

Millersville University
General Education Task Force
Spring 2004 Faculty & Student Focus Groups
Discussion of Potential Revisions to Gen Ed Currently Under Consideration
(3/4/04)

Where We've Been

In November 2002 the twelve-person General Education Task Force was created and charged with re-examining our Gen Ed program and making recommendations for its betterment. It began its work in early 2003. After some months of discussion and debate among ourselves and study of some of the current literature on Gen Ed programming around the country, we decided to extend our discussion of the purposes and principles behind Gen Ed to the larger campus community by holding a series of eight focus group sessions during the fall of 2003. These sessions focused on five of the 12 principles for strong general education programs as promulgated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Attendees were asked to assess the importance of each principle and to evaluate how well it was being upheld at Millersville. 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 members 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. Session transcripts and survey results were reviewed and eventually summarized into a report that has been shared with Faculty Senate as well as Deans' Council.

Where We Are Now Headed

What follows is a series of “position papers” written by different members of the Task Force to provide some information about each of four key proposals regarding the revision of the Gen Ed program. These proposals are derived from various efforts and deliberations of the Task Force over the past year. They represent both innovations and best practices in higher education over

the past ten or twenty years. The nature and selection of these proposals have been heavily shaped by the results of the focus group discussions held last fall. We are now seeking to engage the University community in discussing these ideas in order to help us shape our final recommendations to Faculty Senate, due in November 2004.

What appears first is a revised, consolidated, and simplified set of objectives for general education which we have used as a framework for shaping our proposals. They are built from the current set of 16 Gen Ed objectives which were approved in 1999. Two themes undergird these proposed new objectives: embedding critical thinking and technology within disciplinary modes of inquiry and applying disciplinary modes of inquiry to decision making for personal, career, and civic involvement. While the objectives themselves are not part of what is to be discussed at these meetings (except as time may permit at the end), the Task Force felt they were necessary to share as background to our thinking.

The first position paper proposes a clear and succinct statement of the purpose of General Education at Millersville that would replace our current Governance Manual statement. Building and promoting a common understanding of what we envision for general education at MU is thought to be an essential first step in developing coherence and promoting pride in our program. The second position paper describes a proposed two-tiered structure for the Gen Ed curriculum tied to the proposed new objectives. The first tier (“core”) represents an attempt to have all students take several largely interdisciplinary core courses prior to taking a second tier of courses (“extent”) to fulfill their “distribution” or breadth requirement. The Core courses, which would be very limited in number, are designed to provide a foundation in the liberal arts and a set of core competencies that further study in both the major and general education would then be built upon.

The third proposal deals with an expansion of first-year seminars incorporated into learning communities. It builds upon the success of learning community and first-year seminar initiatives in the undecided program, in the new citizenship BSE, in the Honor’s College, and elsewhere, to foster both greater coherence and a greater sense of academic community among both students and faculty. The last issue involves capstone courses.

How You Can Help

Your participation in the focus group process is the first step. Please carefully read and consider the following proposals BEFORE coming to the focus group meetings. Please consider these ideas with openness and honesty. Try to keep the lofty goals of student learning in its broadest and best sense in mind and leave the security of the status quo and the blinders of discipline-specific interests aside. These proposals should be seen as tentative policy and practice directions rather than firm and binding recommendations for specific changes. The focus groups may endorse only some of these ideas (or some parts of these ideas) and may have some important recommendations for modification or supplementation. In part, these deliberations will be piecemeal and preliminary. A more complete and comprehensive package is our goal for next fall. Necessarily, implementation issues should enter the current discussions in only a limited way. There are many details and decisions that await the feedback we are now seeking. Only with a more comprehensive package of proposals in hand and much additional study and discussion will questions of implementation be meaningfully addressed.

You and your colleagues may have more opinions and input to offer than what can meaningfully fit into a 90-minute focus group session. Therefore, we urge you to share other thoughts and feelings with us by expressing additional opinions with the Task Force, preferably in writing. Please also go back to your colleagues in your department and across campus and continue to discuss these issues. The broader and deeper the dialogue now, the better thought out will be our plan for enhancing General Education at Millersville.

Proposed Revision of General Education Objectives

Utilizing a two-tiered structure, the General Education Program prepares graduates who meet all of the following objectives.

1. In the area of Personal, Ethical, and Civic Values and Decision-making, students will be able to:
 - a) formulate a conceptual framework that embodies historical and contemporary connections among courses, various disciplines, and “real life.”
 - b) articulate and rationally support personal, moral, and civic values and manifest a commitment to these values through personal, career, and civic endeavors.
 - c) demonstrate knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential for communicating with, working with, and making decisions with people of diverse backgrounds.

2. In the area of Critical Thinking through Mathematics, students will be able to:
 - a) solve problems from the real world using the symbolic language of mathematics with appropriate technology.
 - b) use and interpret statistical data for solving personal, career, and civic purposes.

3. In the area of Critical Thinking through the Social Sciences, students will be able to:
 - a) use methods of inquiry of the social sciences, including quantitative and qualitative methods and appropriate technology, to study human behavior and social institutions.
 - b) evaluate and use social science evidence and theories for personal, career, and civic purposes.

