

ACADEMIC COORDINATING COMMISSION, 2016-17
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Report to the Faculty Senate:
Recommended Improvements to General Education
16 November 2016

Background

[1] In April 2016, after the Faculty Senate filed the 2016 General Education Task Force Report, Faculty Senate leadership solicited university-wide input on the Report and on general education, and instructed the Academic Coordinating Commission (ACC) to review all relevant input and recommend appropriate next steps. Following that review, ACC determined that it would recommend improvements to Western's general education program. Over the course of the Fall Quarter, the ACC has had five regular meetings, and dedicated a significant part, sometimes the entirety, of each of those meetings to our review of general education.

[2] As a basis for our discussion, we have given close attention to the following documents: the 2014 Western Study of General Education (WSGE) Task Force Report, including input, compiled in the appendices, from faculty and student surveys and forums; the 2016 General Education Task Force Report; the 2016 General Education Data Summary (compiled by the Faculty Senate office); faculty and student responses to the 2016 Report in both their original forms and thematically organized forms (compiled by the Faculty Senate office); data from the 2016 Student referendum on possible changes to general education; and academic unit responses to the 2016 Report.

[3] The 2014 WSGE Task Force was charged with determining "whether revision of the structure of the general education program" is "desirable" and, if desirable, "feasible." In order to assess the desirability of structural change, the 2014 Task Force surveyed faculty and students: 213/1070 (20%) faculty participated; 1400/10,520 (13%) students participated (first-year and graduate students were not surveyed). Members of the Task Force also organized faculty forums in which they met personally with the faculty of 30/41 (73%) academic departments. The 2014 Task Force reported general satisfaction with the current structure of general education at Western among both faculty and students, and concluded that "there is no widespread desire expressed among either faculty or students to change the GUR structure." Having determined that revision was not "desirable," the Task Force agreed that it was not necessary, at the time, to take up the question of feasibility. That having been said, the 2014 Task Force also noted the many proposals it had heard for improvements to Western's general education program, and suggested that some of those ideas should be given further attention, with the caveat that "the faculty, as a whole, ought to be involved in evaluating and deciding upon any future specific proposals for revising the GURs."

[4] In April 2015, the Faculty Senate discussed the WSGE Task Force Report and provided recommendations to the ACC, taking particular note of the express reluctance of many faculty members to consider the desirability of changes to general education in the absence of specific proposals. The 2016 General Education Task Force was, therefore, charged by ACC with proposing "three options for improving the GUR program," one of which would "involve minimal adjustments to the structure and goals of the current GUR program." The 2016 Task Force reviewed general education programs at fifteen other universities, giving special attention to six of those programs. On the basis of its review, the

2016 Task Force proposed that Western consider two new models for general education—the “Thematic Model” and the “Blended Core Model”—both of which would involve significant structural change. In addition, the 2016 Task Force, reflecting areas of general consensus in their discussion, analysis, and review of Western’s existing program (described by the Task Force as a “Distribution Model”) identified three “improvement opportunities” having to do with diversity, coherence, and writing.

[5] In April 2016, the Faculty Senate, after filing the 2016 Task Force Report, sought university-wide input on the 2016 Report’s proposals through faculty, student, and college surveys, as well as collaborative sessions. With respect to the surveys, 68/928 (7%) faculty participated; 86/15,332 (0.56%) students participated; three academic units (CFPA, CHSS, Library) participated collectively, as did two departments (biology and history). Additionally, the Associated Students included two referendum questions about general education on their spring ballot: 1577-1885/13,562 (11.6-13.9%) students answered one or both of the questions asked.

[6] In reviewing the mass of information described above, the ACC has been guided, in large part, by the way in which the Faculty Senate President framed the Senate’s appeal for feedback on the 2016 Task Force Report: “It is important to note that these ideas are not intended to be voted on by the faculty. Nor are they considered the “answers” for Western’s general education program. Instead, they are a starting place to spur our collective thinking about what we want as a campus. Through the process of reviewing and seeking feedback in response to the Task Force Report we hope to determine what ideas, frameworks, and general education program models are most likely to serve the needs and enjoy the support of the campus community.”

[7] In its deliberations this quarter on possible improvements to general education, the ACC has been guided, as well, by the principles of intellectual diversity, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual rigor as they apply to both students and faculty.

Recommendation

[8] The ACC reports, first, that it has found no university-wide consensus, among faculty or students, in favor of a fundamental change in Western’s model of general education. There was, in some individual cases, thoughtful (sometimes enthusiastic) support for a change of model, but there was also, in other cases, equally thoughtful (and equally enthusiastic) opposition. The ACC, therefore, recommends retaining and improving Western’s existing model of general education, in ways that we think will reflect some of the most promising features of the “Thematic” and “Blended Core” models.

