

POSITION PAPER CONCERNING GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM REVIEW

- I. INTRODUCTION**
- II. HISTORICAL REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION**
 - a. Circa 1980
 - b. 1997: pre-semester conversion
 - c. 1998 and following – the Current Programs
- III. ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PROGRAMS**
 - a. Assessment of core courses
 - b. Assessment of core-like courses
 - c. Assessment of distribution areas
 - d. Assessment of university requirements
 - e. Course taking patterns
- IV. MISSING PIECES**
 - a. Mission, Vision, Goals
 - b. Information Technology
 - c. Global Issues
 - d. Environmental Issues
 - e. Constraints on Study Abroad
 - f. Avoidance of Fine Arts and Life Science
 - g. Lack of support for interdisciplinary course
- V. GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT AND REVISION AND NCA**
- VI. RECOMMENDATIONS**
 - a. Process for Revision
 - b. MnTC Program as a guiding structure

INTRODUCTION

The General Education Curriculum at St. Cloud State University was last revised in 1997 during the transition from the quarter system to the semester system. The General Education Committee (GEC) for the last two years has been considering revisions to the current curriculum in response to faculty and student concerns. These concerns include the lack of assessable learning outcomes for the curriculum as a whole and large segments within it, the difficulty students and faculty encounter in understanding which courses fill which requirements, student course taking patterns that show an avoidance of science, the pressures exerted from the introduction of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC), and several vital academic areas that are not included in the curriculum (e.g. information technology, global issues, environmental issues, etc.). The lack of assessable learning outcomes has become acute as we look toward North Central Accreditation (NCA) review. Consequently, the General Education subcommittee of the Strategic Planning Committee seeks to begin a campus-wide discussion of the revision of the General Education Curriculum. This document serves to lay out the recent history of our current General Education Curriculum and to explore challenges we face in preparing students in the 21st century.

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Much of the structure for our current general education curriculum was in place by the 1980 academic year and extends back considerably further. At that time there were required courses in writing skills, speech communication skills, philosophy, interdisciplinary social science and physical education. In addition to that were three distribution areas; the humanities, natural science and mathematics, and social and behavioral science. There were also general education electives. With the exception of the Diversity curriculum (MGM to some), the Racial Issues curriculum, and the introduction of a requirement in mathematics/statistics, the 1980 curriculum is identical in structure to ours today. The writing requirement is ENGL 191, the speech communication skills requirement is CMST 192, the required philosophy course has changed from a series of courses to PHIL 194, the interdisciplinary social studies course is now 195 Democratic Citizenship, and the physical education requirement has changed from activity courses to a course dealing with wellness and lifelong fitness. The distribution areas are still defined solely based on the departments listed in each area, and the courses that used to fill the general education electives are now the notorious “right-hand column” distribution courses.

Starting in 1996, the university began to discuss revising the general education curriculum as part of the university’s conversion from the quarter system to the semester system. An earlier North Central Accreditation visit had mentioned that our general education curriculum lacked coherence and did not provide a common experience for our students. To address this, the university developed five core competencies: writing skills, speech communication skills, mathematical or statistical skills, critical reasoning, and democratic citizenship. Little was actually changed between the 1997 curriculum and the 1998 curriculum. The philosophy requirement changed from a list of eight courses to only one. The mathematical or statistical skills requirement added a set of eight possible courses. The interdisciplinary social science course requirement was defined as Democratic Citizenship and includes six courses at this time. If coherence was achieved, it was achieved by grouping the previous requirements together to call them a core.

The distribution areas were defined in terms of the affiliation of departments within the three traditional liberal arts and sciences colleges. Any department within the College of Fine Arts and Humanities that offered a distribution course could only do so within the Fine Arts and Humanities distribution area. Those departments within the College of Social Science, the College of Business, and the College of Education were restricted to the Social and Behavioral Sciences distribution area, and those departments in the College of Science and Engineering were limited to the Natural Science distribution area.

During this revision, the general education elective courses were removed as a category, and all of the departments that taught elective courses were used to create the Right-Hand column courses within the current curriculum. Doing this preserved the emphasis on the traditional liberal arts and sciences by requiring that every student take two courses from the departments that traditionally taught liberal arts and sciences courses. There were two exceptions to this. The mathematics department asked to be listed as a right-hand column because they had moved to offering specific courses within the new core.