4. In the area of Critical Thinking through the Natural Sciences, students will be able to:
 - a) use scientific reasoning, laboratory methods, appropriate technology, and mathematics to solve scientific problems.
 - b) evaluate and use scientific evidence and theories for personal, career, and civic purposes.

5. In the area of Critical Thinking through the Humanities and Fine Arts, students will be able to:
 - a) create and/or aesthetically appreciate works of fine art and/or literature.
 - b) apply critical and creative methods of the arts and humanities for personal, career, and civic purposes.

6. In the area of Communication with a Purpose, students will be able to:
 - a) generate, express, and revise ideas for personal, career, and civic communication.
 - b) present ideas formally in spoken, written, and mediated forms for personal, career, and civic communication.

Issue 1: Develop a Purpose statement for General Education

“The best General Education program is not based simply on choosing specific goals or finding the perfect model. The best program is one that is aligned with the learning needs of students on a specific campus and that the faculty of that campus believe in and teach with passion, commitment, and intentionality – only then can they help students engage fully with its purposes and opportunities.” (Ann Ferren, June 2002, Presentation at the Asheville Institute for General Education).

Proposed Purpose Statement

Consistent with Millersville University's mission to "promote intellectual development through an exemplary liberal arts based education," the purpose of General Education is to provide breadth of knowledge as a balance and complement to the depth provided by the major. General Education is designed to provide a coherent, well-rounded educational experience that assures the acquisition of lifelong competencies, values, and ways of knowing necessary for the holistic development of our graduates so that they may become responsible citizens in an increasingly complex global society.

Rationale

- The first round of focus groups found a real lack of coherence across the Gen Ed curriculum. Students and faculty felt the Millersville’s Gen Ed program was more like a list of courses that had to be checked off than a purposeful program. Developing a new purpose statement is the beginning of clarifying what we value.
- The first round of focus groups also found that students come to Millersville because of the strength of their major programs and because of their career interests. The proposed purpose statement recognizes the complementary nature of Gen Ed and major studies.
- Although the culture of Millersville tends to place more importance on major areas of study than on Gen Ed, progress toward the development of an exemplary liberal arts education can be seen historically in Millersville’s evolution from a teacher’s college to a university with a strong regional reputation. One participant in the first round of focus groups commented that this is the third round of Gen Ed reform at Millersville and each time Gen Ed has gotten stronger. The purpose statement recognizes Millersville’s aspiration to develop a Gen Ed program that is as strong as our major areas of study.

- The phrase “well rounded” is the most common understanding of the current purpose of Gen Ed. The purpose statement gives depth to this phrase by describing the qualities we seek in our graduates. In particular, the statement highlights the importance of Gen Ed as preparation for responsible citizenship.
- The phrase "increasingly complex global society" highlights the growing importance of general education as a complement to major programs. Now, more than ever, students need a strong general foundation in order to adapt to the challenges that an increasingly complex global society provides. This foundation includes the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with people from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds.

Focus group questions:

- What are the learning needs of students at Millersville? What do we believe in as a faculty?
- What are the strengths / weaknesses of the proposed purpose statement?
- Is there other language that you would want to see in a purpose statement?

Issue 2: Institute a Two-Tiered Structure for the General Education Program Proposal

It is proposed to structure the general education program at Millersville University into two parts. The first part could be called the “core”. The second part could be called the “extent”. [The Task Force isn’t fully satisfied with this latter term. Any suggestions?]

The courses in the “core” would emphasize general education skills basic to virtually all aspects of education such as critical thinking, communication, and reasoning. The “core” courses would embed these skills, as well as appropriate forms of technology, within disciplinary modes of inquiry and apply these modes of inquiry to decision making for personal, career, and civic involvement. A limited number of courses would be approved as general education “core” courses. Ideally they would be interdisciplinary in nature, but be housed in a department. “Core” courses would count exclusively for general education and would not count toward any major. Students would take four “core” courses, with at least one in each general education block and satisfying the four discipline-related core objectives: critical thinking through a) Mathematics; b) Social Sciences; c) Natural Sciences; d) Humanities and Fine Arts.

There would be a much wider variety of courses available in the “extent” of the general education program. Many courses that are currently general education courses would continue to be available as general education courses in the “extent”. These courses would be used to complete the distribution requirements for each of the first three general education blocks. Consideration was given to having multiple courses packaged into sequences on a more explicit, intention basis than now occurs. For example, a given department might have one (or several) two-course sequences building from the core course in that area and designed specifically for Gen Ed. Students would have a more coherent, integrated exposure to disciplines outside their major. This “vertical integration” adds both depth and coherence to the students’ learning.

Rationale

- In addition to finding a real lack of coherence, the first round of focus groups tended to describe the general education program at Millersville University as an exercise in filling in

blanks on a form. The proposal of a “core” level of general education courses is an attempt to get away from this perception. By having fewer courses from which to choose in the “core”, students will be more likely to have a focused experience when completing the “core” requirements. Moreover, coherence will be achieved because more students will be taking the same “core” courses and will have more opportunities to share this common experience as they progress through both their major requirements and the rest of the general education program.

