



RETHINKING THE “generals”

Remember those general education course requirements?

For many of you, GE really did “bring good things to light.” But whether you loved or despised the program, you couldn’t avoid its demands... or its goal to provide you with a broad and solid foundation.

It’s still our cornerstone. But general education’s recent renovation will now challenge the next generation of UW-RF students to meet the expectations of 21st-century living.

English professor Ruth Wood has the inside story on the three-year effort to remake the program into a relevant, flexible, and measurable component of the UW-River Falls experience.

by Ruth Wood

If you’re like I was before I became a member of UW-RF’s “New General Education Committee,” you thought that a university’s general education program consisted of a list of courses which well-educated faculty and administrators agreed that students needed in order to graduate as “well-educated” American citizens. Some history, some literature, a little math, a foreign language, biology, maybe some health and PE...maybe some geology or geography...maybe some...

Now do you see the problem? How do you decide? Is history more important than political science? Can you require a student to study chemistry if her career interest lies in economics? Where do you draw the line before the list of requirements gets so long that every student spends half his college career studying “generals”?

Furthermore, if you think about it, it’s easy to see that a “well-educated” graduate in the 21st century needs different knowledge and skills than a grad in 1940 or 1970. At Whitewater State in 1928 my father-in-law was expected to take penmanship! Obviously, today’s grad has a greater need to know how to use a computer, and, judging from the in-class work I get from my English students, most of them have never been taught penmanship—let alone the Palmer method!

Responding to a rapidly changing world where education can’t afford to stand still, 2002 UW-RF’s administration charged the Faculty Senate’s Academic Policies and Program (AP&P) committee to reconsider the formula





OLD GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Since 1990, up until the new program was launched, the general education program included these goals and requirements:

The General Education Program is designed to develop essential academic skills, to acquaint students with their cultural heritage, and to provide them with a broad base of liberal studies in the humanities, mathematics, and in the social and physical sciences. It will develop breadth of knowledge and cultivate the critical judgment necessary for mature and responsible lives in work, leisure and as citizens of the nation and the world.

41 credits required from seven course categories: communication, humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, sciences, mathematics, physical education, and a senior-level interdisciplinary capstone.

for the required distribution of general education courses. AP&P appointed a subcommittee to handle this grand task, and they set to work, under the leadership of history professor Kurt Leichtle.

The administration wanted the new committee to, among other things:

- 1) create a program that will prepare graduates to deal intelligently and thoughtfully with the 21st century American situation,
- 2) help students graduate in a timely fashion by requiring fewer general education credit hours and offering more flexible choice of courses,
- 3) require that every course seeking approval as a general education offering include a detailed plan on how specified outcomes will be met and measured and data collected to substantiate student learning.

The Result

Starting in the fall of 2005, freshmen entering UW-River Falls will be required to take, among other things, a course each in “Multidisciplinary Inquiry,” “Ethical Citizenship,” “Global Perspectives,” and “American Cultural Diversity.” Some faculty on the traditional end of the spectrum are not keen about the fact that this program does not require students to take at least one course in history, literature, or a foreign language, and that students can now use a course in statistics to count as their mathematics component. Those looking for more forward-looking changes were equally disappointed that we did not require a course in environmental awareness or 21st century agricultural production.

But no one seems to be complaining about the effort to make general education a slightly smaller part of our students’ programs. The students I advise are mostly English education majors, and the time it takes them to complete a major, a minor, and an obligatory second minor in education, plus do student teaching, is typically 10 full semesters, and they earn about 140 credits in the process. Our catalog says that students can graduate with 120 credits, but the average UW-RF student graduates with 137.

Today’s college student has different priorities as well. They generally have to work more to meet rising college expenses, and they often need both job experience and internships to make their resumes distinctive in a very competitive job market. Though the GE Committee only managed to reduce the total number of general education credits required from 41 to 38, the fact that most of the 3-credit requirements can be filled with a greater variety of courses will make it easier—and more meaningful—for students to complete their GE program.

