

General Education Five Year Review
Millersville University
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Introduction

At the request of Dr. Fred Foster-Clark, Coordinator of General Education, I visited Millersville University on March 24 - 25, 2009 to review the General Education Program. Specifically the proposed focus was to address the following three issues:

- *How does Millersville University know that the revised General Education curriculum is working?*
- *How does one put into practice the necessary procedures to ensure that the General Education Program gets reviewed and adjusted periodically as experience and assessment data accumulate?*
- *How does one promote an institutional context supportive of the periodic changes needed to keep the General Education Program vital and responsive to changing needs and ongoing assessment results including marshalling the resources and administrative support necessary to maintain a strong General Education Program.*

In an effort to gather campus information regarding these three issues, meetings were held with General Education Review Committee (GERC), selected faculty, the Deans Council, students, Dr. Christine Gaudry-Hudson and Dr. Linda McDowell, the Coordinator of First-Year Experience (FYE) program. An exit interview was held with the Provost, Dr. Vilas Prabhu, and Associate Provost, Dr. Thomas Burns, and Dr. Frederick Foster-Clark where preliminary observations and recommendations were shared. This report is the summary of these observations and recommendations.

Background Information

Over the past eleven years General Education revision at Millersville has been the focus of review, refinement and thoughtful and systematic implementation. Based on the General Education Timeline presented, it appears that there has been much input campus wide that has proceeded through the appropriate Faculty Senate committees who along with the General Education Review Committee have reviewed and revised the General Education plan and process. Objectives have been approved by the Senate, external reviews and reform surveys have been conducted and a number of phased initiatives have been identified and implemented.

It was clear from the very first meeting with the GERC and confirmed in meetings with others, that there is a strong sense of purpose and high regard for education at Millersville University. There were consistent comments on how much faculty do, how supportive they were of

students and generally committed to the new General Education program. Major highlights include:

- Positive regard for the University and each other
- Highly committed and engaged group of individuals who want General Education to succeed.
- A culture of committed faculty who want to “do the right things”
- Strong shared governance
- Support from the administration
- A solid assessment platform
- Good retention and graduation rates
- Great students

The General Education plan and early implementation has followed best practices in General Education as suggested by both Middle States Accreditation (MSCHE) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). The General Education Office Annual Report for 2007-08 includes three goals: (1) continue planning for and implementation of the revised General Education curriculum, (2) develop and implement a plan for the assessment of learning outcomes associated with General Education, and (3) refine, assess and expand the First-Year Inquiry (FYI)/ Learning Community initiative as a corner stone of the revised General Education curriculum. The report will address the overall issues involved in implementation and assessment of the General Education as it relates to these three goals.

Meeting with General Education Review Committee (GERC)

The General Education Review Committee is composed of two faculty representatives from each of the four academic units elected by Faculty Senate for overlapping terms of two years, one representative from non-school faculty elected by Senate for two years, and two student representatives elected by Student Senate for overlapping terms of two years. In addition, a chairperson is elected by Faculty Senate from the Faculty Senate membership to serve a three-year term. The Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, the General Education Coordinator, and the First-Year Experience Coordinator are all non-voting, ex officio members of the committee.

The function of this group is to review and evaluate the General Education Program, in consultation with the Academic Outcomes Assessment Committee, and report its recommendations to the Faculty Senate. The Committee may initiate, review, and evaluate proposed changes to the General Education Program and submit its recommendations to Faculty Senate and oversee the implementation of any approved changes to the General Education Program.

An issue identified by the members of the group was the timing of end of the year reports and work needed to be done by the committee. Concentrated and focused work needs to occur as the committee responds to assessment and benchmark data, internal course and program assessments, and forthcoming data such as that from the Wabash National

Study. Since members' terms are two years, ceasing at the end of the academic year, getting new members on board while capitalizing on the wisdom of those whose terms are ending, makes sustained work challenging.