- The proposal of an “extent” level of general education is to reinforce the belief that general education should “provide breadth of knowledge as a balance and complement to the depth provided by the major”. By taking general education courses that also count towards other majors, students will experience how other disciplines think about the world, thus broadening the scope of their vision beyond that of their chosen field. Moreover, the “extent” will provide students with some opportunity to decide for themselves what courses are important to them.

Focus Group Questions:

- Does a two-tiered structure enhance or detract from the purpose and objectives of general education?
- Does the two-tiered structure provide enough freedom of choice for students while at the same time insuring a common foundation of coherence upon which all students may build? What other methods would accomplish this same goal?
- Is it practical to implement a two-tiered structured general education program?

Issue 3: Institute Learning Communities Campus Wide with an Integrated Freshman Seminar

“Learning communities. . . purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. . . learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes.” (Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R.S., & Smith, B.L. (Eds). (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty and disciplines. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 41*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

Proposal

It is proposed to use a learning communities model for both Fall and Spring semesters of the freshman year. The courses included in the learning community would be Tier 1 general education offerings, linked thematically, to facilitate the purpose and goals of General Education, while assuring that students are satisfying Core General Education or major requirements.

A Freshman Seminar course would be linked with one or both learning communities in which freshmen would be enrolled. The Seminar introduces entering students to the mission of the University and the purpose and objectives of general education and to the skills necessary for successful college work and eventual postgraduate endeavors.

Learning Communities at Millersville University are designed to:

- Promote coherence in the General Education Program and facilitate integration of knowledge across disciplines.
- Support students’ successful transition to college life and engagement with the University in the broadest sense.
- Create a sense of community by developing connections between and among students and teachers.

Rationale

- Learning communities can be designed to introduce students to Millersville's General Education Program, its purpose and objectives, and to the acquisition of introductory skills necessary for successful college work, e.g., information literacy, oral and written communication, and problem-solving.
- A learning community approach facilitates a sense of community among students and faculty and supports student engagement with the University's wide array of offerings, curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular.
- Learning communities can facilitate the development of personal, ethical and civic values necessary for responsible citizenship.
- Learning communities can foster depth of understanding of important concepts through increased coherence in learning.

Focus group questions:

- What are the strengths/weaknesses of learning communities?
- What challenges/opportunities do you see for implementing learning communities at Millersville?
- Are there other methods, structures, or approaches that could be used to promote greater coherence and sense of academic community?

Issue 4: Development of Capstone Experiences Linking General Education with the Major

According to Joseph Cuseo's 1998 review of senior capstones, the intended objectives included the following:

- "Promote the coherence and relevance of general education"
- "Promote integration and connections between general education and the academic major"
- "Explicitly and intentionally develop important student skills, competencies, and perspectives" ... including such qualities as "leadership and character and values development" (Henscheid, J.M. (2000). *Professing the disciplines: An analysis of senior seminars and capstone courses* (Monograph No. 30). Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, p. 2.)

Proposal

Each major program of study is encouraged to develop and require some capstone experience(s) that will provide a culmination of study that blends the general education program's emphasis on lifelong competencies and civic engagement with the specific skills and knowledge of the major discipline. This could be a course (e.g., History & Systems of Psychology, senior seminar), a project (e.g., honors project, independent study), and other experience (e.g., student teaching, co-op). A properly situated senior capstone, even if it fulfills a major-related requirement, will be allowed to substitute for an existing Gen Ed requirement, either as a 4th course in the Liberal Arts block (the "extent") or in place of a Perspectives course.

Rationale

- The first round of focus groups found a lack of coherence both across the Gen Ed curriculum and between requirements of the major and those of the Gen Ed program. If both the first (i.e., first-year learning community) and last (i.e., capstone) academic requirements of all Millersville students were to intentionally bridge these gaps, the overall undergraduate experience would take on the sense of coherence, connection, and purpose that students and faculty have said they desire. When these first and last requirements are sandwiched around a series of course progressions, both within and outside the major, depth of study is gained along with the vertical integration.
- Consistent with recent initiatives to promote the Degree Specification process, the major programs of study should build both upon and alongside the Gen Ed program to develop

the whole person with specific skills as well as lifelong competencies, equipped for career, civic, and personal fulfillment. Capstone experiences represent the culmination of this growth process and an opportunity to assess, at both the individual and program levels, the readiness of students in terms of the outcomes specified for them by their degree programs.

Focus group questions:

- How important to becoming a successful graduate is the opportunity for reflection, integration, and synthesis of the entirety of one's coursework, disciplinary activities, and co-curricular experiences?
- What Capstone-like experiences are already being required of Millersville undergraduates? What opportunities and challenges might emerge in the design or re-design of Capstone experiences to incorporate Gen Ed competencies and their assessment?
- Are there other means of obtaining the desired integration and synthesis besides a capstone requirement?