Environmental and Technological Studies had courses listed in the Social and Behavioral Sciences area before the conversion, but because the ETS department is part of the College of Science and Engineering, all of their courses were moved to the Natural Sciences distribution area. Furthermore, since their courses were not part of the traditional sciences, courses from this department were placed in the right-hand column.

In the revision, the philosophy requirement was tightened to critical thinking and the interdisciplinary social science requirement was tightened to Democratic Citizenship. Mathematic or statistical thinking was added as a skill area and ETS lost its select status within the social science distribution area. Little else changed, though the system did become more complicated for the students and advisors with the introduction of the right and left hand columns.

There were numerous racially motivated disturbances on campus in the 1997-1998 academic year and in response the faculty developed the Racial Issues curriculum the following year. The Racial Issues curriculum was the first developed with a mission, goals, and criteria that were assessable. The following year a taskforce revised the Multicultural, Gender, and Minority curriculum to the Diversity Curriculum, again developing assessable mission, goals, and criteria.

Around 2000, the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC) was introduced and all universities are now expected to both offer and accept the MnTC as a general education curriculum. The MnTC is built around ten goals that are loosely defined. The university possesses some latitude in how it chooses to offer the MnTC. At present the university has simply placed courses approved for the SCSU general education curriculum in goal areas that appear appropriate. Not all SCSU general education courses are part of the SCSU MnTC, and several goal areas within the MnTC do not fit well within our current structure and have only a few courses associated with them.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PROGRAMS

In Fall 2004, the University prepared an assessment report for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). In preparing that report, information was collected from departments that offer various general education courses. Concerning the assessment of general education the report states,

Assessment of the university's general education curriculum has been limited to the efforts of individual departments. The General Education Core Curriculum consists of five areas: Written Communications (ENGL 191), Oral Communication (CMST 192), Mathematical/Statistical Reasoning (MATH 193, STAT 193), Critical Reasoning (PHIL 194), and Democratic Citizenship (various social-sciences courses with course number 195). Since 2000, significant assessment has been implemented for the ENGL 191, PHIL 194, and MATH/STAT 193 courses. The Communication Studies department initiated its pilot assessment project for CMST 192 in 2002. Assessing the Mathematical/Statistical Reasoning and Democratic Citizenship components has been more challenging due to the multiple departments involved in the delivery of these parts of the curriculum, but the departments have taken responsibility for building assessment programs into their consideration of their general-education obligations.

The report goes on to detail the efforts of departments in assessing individual courses. Assessment of distribution areas is primarily being done only at the individual course level. The Racial Issues Committee has made some strides in assessing the Racial Issues Curriculum; however, no assessment beyond individual course assessment has been undertaken for other parts of the general education program.

An additional complication is that there are at least three general education curricula to assess. Students can meet their general education requirements at SCSU through our General Education Curriculum, our Honors Program, or the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum. There has been no assessment to date of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum. The Honors Program has ongoing assessment.

The most serious limit to assessing the general education curriculum as a whole or its five major subparts (i.e. core, diversity, and three distribution areas) is the lack of assessable goals and learning outcomes for the curriculum or its major parts. Of the five subparts listed above, only the diversity curriculum has established goals and criteria that are assessable.

Information on the course-taking patterns of students with regard to the general education curriculum has been collected in two forms. The College of Business collected data on the credit generation within all general education courses from the Fall of 1998 through Spring 2001. Members of the Mathematics and Statistics departments compiled data on the average number of semesters completed by a student before they completed a given general education core requirement. A synopsis of each of these data sets is attached to this paper. The COB report on credit taking behavior indicates that students are on average meeting the distribution requirements by taking 9 credits in Area A and C and only 6 credits in Area B. There are twice as many credits generated in Area A and C courses as there are in Area B. This is a result of student course taking patterns and not course availability. The report also indicates that the percentage of credits generated by left-hand column courses in each area are as follows; Area A 79%, Area B 85%, and Area C 73%. The data collected on completion times for the core courses indicates that the average number of semesters to completion for the Core courses and university requirements are as follows; Core 1, 2.1 semesters, Core 2, 2.4 semesters, Core 3, 2.7 semesters, Core 4, 3.2 semesters, Core 5, 2.3 semesters, PESS 122, 3.6 semesters, and Racial Issues, 3.5 semesters. We are very close to meeting the university's goal of having students complete their Core 1 and Core 2 requirements in their first year; however, we have considerable work to do in regards to meeting the same goal for Racial Issues.

