be involved in a process of going back to first principles and clarifying the purposes of the program and the concomitant purposes of each individual course. It may be that circumstances of money and faculty are such that the only goal achievable is acquainting students with representative insights of a variety of areas of knowledge deemed by the faculty to be of primary importance. If that is the case, then the University needs to say that to all concerned and proceed to teach the General Education courses accordingly.

If the General Education Program is to focus on this breadth of knowledge goal, faculty need to be clear about the purposes of such a goal. Acquaintance with particular content is not the main purpose, though it may be incidental to the purposes of such courses as "The Western World" and aspects of the science sequences. The justification of a distribution requirement is acquainting students with a variety of ways of approaching the world of experience, a variety of "ways of knowing." The history, humanities, science and social science courses thus have the ultimate goal of conveying some understanding of the analytic power of the epistemologies they represent. The "Comparative Studies" courses have as their purpose helping students to understand how the world looks to people of some non-Western cultures and teaching them how to think themselves into someone else's shoes.

All people teaching these courses should design their syllabi and choose their textbooks, readings and other course materials in accordance with these goals. Their tests and other graded assignments should reflect the same purposes. And again, the instructors need to be specifically aware of why they are teaching the courses, an awareness that is refreshed regularly and clearly conveyed to students.

2. All faculty involved in teaching a particular course should meet regularly, perhaps before each quarter begins and once during the quarter. The meetings should be scheduled at a time when adjunct faculty can attend. These part-time instructors may even have to be paid a little extra to assure their presence.

The first function of these meetings is to make sure all understand the purposes of the course. Beginning-of-quarter gatherings are particularly important for adjunct faculty and graduate students who are teaching the course for the first time and for those full-time faculty who have not taught it for a while. Orientation and socialization of instructors to the substance and culture of the course takes place in these meetings. Neither the department nor the institution can assure itself that a given section of the course will fulfill its purposes if the department chair hands the adjunct a syllabus and lets the instructor take it from there.

As this last paragraph suggests, I believe firmly that when a course is required by the University and/or the department, the individual instructor does not have license to teach it any way he or she wishes. The instructor has an obligation first to fulfill the goals that have been established for that course. The agent that establishes the requirement--department, college or university--has a right and obligation to know that those goals are being appropriately pursued. In the case of general education courses, both the department and the institution as a whole have rights of oversight, which they should exercise.

In addition to clarifying goals and creating a common culture for the course, regular meetings can serve as the occasion for exchanging ideas about course materials and teaching strategies, hearing from an expert from either inside or outside the group on some matter of interest to all instructors, or discussing testing and grading practices. The group might choose to adopt a common ground rules for course
content or even a common syllabus.

3. Although it may be difficult to do, those responsible for General Education should identify some opportunities for making connections among the courses and urging faculty to address those connections. The non-Western courses might be strengthened by requiring students to take the relevant humanities, social science or science course first. Humanities courses can build on the history course. Social science and some science courses can make use of humanities material and demonstrate another way of approaching it. In any event, instructors should have some awareness of what goes on in the General Education Program as a whole and look for ways to relate what they are teaching to the content of other courses. Otherwise the Program will never amount to more than the sum of its parts.

4. Make a concerted, continuing effort to teach students the purposes of the General Education Program. An hour or so as part of freshman orientation is not enough. Such discussions are the last things likely to make an impression on students at a time when logistics and social adjustment are most on their minds. The best place to do such teaching is in the syllabus and introduction to each course, with frequent reminders throughout the course about why students and faculty are there in the first place.

An attractive brochure with a thorough discussion, couched in language students understand, of the structure and purposes of the General Education Program would be helpful, especially if students have specific occasions during their university careers to review it with teachers or advisors. Distributing it without providing for such discussion of it is, however, not worthwhile.

Making sure that advisors understand the purposes of General Education and are prepared to show students ways of building a partially integrated program would be a useful piece of this education process. Advisors have limited opportunity to interact with students about matters related to general education, but such opportunities could be created.

5. Provide some help for faculty in developing evaluation strategies for large courses. Evaluating solely by multiple choice questions focused on specific factual material virtually guarantees that students will fail to understand the purposes of a general education program. Although they certainly require more effort to devise and grade, other evaluation tools are central to any more effective effort than is now in place. Faculty need help in identifying and implementing viable alternatives to machine-graded testing.

6. In particular, work with faculty, course-by-course, to assess possibilities for implementing writing-across-the-curriculum strategies, at least in courses enrolling 120 or fewer students. Requiring much writing in courses of more than 25-30 imposes a cruel grading burden on faculty, but some have devised manageable strategies for larger classes and more could do so. The Director of the Writing Center seems able and certainly willing to take the lead in this effort, but she will need more professional help in carrying out the current task of working with students if she is to turn more of her attention to faculty.

