General Education III Task Force

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the history of the development of General Education at New Paltz?

Twenty years ago, the State University of New York at New Paltz designed and instated its first college-wide general education program. Ten years later, a planned review of general education led to a number of significant revisions of structure, content, and anticipated outcomes, which were incorporated into General Education II. SUNY New Paltz is in the process of another ten-year review of general education. General Education III will be in place for fall 2003.

In December 1998, the Provost's Office of SUNY Central Administration issued a brief report, as well as concise guidelines for implementation of a system-wide General Education program. Including competencies and knowledge and skill-based learning outcomes, all two-year (subsequent adjustments have been made for community colleges) and four-year undergraduate colleges and universities in the entire SUNY system were asked to demonstrate their compliance with these guidelines. The extent of review and justification was extensive. Not only were general programs -- competencies and knowledge and skill areas -- evaluated, each individual course designated to satisfy a particular area was reviewed.

Thorough justifications, hundreds of documents and course syllabi, and mountains of paper were prepared, assembled and sent to the Provost's Office of SUNY Central to demonstrate that New Paltz's General Education II sufficiently met the new standards. Ultimately, there were few changes and amendments that had to be made in General Education II in order to meet the Provost's guidelines. These changes were adopted by the college as General Education IIA.

2. What is the charge of the GE Task Force?

A General Education III Task Force including faculty, professional staff, and students was convened in fall 1998, for the purpose of reviewing General Education at SUNY New Paltz and to design and develop a new program -- General Education III -- for the next ten years. In early September 2000 a day long retreat was organized. The Task Force, campus administrators, and selected faculty and staff participated in a workshop and conversations led by Andrea Leskes, Vice President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Considering objectives, outcomes, structures, models, and process, the workshop served as a very positive catalyst to renew the mission of the Task Force to help shape the future of General Education.

The General Education III Task Force has focused, in particular, on issues of process, consultation, and communication. In addition to an underlying commitment to an open, transparent, and democratic process, the Task Force wanted to dispel some of the confusion and discontent engendered by the General Education review process mandated by the SUNY Provost's Office. During the 2001 academic year, rotating teams of three task force members met with every department and with students and representatives of other campus constituencies to gather information and perspectives on GE reform. The GEIII Task Force conducts open meetings every Friday. A bibliography of articles and books is on electronic reserve and available to everyone on campus.

3. What research, national trends or models of General Education have informed your discussions and thoughts so far ?

Perhaps the most accurate statement to be made about general education in the United States is that "with the exception of writing skills there is little agreement on the specifics of general education" (Kanter, Gamson, and London,1997). While there is little agreement about the specifics, the issues related to General Education reform can be organized around what Jerry Gaff call's the four C's: content, coherence, commonality, and comprehensiveness. First, debates in the area of content not only include debates about the knowledge areas, but also issues related to skills (e.g. writing, information literacy, critical thinking) and personal qualities (e.g. life long learning, civic responsibility, empathy) that students should possess. Second, the lack of coherence in general education was a common theme and concern raised in the departmental meetings. There are a variety of structural and pedagogical mechanisms to introduce more coherence into a curriculum, but little agreement in broad terms about how that is achieved and if it is a desirable end depending on the type of students at an institution (e.g. older, part-time students). How to incorporate concepts of the value of individuality with the notion of community is the third source of tension or debate in general education. The desire of faculty is for students to develop the ability to think critically and independently, yet many general education curricula emphasize a "shared" experience for their undergraduates. Lastly, meaningful general education reform requires the faculty as a whole to consider the curriculum as a whole. The comprehensive nature of general education, in that it cuts across strong departmental and disciplinary boundaries, causes tension in and of itself and the process of successful reform of this nature is a source of tension and debate.