Additional concerns centered on the need for support both in funded positions and a permanent budget for General Education. As the plan to revise and develop General Education proceeds, funding needs to be appropriate and permanent. While the FYI/LC program was to be a centerpiece of the new curriculum, it is floundering. There are not enough course offerings in the fall. The FYE Coordinator only has a one-course release to recruit and train faculty, implement and assess programs as well as provide other policy, program, and faculty development activities for this critical part of General Education. There was discussion about the need to establish a recertification process for General Education courses and the lack of "requirement" to teach in the General Education program or any campus wide objective criteria to reward those who do.

Meeting with Selected Faculty

In a breakfast meeting with a small group of faculty a number of issues regarding the General Education program emerged. Three major themes were obvious that included differences in student experiences, faculty development and advising.

Based on whether or not they declared a major, the intentional focus on Student Learning Outcomes appears to be variable. Students who are undeclared, particularly those in the First-Year Inquiry Seminar, appear to be experiencing more intentional approaches to seeing connections between the General Education outcomes, lifelong learning and future careers than those entering the University who have already declared majors. The literature suggests that most students change majors at least once during their academic careers and many students do not obtain careers in their intended fields. Thus it is critical that the value of liberal arts in General Education and introductory courses be addressed. Courses that are to carry a General Education designation must demonstrate how their course connects with the General Education outcomes. Enforcement of this beyond the curricular approval process has not been addressed and may account for the lack of understanding by some students as to how these outcomes connect to course content even when the outcomes are listed on the syllabi. Given the importance of helping students understand the importance of liberal arts, there is a critical need that all faculty understand how to make student learning outcomes in General Education courses as well as major courses more transparent for students. All faculty should develop skills in how to help students understand and make connections which may be obvious to faculty, but not to students. Thus, a second theme emerged in the meeting with faculty – the need for sustained and focused faculty development.

While the Office of Academic Advisement provides several training opportunities each year to provide faculty with a better understanding of Millersville's General Education program and how best to advise students within the program, there does not appear to be

any opportunity when the entire Millersville faculty is together where the value of general education or the liberal arts is addressed. An opening of the academic year session devoted to student learning as it connects to the liberal arts mission of the institution could be a powerful event. If the entire faculty does not understand the importance of their role(s), the ownership of who teaches the liberal arts is left to a core group of courses and limited faculty members. In a meeting with the deans when one proudly described a group of students who won a national contest, it was clear that Millersville *is* graduating students with the core skills and outcomes. What is not clear is where or how they are learning the skills, as it seems that students are not experiencing exposure to the why's of General Education at the same rate.

It is clear that in the AIM program underprepared students are provided with career exploration and are helped to see connections to General Education and how General Education and the subsequent learning outcomes will lead to their success during college and beyond. This also seems to occur to some degree with most undeclared students. If this is not happening more intentionally and broadly, missed opportunities abound.

Meetings with Students

In attendance were nine students -- five meteorology majors, two communication majors, one history major and one foreign language major. Seven of them were seniors (or 'super' seniors), one was a sophomore and one was a junior. It is also important to mention that one student served as an orientation leader and another was a peer mentor within the FYE program. At first, students were quiet and a number reported that they would have to leave soon. By the end of the meeting the students stayed over time, and expressed their genuine thanks for the opportunity to be heard.

When asked "What is the purpose of the General Education at Millersville University?" students gave various answers such as to provide a well-rounded education and to expose students to subjects which they wouldn't have taken voluntarily. Students stated that the purpose of General Education was never explicitly explained to them, although the orientation leader was quick to point out that he learned about it thanks to a talk given by the Advisement Office. When asked if students in the new General Education program understand General Education more clearly than in previous years, the response was "no" because this talk was for orientation leaders only. The mentor who helped with the FYE seminars pointed out that AIM for Success students are educated about the importance of General Education but it is up to them to process the information provided. Students who have an opportunity to understand the importance of General Education would be FYE participants, students enrolled in ESCI learning communities or through an advisor.

Students complained about the excessive number of General Education courses and felt that it was up to the professor to show how a course can be useful. S/he should ask thought-provoking questions, encourage intuitive responses, encourage more classroom interaction, and heighten creativity. According to them, passion for teaching has been lost in some courses. COMM 100, ENGL 110, and WELL 175 should stress life-skill

development. Students felt courses should provide meaningful discussions, allow for debates, and put students in real life situations. Classrooms should be set up to encourage dialogue rather than to deliver boring lectures using PowerPoint. Some interesting statements were made such as: “General Education courses are important if taught in a correct manner” and “the courses we love the most are worth the least.”