The committee’s last charge was to create an assessable program with built-in accountability features. Since I teach courses for pre-service teachers, this stipulation greatly appealed to me. Just ask my techniques students how many times I tell them: “In order to plan successfully, you have to know what you want students to know and do at the end of your lesson, unit, and course. If the kind of tasks you assign don’t really show that students have learned more than a list of facts, you don’t know if you’re doing your job or not.”

Nationwide, accreditation associations are requiring university departments to provide data that demonstrates how well students are learning the essential components of their disciplines. UW-RF found itself coming up short in having concrete proof. Our graduate surveys reported greater satisfaction with the education students received here than graduates at comparably sized and financed institutions nationwide, but we didn’t have standardized graduation tests to prove it, nor did we have the budget to be able to add them.

Instead, we hired Susan Hatfield, an assessment expert from Winona State University, to teach us how to state goals and expectations in measurable ways. Once we can assess student learning within individual courses, we can compile the data from these courses to give us concrete evidence of how we’re doing overall. We’ll be killing two birds with one effort: holding ourselves and students accountable, and collecting usable data for public reckoning as well.

To me and many other members of the General Education Committee, this plan seemed great. But not everyone on the faculty was enthusiastic. Accountability that measures student ability to conceptualize and apply learning often requires that students articulate their own answers—in writing, orally, or through practical application. Each designator goal page on the General Education Web site indicates that each course include “to the extent possible...written composition [and] oral discussion....”

For many teachers this sounded like a significant departure from long-standing practices, and they were skeptical of the need to change what they were doing. When I started to chair the committee in the spring of 2004, the most frequent inquiry I received from course proposers was “Are you going to automatically reject this because I’m not having my students write essays or participate in discussion?”

Switching Gears

Up until the point of actually deciding which courses would be accepted into the “new” general education program, working on this committee had been the most interesting and satisfying in my 13 years of committee work at UW-RF. From my first introduction to it in 2003, committee members talked idealistically; we reasoned complexly; we tried hard to achieve consensus on notions of what’s essential to the development of a UW-RF graduate without making pitches for our own departments and colleges. This was the best committee assignment ever. Early on in the deliberation, the subcommittee agreed to circumvent “vested interests” by foregoing all mention of specific disciplines (i.e. we could not talk about “history courses” or “biology” or “music”; we did make an exception for “mathematics,” since it’s both a way of thinking and learning and a discipline) and limit our decisions to the kinds of learning students needed to gain in order to be “good RF grads.”

Once the language and stipulations of the new GE program had been approved by Faculty Senate on Feb. 19, 2004, the committee faced more challenges in figuring out how to get a new program up and running. But many of us were worn out from serving double duty as AP&P members and GE subcommittee members. So the first suggestion, implemented Feb. 26 of 2004, was to have Faculty Senate create a new standing committee: The General Education Committee.

The new committee began meeting in April of 2004. In an early decision—the choice of a chair—I’d like to report that I was chosen by acclamation. But the fact of the matter is that no one else on the committee stood to gain as much freed-up time as I by the Provost’s considerate offer to let the first year’s chair have a course release to manage all the demands of this new committee. How much more stress could chairing this committee be than teaching a section of freshman English and reading all those papers? I would soon find out.

Everybody Starts at Square One

No one has accused the General Education Committee of being lazy. And faculty learned that we’re not afraid to ruffle feathers. From the get-go we made it clear that every course, no matter how long it had already been taught as a general education course, would have to go through an approval process which ended with our committee (after getting departmental, college and university approval). Adding together brand-new proposals and revised proposals, we considered 64 proposals between September 2004 and May 2005.

In most of the meetings from September through May, all members came with photocopies of one to five course proposals they had read and evaluated. The proposer of each course would be present to answer questions—primarily aimed at determining whether the practices of the proposed course were likely to fulfill the designated outcomes and whether plans for gathering and recording assessment data would be practicable and appropriate.