In spite of little agreement on the details of General Education, there are some notable trends in the reform of General Education curricula. Many are reflective of the thoughts and concerns raised in department meetings at New Paltz. Some of these trends include general education curricula that emphasize fundamental skills, tighter curriculum structure, integration of knowledge, the freshman and senior years, extension through all four years, global studies, cultural diversity, moral reflection, active learning, and assessment (Gaff, 1991). However, these trends in general education innovations cannot be taken out of context and the extent to which they become part of a final model of general education for a campus should be a reflection of the strengths, constraints, and vision of the campus community.

The underlying philosophy of a general education program while often implicit, is an important factor in the ultimate development of a model. One researcher has categorized the basic assumptions underlying GE models, irrespective of their specific structure, into three basic models: the "Great Books", the "Disciplinary Scholar", and the "Effective Citizen". The Great Books model "looks to the past for enduring ideas and values to form and guide students in the present" (Newton, 2000) (see the chart at the end of this document for a summary). This approach is entirely organized around the "pivotal ideas/authors of the western tradition" and is constituted as a "broad review of the substance of western tradition". A clear example of this approach that pervades the entire curriculum can be found by going to St. Johns, Maryland.

The differences in the Scholarly Discipline and the Effective Citizen models may seem subtle on their face, but in fact have very different orientations, particularly when they play out in practice. The Scholarly Discipline model, typically found in research universities, emphasizes a GE that is derived from and draws on the strength of the disciplines and therefore becomes a series of rigorous introductory courses in the disciplines. "The emphasis is less on coherence and unity of knowledge as it is on a series of intensive experiences in the disciplines. Students make their own connections through reflection" (Newton, 2000). Northeastern (URL) is a clear example of how the strong disciplinary orientation of faculty led to a General Education curriculum that is organized along major (disciplinary) lines and coherence is achieved through a common set of learning goals/objectives and emphasis on three basic skills.

In the Effective Citizen model the curriculum is built around "the issues and problems graduates will be expected to confront in order to lead productive lives" (Newton, 2000). The curriculum is drawn from the disciplines because they contain the knowledge that future citizens require, but the fundamental objective for this type of general education program is not to train a scientist but to educate graduates with scientific literacy essential to be effective citizens. "Students do not learn the discipline as much as they learn about the discipline and its importance both in modern society and for them as citizens of the next century". Alverno College's general education curriculum is one that emphasizes skills and competencies (within the context of disciplines) to promote this model while Wagner College utilizes fieldwork in conjunction with foundation courses, disciplinary courses, and learning communities to promote an effective citizen approach.

Within these broad approaches to general education a variety of structural models have developed. Most GE curricula exist on a distribution model continuum ranging from no student choice to total student choice. On one extreme, with not only a common curriculum, but also common text is the Great Books Model. Somewhere in the middle are general education curricula that have some elements of unity or coherence found perhaps in a set of core or common courses or a common emphasis across courses. On the other end of the spectrum would be a true distribution model with a large number of courses loosely organized into categories. For example, the desire for more coherence within the curriculum between courses as well as throughout a students four years on campus have led to a "vertical spine" approach to the GE structure. This might consist of one or more thematically organized courses that extend from the freshman to senior years, for example Fairleigh Dickinson. Northeastern University, similar to Duke's approach, unified strong disciplinary cultures with no core courses, but established a common set of goals across the curriculum.

4. What are the major findings of your discussions on campus?

Faculty identified a wide-variation in the level of preparation of students, despite what they have heard with respect to increased selectivity in admissions. Students also identified the wide variation in their levels of preparation for college and a desire to be treated accordingly: "I know staff and teachers have the same expectations of us, but we have different experiences high school wise". They also made consistent comments about the need for engagement in the classroom: "The smaller setting is easier and more personal, it's 2-way learning". However, even large lecture courses, while not favored, could have positive learning experiences: "the class was packed, people were sitting on the steps, but he knew everyone's name, it was exciting, and nobody missed class".