Students were quick to point out that many of the General Education skills can be gained through campus organizations and/or leadership opportunities and could clearly see connections between General Education and out of class opportunities. Finally students were eager to share that there is a campus-wide perception that general education courses are a ‘money making scheme’ to keep students at Millersville longer.

Meeting with FYE coordinator

There are a number of FYE initiatives that makes this program of First-Year Inquiry seminars a model that other universities should strive to emulate. These three-credit seminars are cornerstones of the revised Gen Ed program. There are Living-Learning communities for Exploratory students that integrate Foundations courses (ENGL 110 or COMM 100) with first-year seminars (both FYI and major-based), a successful Common Reading program integrated with the University’s Theme, an ongoing system of faculty development workshops to support instruction of first-year student, and an assessment program that continues to receive national attention.

While this exciting program has great potential, it is doubtful that it can maintain its current excellence as it continues to grow. The General Education Task Force suggested the expansion of the FYE Coordinator to entail a two-course release per semester rather than a one-course release in order to support the expansion of first-year seminars into the General Education curriculum. During the meeting with the FYE coordinator the concern expressed by the GERC about insufficient staffing of the FYI courses for the fall was confirmed. As was stated in the Guiding Principles for the new General Education curriculum “Reform will be accompanied by sufficient faculty, administrative, and resource support.” This must happen for this cornerstone program to succeed.

Meeting with Deans

Administrators shared a number of observations about the new General Education curriculum implementation. There was much positive information provided indicating that the new curriculum was “moving along” and that faculty were willing to “try it.” The new curriculum was described as simplified, creative and flexible, leading to greater coherence. There was discussion about how students “get it” and understand why they benefitted from General Education often after they leave.

When asked how General Education courses are staffed, it appeared to be decided at the department level with some input at a higher level. The registrar and associate provost work closely with the deans to identify the needs of students in General Education. Conversations via the school councils help engage department chairs in discussing the

needs for General Education.

There was mention of some resistance to change and the tensions associated with trying to balance a new and old General Education curriculum. There is the challenge in some departments to meet accreditation standards requirements while balancing what is needed in General Education. Faculty “build schedules” the way they used to and inertia has set in. This summer a course audit will be done to identify which courses should be taught with the understanding that faculty will be expected to offer courses students need rather than what they have always done.

Deans reported that faculty do have General Education outcomes in their course syllabi to help students understand the connections to preparation for work (majors) and lifelong learning.

The new Assistant VP for Assessment and Planning seems most knowledgeable and positioned to support the assessment for General Education.

Revisiting the Focus and Summary and Recommendations

Millersville University, faculty, staff, students and administrators have developed and are in the process of implementing a well defined, thoughtful and intentional General Education program. Individuals are highly committed to the success of the program and are supportive and complimentary of each other. There is a strong sense of purpose and high regard for education at Millersville University. Administrators are supportive of faculty, faculty of students and, while students did focus on some of their perceived shortcomings of General Education, they were quick to point out that the General Education course were among those they loved the most. In addition, there is a solid assessment plan in place that will help to continuously guide the implementation plan. Given this positive environment along with a healthy enrollment there appears to be no compelling need to change.

Universities that have a compelling reason to change (enrollment declines, accreditation challenges, etc.) are often apt to garner support and make the needed change. At Millersville, there are no compelling reasons. Enrollment is strong and accreditation is solid. However, Millersville has a unique opportunity to significantly enhance its core curriculum and become a model program for others. The university administration, faculty and staff should be complimented for their commitment to invest time and resources into large scale change when the university could enjoy a few more years of status quo. And while Millersville University has done an excellent job of developing and implementing this change, a number of themes emerged in many of the meetings and are the basis for recommendations to further develop the program.