7. Create permanent, specific mechanisms for administering, setting policy for, monitoring and advocating the General Education Program. In recognition of the campus-wide scope of the program, administration should be housed in the Vice President for Academic Affairs' Office. A group consisting of the Associate Vice President and the Associate Deans of the three colleges offering courses in the program could be constituted as an administrative committee to meet regularly and address day-to-day concerns of program management. That group, a faculty standing Committee on General Education or a standing subcommittee of the University Curriculum Committee could be responsible for policy, monitoring and advocacy, acting either on its own or through the administrative group.

Implementation of these recommendations is not entirely without cost. The principal cost will be in
faculty time, which is currently at a premium. Any improvement, however, will be difficult to achieve without a campus-wide refocusing on goals and continuous attention to maintaining awareness of them.

Actual dollar expenditures come in faculty development, an effort the University would need to make in order to implement writing across the curriculum no matter what else it did.

B. Program Adjustments

The steps I have just outlined, if effectively implemented, would go a long way toward focusing the existing program without the turmoil of modifying requirements or devising a new program. However, circumstances may prove such that WSU can contemplate some changes within the framework of the current general Education Program. In making the following suggestions, I am again trying to be conscious of the need to avoid additional expense and to operate within space limitations.

1. Creating a single course, taught in sections of no more than 30, in which the focus would be on reading significant texts and talking and writing about them would be a good strategy for attending to the intellectual skill development goals of general education. Such a move would mean allowing enrollment in most other general education courses to rise, if the space is available to do that.

"Putting all the eggs in one basket" in this way would provide a clear example for students of what general education is about and encourage them to bring these skills to other courses. The "Great Books" courses are good candidates for this treatment. If one could teach another course in this mode, I would opt for course in the science sequence, as involving different modes of thought and analysis which could form a specific contrast with the humanistic materials of the great books courses. I would, however, seriously consider including works of science in the great books courses.

2. Reduce the general education requirement from 57 quarter hours to the minimum required 54. The resources can be shifted to other general education purposes.

3. Use the one course that the transfer module allows each campus to reserve for itself to establish an upper division requirement, a general education course that students may not take until they had reached junior status. The course, which might be the same course for all students or a selection from among a few or a large number of courses with appropriate characteristics, would require students to exhibit a high level of conceptual sophistication in dealing with trans-disciplinary issues; e.g., comparative epistemologies, ethical questions, socioeconomic problems.

If resources and regulatory bodies permit, this upper division requirement should probably consist of two or three courses. The object is to create some intellectual progression within the general education program, get some of the general education courses out of the freshman-sophomore category, and get juniors and seniors out of lower division courses.

4. Make intentional use of major programs to achieve general education goals. Many of the skills that majors ought to and probably do require students to exhibit are the same as those for general education.

Culminating experiences in the major could be used as a means for students to exhibit their mastery of general intellectual skills. The challenge of preparing students to complete that "capstone" requirement satisfactorily would make it necessary for faculty teaching upper division courses in the major to pay some specific attention to helping students develop these kinds of skills, thus increasing the number of
courses all students would encounter in which they were asked to think analytically and work on problem solving, along with the writing requirements that are now a part of most majors.

5. Work on integrating non-western subject matter and issues of American pluralism into existing general education courses. Notions of "us-and-them" communicated by the placement of non-Western cultures in the current program is of dubious validity. Students question it. They also question the lack of attention to the diversity of American cultures in most of the curriculum. Better curricular integration might allow the elimination of specific non-Western requirements in the General Education Program and make room for some of the different kinds of possibilities I have suggested. From what I heard, however, it will take some time to effect such integration. In Conclusion

None of these steps, within either the current program or a modified one, will do anything to reduce the serious systemic problems of funding and space that prevent Wright State from offering the kind of general education program it desires. The transfer module, furthermore, stands as a barrier to some viable improvements.

As I have indicated, however, I believe the University, by involving all instructors in the General Education Program in some careful thinking about program purposes and their instructional concomitants, can achieve some results closer to what it wants. Such outcomes will also require more careful program monitoring than has been the rule.

If WSU is ready for some changes, many are possible. I have suggested some modest ones that can perhaps be accomplished within current resources. These ideas are, however, only suggestive of a few of the many practices that have proven successful in other institutions. I would not want these ideas for program modification to be taken as definitive or prescriptive. On the other hand, I do mean the program improvements to be considered prescriptively.

My thanks to all I met at Wright State for their openness with me and their thoughtfulness about the educational process. Despite the difficult operating circumstances and the fear that things are amiss in the General Education Program, I am certain that most students have a good experience of the University and that much is going right. I heard of many extraordinary, sustained efforts that do great credit to the individuals and the institution. I hope you find my small contribution to your ongoing efforts to be helpful.

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