MISSING PIECES

Much of the university's general education program largely resembles that of the 1980s. No mission statement or goals have been developed for the general education program as a whole, the core curriculum, or any of the distribution areas. Five criteria have been developed for establishing what constitutes a general education course, and any course approved for inclusion in the general education curriculum must meet at least three of the five criteria. Only two pieces within the curriculum (Diversity and Racial Issues curricula) have assessable mission statements, goals, and criteria. The distribution areas have never been defined, and no criterion for inclusion of a course within a distribution area exists except for the college affiliation of the department that offers the course. The university requires all students to take a laboratory science course, but has never defined what that means or provided a set of guidelines to determine what constitutes a laboratory course.

Some faculty members believe that our current general education curriculum does not address a few key areas that are important to students in the 21st century. These include information technology and research methods, global issues, environmental issues, and social responsibility. Additionally, it is possible to complete the general education program and never be exposed to the fine arts or a life science. Development of general education mission and vision may help guide us in deciding these issues.

As a university we value study abroad and have developed a strong and active study abroad program. Our current general education curriculum often hinders students' participation in study abroad programs. Since courses meeting distribution requirements are restricted to departments within a specific college, it is difficult for us to offer the necessary choices for student to have a complete set of courses to take while on study abroad programs. Often students who participate in study abroad program do so by adding a semester or year to their academic programs.

Finally, the current general education curriculum makes it difficult to offer truly interdisciplinary courses within the distribution areas. Most of the interdisciplinary courses are listed as right-hand column courses, and consequently students are not as interested in taking them. As right-hand column courses, they are less likely to be usable in meeting a student's general education requirements.

The general education curriculum has many missing pieces. The biggest of these are the shortcomings in meeting the needs of our students and the lack of mission statements, goals, assessable learning outcomes, and key definitions. These are issues that cannot be addressed easily. The university can either try to patch the current general education curriculum, or build a curriculum that addresses the issues that students face now and which will allow the university to effectively assess the curriculum and to more effectively align with state and regional programs.

GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT AND REVISION AND NCA

The university has evaluated the general education curriculum through various mechanisms. Through these evaluations, we have found that there are too many problems with addressing perceived student needs and with having sufficient defined learning outcomes to make the major pieces within the curriculum assessable at this time. We have made progress on assessing the individual courses and have realized that we cannot proceed on assessment at the “program” level within general education until the distribution areas are defined and learning outcomes are developed for the core and distribution areas. We can at this point either develop the assessable learning outcomes for our current general education curricula and then proceed with program level assessment, or we can decide to revise our general education program to better meet current and future student educational needs and build in assessable learning outcomes from the beginning. Either process demonstrates the university’s commitment to continual improvement in quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Strategic Planning Committee makes the following recommendations concerning general education.

- The university should undertake a revision of the general education curriculum immediately. The current curriculum was largely developed more than 25 years ago, does not include several curricular areas relevant to the 21st century, is difficult for students and faculty to comprehend, does not have assessable learning outcomes, and makes transferring to other institutions difficult for students.
- The revision should follow the accepted university process for curriculum development and revision. A synopsis of the current process is attached.
- The university should consider the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum as a possible structure around which to develop the general education curriculum. The MnTC addresses most of the missing curricular pieces in our current general education curriculum. The MnTC has substantial flexibility to allow the university to design a curriculum that is unique to SCSU and meets the needs of our students. Assessable goals and learning outcomes do not exist for the MnTC and through their development the university could design a strong and unique general education program. This would also solve many of the transfer issues some of our students face.
- The university should continue to assess the individual courses within the general education curriculum and look for ways to further evaluate the major parts and the program as a whole. The university should continue to track the course taking pattern of students and the number of semesters to completion for general education requirements. The similarities in Core 1 and Core 2 suggest that these two areas could look at combining their assessments efforts. The departments offering Diversity Courses should begin discussions of how they could assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting the learning outcomes that exist for this curriculum.