- *How does Millersville University know that the revised General Education curriculum is working?*

There are a number of ways in which to judge whether or not the curriculum is working. Is there an assessment plan? Has it been implemented? What has preliminary student learning evidence shown as well as some additional program indicators?

First, there is an excellent plan in place to assess student learning outcomes. The Academic Outcomes Assessment Committee (AOAC) developed a plan to continue assessment related to the seven General Education student learning outcomes enumerated by Middle States. Three areas for assessment outcomes were identified during AY 2005-2006 and in the subsequent year a quantitative reasoning test was developed. Also, writing samples were gathered to assess both written communication and literacy objectives. In AY2006-2007 assessment was focused on critical reasoning and analysis, scientific reasoning, oral communication, and technological literacy as well as a pilot for the First Year Seminar which in the subsequent year was expanded. Preliminary evidence indicates that students are meeting the designated outcomes. Millersville University is now at an important juncture where large amounts of data are being gathered and a plan of approach led by the new Assistant Vice President of Assessment and Planning is in process. Identifying the tools and process for assessment is a difficult challenge and is in place and is being tracked. Additional indicators of whether or not the program is working can be measured by some factors such as:

- Are there sufficient faculty available to teach in General Education?
- Are the faculty adequately trained?
- Are students able to recognize learning outcomes in their General Education classes and articulate how they connect to the courses they are taking?

While being cognizant of the data being gathered and collected by a seemingly strong assessment officer, the purpose of this visit was to gather qualitative data that can support these results. There is generally movement towards building a strong curriculum but widespread ownership and student buy in remains a challenge. This may be a natural occurrence of phasing out an old curriculum and implementing a new one, all while trying to balance existing resources.

- ***How does one put into practice the necessary procedures to ensure that the General Education Program gets reviewed and adjusted periodically as experience and assessment data accumulate?***

Given the recent hire of an Assistant Vice President for Assessment and Planning, who seems most aware of what is needed, and the already established Academic Outcomes Assessment Committee (AOAC), a strong plan for assessment is in place. The GERC is in a position to respond to data and make recommendations, if the structure and timeliness of actions occur. Given two year terms and limited time for the group to work at the end of the spring semester and the large amount of information that is being collected, responses to assessment data could be hampered. In addition, without additional support in FYE, where much assessment has already occurred, progress in using data to make change could further be impeded.

- ***How does one promote an institutional context supportive of the periodic changes needed to keep the General Education Program vital and responsive to changing needs and ongoing assessment results including marshalling the resources and administrative support necessary to maintain a strong General Education Program.***

There is strong sense of purpose for General Education by both the faculty who were interviewed and the administration but less so by students. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that this same sense of purpose is not shared by all faculty. There are many excellent initiatives, with strong leadership, that support student learning, particularly the skills and commitment of the First-Year Experience and General Education Coordinators. However, as the new curriculum becomes more widespread and the old is phased out, if positions and support for the program do not expand or keep pace, the demands may render this good work much less effective. The availability of resources (reallocation) and strong administrative leadership are keys to progress. While the foundation for Millersville University's General Education curriculum is solid and supported by the University, given the operating of two separate curriculums and strained resources, there are challenges. As Dr. Steven Briggs, a previous General Education external reviewer, recognized five years ago, making institutional change of this magnitude requires leadership and investment at the levels of the President and Provost. Support at these levels for the institutional changes in General Education needs to be bolstered in order for progress to be maintained and their potential to be realized.

Considerations and Recommendations.

1. **Develop explicit efforts to help students understand the meaning** of General Education in and out of the classroom and advising. This is as critical for undeclared students as declared, given students often change majors. There is also a need for all students to understand WHY they are taking General Education courses. Students should be making connections in and out of classroom opportunities, including co-op and internship experiences and leadership opportunities on campus.
2. **Be more explicit regarding advisement recommendations and provide training for advisors.** There are many important goals for General Education that are not represented by a specific course. Guidelines are provided encouraging advisors "to help students and faculty make decisions that best meet these goals for each student." There is a long list of specific guidelines but what is missing in this list of suggestions is a specific recommendation that addresses the need to help students make connection between and among courses and to see how General Education courses they are taking support their majors and lifelong learning.
3. **Encourage advisors and instructors to have explicit conversations with students** about courses they are or will be taking and what the learning outcomes in the courses are. This dialogue, along with faculty intentionally reinforcing the learning outcomes in all courses, should help students to develop a clearer understanding of the purpose of General Education - as opposed to in their