We were relieved to see that our methods seemed to work rather slickly. That is, until we finished the math and science proposals. It was when we tackled our first proposal from the English department that we learned the pitfalls. That’s not a surprise. If a math teacher has to prove that students are learning how to compute cubic roots, showing papers where students successfully applied the formula and came up with the desired result would do in large part. Add a request that students explain in words how they knew that was the correct procedure, and you’ve established comprehension as well as application.

But ask an English teacher to demonstrate that a student can “write an effective summary,” and you can bet that one reader will love it because of its sublime style, while another will find it superficial. We realized that we needed to listen hard to how teachers outside of our own disciplines determined quality of student work and level of student learning. We had to stretch our own habits of thinking to bend the way that others think.



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK!

To take a detailed look at UW-RF’s new general education program, go to www.uwrf.edu/faculty_senate/gened/General_Education



Faculty reactions to getting proposals rejected the first time they came before the committee were mixed. Some proposers came assuming that we'd find something lacking and then give them advice about how to revise in order to win our approval the next time. They usually went away with their expectations fulfilled—sometimes happy to have further guidance, sometimes dubious that we had clearly articulated what we “really wanted” from them.

Some came assuming that their course had been well taught and well evaluated for years and a committee of “outsiders” (i.e. teachers not in their field) could hardly give them useful advice about how to do it better. Some felt that we were going too far in “dictating” what course content and student assessment should be.

Between October 8 and May 12, the committee approved 35 courses on the first submission, 19 on the second, and 2 on the third. Seven courses are currently before the committee but have yet to achieve approval. We don't have a record of how many of the proposers who were asked to revise went away angry, though we did get a pretty strong indication in at least one instance. Of the three proposers whose courses were flatly turned down, all departed the meetings graciously—while I mopped my brow. I joked to a friend who had asked how I was surviving the pressures of being chair that I had “put myself in a trance-like state before bed” in order to avoid losing sleep over motions that we didn't pass as well as motions that we did.

In reality, our meetings were conducted very civilly. And even though our votes were almost all unanimous, we succeeded, predictably, at not pleasing everyone. Here are two of the decisions we made that stirred up the most controversy:

- 1) to accept introductory modern language courses under the “Communication Speech and Listening” designator
- 2) to reject Environmental Sciences 105 as a “Social and Behavioral Science designator,” even though it has a 10-year history of being offered as a social science course

Charting new territory

Did we blunder into decisions that are inconsistent or political? I concede that we may have, though innocently, I'd argue. In so many ways, this committee was charting new territory. The first of the items—accepting modern language in the CSL designator—is a good example of such trail-blazing. This decision came late in the year, after the committee had had lots of experience in treating the language of the goals and outcomes as our ultimate deciding point. Do first-year modern language students “read analytically and critically,” “speak and listen effectively in . . . group settings,” “...evaluate written, visual, and aural material?” Most of us agreed that they did. The modern language proposers had spent much time over the year designing their course proposals to match the language of the stipulations. And we knew that none of the designators were intended to be filled by one specific course.

But technical fit was not a persuasive argument to people who believe that SCTA 100—Introduction to Speech—is the rightful “owner” of the 3-credit CSL slot. There are, according to the detractors of our decision, too many essential skills that are taught in SCTA 100 that students will miss out on if they don't take that course. At the present moment, we're waiting to see whether Faculty Senate will be moved by the contingent that does not like having modern languages compete with SCTA 100 to move to change the language of the CSL proposal to more clearly rule out modern languages as a “contender.”

Differences of judgment about whether courses in environmental science and plant and earth science should continue to receive SBS credit led to unprecedented disputes. With specialties like “Social and Behavioral Sciences,” it was clear that committee members who taught in that specialty had a keener notion of what constituted required Outcome B—applying “methods of the social sciences”—than other faculty members. The difference in viewpoint also brought to light that committee members with different areas of expertise were likely to bring slightly different criteria to bear in deciding on the worthiness of a course in a particular category. Environmental Science 105 was the only vote of the year undeadlocked by the chair's vote. That one I did lose some sleep over.



