

Annual Report  
General Education Coordinator  
May 2004

In accordance with the Guidelines for Annual Reports, this document will review major accomplishments of my program during the past year as well as obstacles to progress. Progress is reviewed in the two central areas of my responsibility: Gen Ed curricular reform and assessment.

Gen Ed Curricular Review and Reform: Accomplishments

Goal#1 (Transforming the Curriculum): This past year continued 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. The Gen Ed Task Force, which began meeting in February 2003, held two series of focus meetings this year – one in the fall of 2003 and a second in spring 2004.

The first series of eight focus group sessions were held between the end of September and the early part of November 2003 and were designed to evaluate the importance of five selected principles that can be used to guide general education programs and then to assess how well each is being met currently at Millersville. A background document and survey was prepared and distributed before each session to guide these focus groups. Each session was facilitated and discussion recorded generally by two members of the Task Force and included both faculty and student participation (by invitation) – typically 8 to 10 participants per session. Over 40 faculty members and nearly 30 students participated in total. All members of both the Faculty and Student Senates were invited as well as chairs of all departments. Additional faculty were invited at the recommendation of attendees from the first wave of meetings. Faculty members were asked to bring a student from their own department to the session if possible. Twenty-one of the 26 academic departments were represented. Transcripts from each session were prepared and then summarized into a document (*Report on the Fall 2003 Faculty & Student Focus Groups*) that was distributed to Dean's Council and Faculty Senate in January and February, respectively.

Based upon the results of this first series of focus groups, a series of proposed recommendations for changes to the Gen Ed curriculum were proposed and debated within the Task Force. A resulting list of four major changes with brief rationales, together with a revised listing of Gen Ed Objectives, was prepared (entitled, *Discussion of Potential Revisions to Gen Ed Currently Under Consideration*) and circulated prior to a second series of seven focus group meetings held in March 2004. Approximately 35 faculty members and a dozen students attended these meetings. The Task Force has reviewed transcripts of these meetings and separate subgroups are engaged to review and refine the proposals in the following three areas: first-year learning communities, Capstone experiences, and a two-tiered structuring of liberal arts courses. The Task Force is scheduled to make its final recommendations to Faculty Senate in November 2004.

To enhance our ability to design and implement a restructuring of students' first-year experiences and to capitalize on successes Millersville has already had in this area, we applied and were eventually accepted into the Washington Center's National Learning Communities Summer Institute at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. A team of seven faculty, administrators, and students will be spending five days attending workshops and collaborating with Institute faculty to design a first-year learning communities proposal and implementation plan.

As a final step in our review and reform efforts, we have worked on our five-year Program Review for General Education. This included a very successful visit by Dr. Stephen Briggs, Provost of The College of New Jersey, who served as our external reviewer and met with several groups of faculty, students, and administrators over two days to discuss our current program and plans for reform. A written report is forthcoming.

### 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. For the past few years, we have 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 summer and fall of 2003 we planned and then hosted a Faculty Convocation on Assessment in order to provide opportunities for faculty and staff to expand their knowledge base, get technical assistance, and become energized around the issues of outcomes assessment. Nationally recognized experts from AAHE (Peggy Maki) and from Kings' College (Edmund Napieralski and three of his colleagues) were on campus for two days of lectures and hands-on workshops. These sessions were very well received and well attended, especially considering they coincided with the arrival of Hurricane Isabel.

Assessment activities continued to dominate discussions at biweekly meetings of the Gen Ed Review/Academic Outcomes Assessment Committees. In the fall I devised a proposed assessment report format and drafted a report on the assessment of the critical reasoning objective based upon the Tasks in Critical Thinking test given in 2002 (Gen Ed Objective #2). A draft of the written communication objective (Gen Ed Objective #4) was prepared this spring based upon their evaluation of over 70 student papers (first and final drafts) from several different sections of ENGL 311, which were scored in June 2003. This assessment effort is under the direction of William Archibald and Susanne Nimmrichter.

A third objective being assessed is 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) in the spring of 2003 to provide course-embedded assessments. Scoring again took place last summer. Revisions to the assessment procedure were considered last fall and a re-assessment using mid-term testing was conducted in courses this spring. A report from this assessment effort, under the direction of James Fenwick and Zhoude Shao, will be forthcoming by fall of 2004.

Discussion has continued on the assessment procedures for information literacy (Gen Ed Objective #3) and coherence (Gen Ed Objective #13). Prompts, to be used as part of a coherence assessment effort and imbedded in Perspectives courses, were discussed and finalized by the GERC/AOAC, but it was unclear whether any assessments with this prompt could still be done this spring. More widespread assessment of coherence is likely for the fall semester.

Background studies of the assessment of scientific reasoning and technology literacy were begun in the fall, but no further progress was made on these or other assessment areas.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

A significant impediment to speedy and comprehensive progress on the tasks of the Gen Ed Coordinator had been time and energy resources. Prior to last fall, the position carried only a one-course reassignment per semester. Beginning last August, this was increased to a two-course reassignment. I believe this has made a notable difference in my ability to move the Task Force and assessment agendas forward. A proposal to make this change permanent has been made which could help relieve some practical difficulties (e.g., long-term planning) with the position. Additional steps to create a physical presence (i.e., a Gen Ed office) and to provide clerical support are still needed.

I noted in previous annual reports that another barrier to Gen Ed review and enhancement and to assessment efforts was the lack of faculty buy-in. I believe we have made important strides in breaking down this barrier during the past year. Faculty development efforts on assessment issues coinciding with Dan Weinstein's arrival on campus and his initiation of the Degree Specification Process have done much to prepare our campus for continuing expansion of efforts to assess learning outcomes. In the Gen Ed area, the successful focus group processes have been instrumental in engaging the community in productive dialogues about the philosophies, realities, and prospects of general education and liberal learning at Millersville. Though involving a much smaller cross-section of the campus, Dr. Briggs' visit built nicely upon the momentum created through focus groups and provided important external grounding about some of the ideas we have proposed.

It is hoped that these efforts will have payoff in actions and not just words. That is really the agenda of the coming year. Can we develop viable proposals for enhancing the general education of our undergraduate students that are acceptable to the campus

community? Can we work to overcome the implementation pitfalls of the last major Gen Ed revision that still have some faculty bitter and skeptical? Can we successfully tie meaningful assessment of the Gen Ed learning outcomes to the Degree Specification process? Can we deliver on the promise of assessment reports in several Gen Ed areas and take the next step of using such data to inform curriculum development? While a commitment to productive discussion of general education and assessment on the part of faculty has been engendered during this past year, the commitment to action remains an unrealized potential.

### Major Highlights

- Ran two series of focus groups – one in fall 2003 and a second in spring 2004 – involving 15 separate meetings and a total of nearly 80 faculty and about half as many students.
- Produced three reports as background to or in summary of the Focus Group process.
- Completed draft reports for the assessment of critical reasoning and the assessment of written communication, as well as developing a standard format for such reports.
- Planned and conducted a two-day Faculty Convocation on Outcomes Assessment involving nationally recognized speakers and workshop leaders.
- Collected and analyzed institutional data, hosted an external review, and prepared a Five-Year Program Review for General Education (report still in progress).