[9] The ACC reports, second, that there is a university-wide desire for some very specific improvements to Western’s existing general education program. In fact, the ACC has found strong support for the three “improvement opportunities” identified by the 2016 Task Force. In an effort to facilitate continued discussion, the ACC has organized proposed improvements into four priority areas: (1) Writing; (2) Diversity; (3) Coherence; (4) Faculty-Student Engagement. It should be noted that the ACC has not considered resource limitations in its discussion of improvements to general education. The ACC recognizes, however, that significant improvements to general education will likely require some re-alignment of university resources. The ACC recommends the adoption of all the improvements proposed in these four priority areas.

[10] The ACC reports, third, that it remains committed to the “3/2/1 model” described in its Handbook, by which at least 60 credits of a Western baccalaureate education are general education credits.

Priority Areas

[1 1] (i) Writing. The ACC recommends a three-stage writing requirement stretching across a Western student's baccalaureate education: two courses designated W1, two courses designated W2, and one course designated W3. (1a) The first stage (W1) would require English 101, as is currently required, and a 200-level "writing in the disciplines course," on the model of the "writing in the content areas" requirement previously passed by the ACC and Faculty Senate in 2004. Individual departments, following university guidelines (for minimum number of assignments, pages, revisions, etc.), would be encouraged to develop their own discipline-specific, writing-intensive courses for this purpose, though the ACC acknowledges that it may not be practical for all departments to do so. The 200-level course could be taken in either the first or second year, (1b) The second stage would require at least two GUR courses at the 200- and 300-level with a writing designation (W2). The ACC envisions the W2 designation being applied to existing GUR courses as a way of identifying GUR courses that already have significant writing requirements as part of the course. W2 courses would not necessarily be "writing-intensive," but would have some minimum percentage of the overall course grade based on written assignments, (1c) The third stage (W3) would require at least one upper-division, writing-intensive course, ideally within the major. In many majors, existing seminar or "capstone" or thesis requirements (or similar culminating courses) would receive the W3 designation. (The proposed third stage would replace our current WP requirement.)

[1 2] (2) Diversity. The ACC recommends replacement of our current ACGM and BCGM requirements. Instead, the current minimum credit requirement for HUM and SSC would increase from 24 credits to 34 credits (from 12 to 17 credits for each of the two areas), and the GUR courses currently listed under either ACGM or BCGM would be moved into either HUM or SSC, as appropriate. Each student would be required to take at least two courses with a "diversity-equity-justice" (DEJ) designation, indicating that the course has met university guidelines for addressing, in some deliberate and sustained form, the study of human diversity and of systemic equity- and justice-related issues arising from the experience of diversity. The ACC recommends that in developing this designation, thorough consideration be given to a question posed by the 2016 General Education Task Force: "How could we adopt a developmental approach to understanding diversity, giving our students an initial understanding of foundational diversity concepts, followed by an opportunity for students to explore them in more depth?" (The new system would avoid the arbitrary geographical division in the current ACGM-BCGM distinction; it would also avoid the necessity of categorizing a course as either CGM or HUM/SSC.)

[1 3] (3) Coherence. The 2016 General Education Task Force observed that "a coherent set of requirements requires that a system be created, defined by a recognizable logic of sequence and components unified by clear goals." The ACC sees coherence in Western's general education program as largely a matter of perspective and presentation. (3a) With respect to presentation of the program as a whole, the ACC recommends the further development and dissemination of a clear statement of purpose, as well as written and visual representations of the GUR structure. The ACC further recommends that faculty teaching GUR courses be expected to briefly explain, at the start of a course or within the syllabus, the place of their course in the larger GUR structure. (3b) With respect to general education curriculum, the ACC recommends the ongoing development, at the instance of individual faculty and departments, of thematically-linked courses between disciplines, and of coherent sequences of courses within disciplines, including sequences that move from lower-level to upper-level GUR courses. (The ACC prefers that the university provide students with linked courses as an option, rather than a requirement.) (3c) Lastly, the ACC recommends the simplification and reduction (to no more than four) of the current eleven GUR competencies.

[1 4] (4) Faculty-Student Engagement. (4a) The ACC recommends that the University offer a higher percentage of small (maximum of 25 students) GUR classes, including all writing-intensive classes, and that students be required to take at least one small class during their first or second quarter at Western. This improvement could be attained, in part, by the expansion of the first-stage writing requirement (see (1a) above). Additionally, the ACC favors the restoration and expansion of the First Year Experience (FYE) program, so that at least one FYE is available each year in every appropriate Department. (4b) The ACC also recommends that the University offers one-on-one, faculty advising for prospective majors in their first year at Western, including advising about the place of general education in baccalaureate studies.

Implementation Process

[1 5] If the Faculty Senate approves any or all of the above proposals, the ACC recommends that the ACC be charged with directing the further development, review, and implementation of the approved proposals. The ACC anticipates charging, in turn, its Committee on Undergraduate Education with the work of development, review, and implementation. The ACC also anticipates the possibility, depending on the number of proposals approved by the Senate, of charging one or more Task Forces to assist the ACC and the CUE. The ACC recommends full implementation of all approved proposals by the start of the academic year, 2018-19.

Respectfully submitted,
2016-17 Commissioners of the ACC