- opinion “a ploy to keep students longer at the university.” Progress in this area could be measured by a change in the NSSE questions that asks students if they have had a conversation about future careers with faculty or advisors – or an overall improvement in conversations out of the class with faculty.
4. **Focus faculty development and provide additional training for advisors.** There is no centralized or focus “kick off” to the academic year that helps the faculty or academic community understand the relationship of General Education to lifelong learning and future success. If faculty do not see the connection or the value of a core set of skills as a foundation on which majors can build, how can they help students to understand it? In addition, ongoing enrichment activities could help faculty develop resources in career exploration, within and outside of majors, specifically as it relates to broad student learning outcomes. Also, consider providing training for advisors (both professional and faculty advisors) on how to help students make connections between courses they are taking, how the students learning outcomes will be addressed in courses, and the importance of having conversations about how these outcomes connect to success in the workplace and specific careers.
 5. **Promote dialogue about how departments can connect and use General Education as the foundation for majors and lifelong learning.** Because of possible tensions between and among faculty due to strained resources and competing priorities, administrators must provide ongoing dialogue about this to help everyone understand the common outcomes for the university. “We all have the same goal for our students...to be successful.”
 6. **Provide opportunities for administrators to have more day to day understanding of the challenges in implementing a new General Education program.** There is somewhat of a disconnect between what administrators may think is happening and what the faculty and students are experiencing. A number of faculty reported that there are not sufficient resources to staff some of the General Education courses, particularly in the FYI program. There needs to be a clear understanding of course offerings in the new and old General Education curriculum, and a plan to provide guidance in this area (it was reported that an assessment of needed courses will occur this summer). It is critical that this information and expectations be clearly communicated to the faculty. Only when this happens will courses such as those in the First Year Experience program be adequately staffed. In addition, while faculty report including Student Learning Outcomes on their syllabi- does this effectively communicate the purpose to students? Based on what students said – it does not.
 7. **Provide adequate support for the First Year Experience program – particularly in what is considered the cornerstone piece.** This program has done incredible work but will not be able to sustain the effort if additional support is not given. It is critical that this program have more sustained support, particularly at the coordinator level to develop and assess the program, as well as recruit and train faculty to teach in it. As suggested by the General Education Task Force, the FYE Coordinator should receive a two-course release per

semester rather than a one-course release in order to support the expansion of first-year seminars into the General Education curriculum

8. **Establish clear priorities from the top.** One of the questions that should be asked of most all departments is how are priorities established? Most everyone on campus indicated that people are working beyond their maximum capacities given the increasing demand on faculty. Faculty will have to carefully choose which activities and initiatives are the most important to the goal of student success but this prioritization must be explicitly guided and rewarded. Especially as new initiatives are established, workloads and priorities within departments must be assessed and carefully weighed.

9. **Explore faculty roles and incentives.** There was some question about the need to establish clear roles and incentives for faculty regarding their contribution to the new curriculum. While many faculty may enjoy teaching in the General Education, others may see this as “shooting themselves in the foot” by taking on additional activities that are not explicitly rewarded. This is of particular concern of faculty who are not yet tenured and whose area of research is disciplined based. However the reward system is structured at Millersville, it should allow for some benefit to consistently contributing to the General Education program and to provide incentives to help increase departmental participation in delivering the General Education program.

It was an honor and a pleasure working with this highly dedicated and professional group of administrators, faculty and staff at Millersville University. Millersville University is a model for a collaborative, thoughtful and intentional process for curricular revision. Each step in the development of this program has involved the campus. Best practices in General Education have been carefully employed and as a result students will greatly benefit from this program. I am confident that not only will student learning be enhanced, but the existing culture of caring and support will continue. I look forward to hearing more of the good work happening in the General Education Program in the future and if I can be of more help I would be happy to do so.