In order to answer the questions posed in the research and to facilitate a campus conversation about what it was that the New Paltz campus desired from a General Education curriculum, the Task Force embarked on a commitment to solicit input directly from faculty, students, and administrators. Throughout fall 2000 and concluding in spring 2001, Task Force members met with every academic department and most other programs and areas on campus. Student input began to be solicited by hosting two focus groups with more expected later in the process. A number of general themes and trends emerged and crystallized from these conversations:

Attitudes toward GE
There was an overall sense of a hierarchy between courses in the major and GE, with general education courses on the bottom. While students may treat General Education as something akin to cough medicine in that it tastes terrible but it's good for you, many faculty voiced concerns about their own treatment of general education courses as something of lesser status or concern

than courses in the major. Adding to perceptions of this "status" is the large number of adjunct faculty who are teaching general education courses.

Skills and Competencies
The need for stronger critical thinking skills was identified in statements such as students should have "an awareness of who's narrating the story" or "be able to evaluate truth".   The desire for stronger writing skills was apparent in virtually every conversation. Another common emphasis that is related, although not exclusively, is with respect to students' skills in information literacy: "they are wanting to access information, not evaluate it".

The Number of Credits Required for GE
Aside from the desire to increase students skills in writing, critical thinking, and information literacy, reducing the number of credits to complete General Education was a common desire among faculty and the students in the two focus groups. The 43-52 credit requirement in GE is a large portion of the overall credit requirements, and thus poses significant issues for many majors. The reduction in GE credit requirements would not only reduce some of the pressures being felt by departments and students with respect to scheduling, but would also provide the opportunity for departments to offer or accept more elective courses towards the major.

Coherence
A common sentiment across departments was the desire for more integration or coherence within the GE curriculum to provide students with better "connections between the disciplines". However, these thoughts are tempered with the feeling that students must also be allowed "room for exploration". In the focus groups, students also identified the desire for more choice, in that they felt the need for more GE course offerings within the existing categories.

Global Context/Cross-Cultural Competence
In part related to the issue of curricular coherence, but encompassing a much broader theme was the idea that GE should emphasize concepts of diversity and cross-cultural competence. While some expressed the desire for the curriculum to provide students with "context or perspective", another common thought was the "need to create a national and global identity that may not just be a course" and "if we're talking about culture, GE should reflect as broad a vision as possible"

Ethical Reflection and Civic Responsibility
Departmental meetings brought out the importance of General Education in encouraging students to examine critically their ethical standards and responsibility to their community.

	Great Books	**Scholarly Discipline**	**New Paltz GEIII**	**Effective Citizen**
Key Insight	Focus on the perennial human question	Disciplines as the accumulated wisdom and ways of understanding the world humankind has developed over the centuries		Education in the service of self-reforming democracy
Role of the University	Handing on the tradition	Vigorous developer/extender of knowledge and methods of the academic disciplines		Progressive force for democratic change
Substance of Curriculum	Pivotal ideas/authors of western tradition	Key concepts and methods of inquiry as defined by the discipline		Knowledge/skills vital to living in and improving modern society
Ideal Graduate	Classically educated through encounters with classic works and authors	Beginning practitioner of the disciplines		An effective citizen
Emphasis	Unity	Method		Action
Breadth/Depth	Broad review of the substance of the western tradition	Sharp introduction to the range of basic disciplines		Comprehensive introduction to current knowledge
Source of Coherence	Unified by a historical review of key responses to the perennial questions	The individual student piecing together the mosaic of the disciplines		The focus on preparing graduates with skills/knowledge for modern society
Faculty	Broadly educated generalists	Disciplinary experts		Instructors committed to educate non specialists in their areas of specialty
Likely Locations	Liberal arts colleges/special programs in larger universities	Research oriented universities with strong departments		Institutions with strong client-centered orientation and sense of public mission
Orientation	Looks to past for enduring ideas and values to form and guide students in the present	Instills an understanding of the intellectual treasures and scholarly methods that are society's intellectual heritage		Develops the tools and commitment needed to shape the future
Inspirations/Advocates	Hutchins/Adler/Bennett/Cheney/Bloom	Bruner/Phenix/professional disciplinary societies		Dewey/Childs

Newton, R. (2000). Tensions and models in general education planning. Journal of General Education(49)3, p.180.