NEW GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

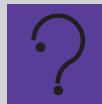
Goals and requirements of the new program include:



The purpose of the UW-RF General Education Program is to facilitate the acquisition and integration of knowledge, abilities, and ethics in order to form a foundation for lifelong learning.



The interdisciplinary foundation includes the ability to communicate effectively; comprehend the inter-relatedness of past and present human experience; apply scientific principles to the human and natural world; engage in inquiry and critical thinking; develop and appreciate the responsibilities of individuals to themselves, each other, society, and the world.



38 credits required. Courses must address one or more of the five specific goals listed above and demonstrate measurable outcomes.



Who Benefits?

The General Education Committee would like to believe that everybody will benefit. Even those of us who have to do more work to get course proposals revised and the assessments up and running. As a member of the English department's general education subcommittee, I'm one of those people. I spent a fair amount of time last summer and fall working with Freshman English coordinator Steve Luebke to prepare a proposal for a new CRW course: English 100. When we were ready and Dr. Luebke presented this proposal to the committee, even my presence as chair didn't help us get it passed.

We felt rebuffed, to be sure, but once we started to follow the committee's suggestions, we realized that we were filling holes that should have been filled and becoming more clear and precise in our expectations for the sake of the great number of teachers who would be teaching this course and students who would be taking it. I believe other faculty are also finding that the process of proposing courses for the General Education program encourages more articulated thinking about their courses and perhaps some meaningful revisions.

Students, I feel, will benefit in a long list of ways, including these:

- 1) being made more aware of what their general education program is designed to give them,
- 2) being assessed in ways that both reinforce learning and clearly indicate what kind and what extent of learning they've managed,
- 3) having more consistent aims and expectations among sections of the same course,
- 4) experiencing more authentic teaching and assessing; more challenging assignments requiring more critical thinking, and
- 5) being offered new and updated courses, new ways of conceptualizing.

One of the aims of the committee was to try to stifle the common notion that "generals" were something "to get done with" rather than a true cornerstone to their growth as citizens, professionals, and leaders. The new "Ethical Citizenship" requirement, for example, provides an opportunity for a student to take a course that's been around for a while—for example, Journalism 101—Mass Media, or ESM 105—Environmental Studies—but see it in the perspective not just of learning about the mass media or the environment, but of understanding how their personal decision-making is influenced by critical knowledge of fields like these.

Who Stands to Lose?

It depends. It depends on whether you're an adjunct English teacher who may have fewer sections to teach or a tenured psych teacher who may have more. It depends on whether you see all change as problematic or some change as really essential. It depends on whether increasing students' opportunities to truly formulate and express their ideas orally and in writing is worth the extra class time and grading time those processes may entail.

Obviously there will be some shifting of demands. More students may be

taking Environmental Science 105 and fewer English 241. Registration for the next several semesters may cause headaches for deans, the registrar's office, and department chairs—and possibly students. Where recently the campus has been able to use predominantly past enrollment figures to predict how many sections of, say, Political Science 114, English 111, and Biology 150, need to be offered each semester, now there's less predictability because students have a widened range of choices.

The system also potentially lends itself to the pull of marketing strategies. If teachers or departments decide to "advertise" certain courses more aggressively, that may alter usual distribution phenomena.

A Self-regulating Program

Every course that has been approved so far for the new general education program must reapply in one to five years. At that time, proposers will be asked to provide data that demonstrates that students in these courses have achieved the desired aims and outcomes to a satisfactory degree. If the evidence provided isn't adequate, the course won't be approved for renewal, and the course will not be offered for general education credit until a better plan for promoting and/or measuring student learning is devised.

If this process goes well, it means that teachers have to "deliver the goods" on a regular and consistent basis. Not that we don't right now. But we'll know and so will everybody else that we're doing a great job of educating here at UW-RF. ■



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