

Annual Report  
General Education Coordinator  
June 2003

In accordance with the Guidelines for Annual Reports, this document will first set forth accomplishments relevant to the Academic Affairs goals and then will review other major accomplishments as well as obstacles to progress.

Accomplishments

Goal#1 (Transforming the Curriculum): This past year began a process of examining the existing General Education program with an eye towards making it more responsive to the learning needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and taking advantage of new models, trends, and innovations in undergraduate education nationally. We began this process in June 2002 with the participation of a team of five MU faculty and administrators attending the 13<sup>th</sup> Asheville Institute for General Education. Team meetings continued into the fall, whereupon the General Education Review Committee (GERC) and Faculty Senate were, in turn, asked to support the creation of a Task Force to review the Gen Ed program and consider ways to improve upon what it already is accomplishing. This proposal was approved and the Task Force was elected/selected in December and January and held its first meeting in February. The Gen Ed Coordinator was eventually selected to chair this Task Force with its 12 student, faculty, and administrative members. Seven meetings, including a half-day session, have been held so far. An Interim Report was made to Senate in May; a Final Report is due in November 2004.

The Gen Ed Coordinator also served on the local program planning committee for the AAC&U's Network for Academic Renewal Conference on General Education. The Conference was held in late February in Philadelphia and was attended by an MU team of four, three of whom are on the Gen Ed Task Force.

Considerable work was also done this year in compiling a Catalog of General Education courses with information on the Gen Ed objectives purportedly fulfilled by each course and the means of assessment used to gauge their fulfillment. Most of the 400 plus Gen Ed courses at MU have now been cataloged (after three rounds of requests beginning in April 2002). As a by-product of this process, the ambiguous status of several courses has been clarified and a number of errors in the Undergraduate Catalog have been rectified. Data from the Catalog surveys are currently being analyzed and will provide a baseline picture of the Gen Ed program for internal purposes and for Middle States accreditation self-study. They will also be used to help target outcomes assessment efforts.

Goal #2 (Diversity): Despite continuing discussion and debate in both GERC and Faculty Senate, the proposal to add a diversity requirement for MU undergraduates remains on hold. With the many adjustments needed to various curricula to meet the 120-credit guidelines, it was felt that a delay in further consideration of the proposal was

appropriate. The commitment to diversity, social equity, and global issues implied in Goal #2 is strongly being considered by the Task Force in their review of the curriculum and development of recommendations.

A last accomplishment of this past year was the revision to the General Education section of the Governance Manual. Several changes in policy needed to be included and a general reorganization to improve readability was made. This project was completed with staff support from Michele Bote, with Diane Duell pinch-hitting when we were in a time “pinch.”

### Outcomes Assessment

Many of the other accomplishments of this office pertain to the second thrust of my position, outcomes assessment. The General Education program is currently conceived within a framework of 16 objectives related to a student’s learning. As discussed above, in order to help ensure that students’ programs move them toward the fulfillment of these objectives, we have surveyed all departments about each of the Gen Ed courses that are currently taught. For the past two years, we have also been involved with the direct assessment of student learning in relation to selected objectives. While progress continues to be slow (see obstacles discussed below), there has been positive movement in assessing several of the major general education objectives.

During the spring of 2002 we began full implementation of the plan to assess the critical reasoning objective (Gen Ed Objective #2). The plan called for testing of a random sample of students who had completed 60 credits using the Tasks in Critical Thinking (TCT; from ETS). A first wave of testing was completed in March 2002 with a second wave added in October 2002. Faculty scored this open-ended, problem-solving test in May 2002 and in January 2003. A final report is being prepared this summer.

Also in line with the critical reasoning objective, but tapping into several other learning outcome areas, I conducted a series of focus group interviews late in the fall 2002 semester. These groups included students about to graduate from a wide variety of majors. For each of the three groups, two additional members of GERC assisted me in conducting the interviews. Transcripts and thematic summaries were compiled to reflect the content of these discussions and are being incorporated into a variety of specific assessment reports.

The second objective being assessed (Gen Ed Objective #4) pertains to written communication. The plan for assessment and rubric that was developed during the spring of 2002 was implemented this past year. Over 70 student papers (first and final drafts) from several different sections of ENGL 311 were collected and will be scored in June 2003. A report from this assessment effort, under the direction of William Archibald and Susanne Nimmrichter, will be forthcoming later this summer.

A third objective being assessed was mathematical reasoning (Gen Ed Objective #1). Test items were embedded in exams from several different Gen Ed courses in the

Math Department (approximately 300 students) to provide course-embedded assessments. Scoring again is taking place this summer. A report from this assessment effort, under the direction of James Fenwick and Zhoude Shao, will be forthcoming later this summer.

Work has also continued, with less of my direct involvement, on the pilot-testing of assessment procedures for information literacy (Gen Ed Objective #3) and coherence (Gen Ed Objective #13). Early development studies of scientific reasoning and technology literacy are also underway.

As outlined above, the direct assessment of learning outcomes is taking place in selected areas. These assessments are yet to generate any positive evidence of the achievement of learning outcomes. Likewise, it is too early still to have put the results of these assessment activities to use in improving curriculum and instructional practices, though that is clearly the intent of our assessment system. The Gen Ed Task Force is, however, anxious to begin receiving more concrete feedback from the assessment efforts to help guide its work.

### Obstacles

As mentioned in last year's annual report, there are structural impediments to fully reaching some of the aspirations of this office. First, the time limitations of the one-quarter-time release position have hampered progress. The assessment of the Gen Ed objectives is a broad and far-reaching task that is both difficult and time-consuming. Without an Assessment Director or other staff support, there are inadequate resources to carry out anything beyond the rather piecemeal and slow process that has typified progress over the past two years. The addition of more curriculum supervision and development work through the creation of the Gen Ed Task Force has further taxed the resources of this office. While consideration for expanding the position to one-half time has been given, the slow pace of decision-making on this issue has placed constraints on effective planning and task allocation.

Another barrier continues to be the lack of faculty buy-in. While I believe we have made strides in this area and have two effective committee structures and a growing awareness of both general education and assessment-related issues among faculty and administrators broadly, more work is certainly needed to develop a culture of assessment and a renewed commitment to general education. The continued work of the Task Force and the Provost's commitment to faculty development on assessment issues in the upcoming academic year both will help with this difficult task. Still, until a real sense of ownership of General Education and a commitment to assessment on the part of faculty develops, sufficient involvement of faculty in the process of Gen Ed assessment will continue to be a struggle.