

GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE: Recommendations to Faculty Council

Tasked to review and, if appropriate, suggest revisions to the current MU General Education program, we recommend the adoption of several modifications of the extant program. The organization of our recommendations parallels the list of questions and issues presented to us by Faculty Council, with the inclusion of general observations concerning the parameters within which the MU General Education program necessarily operates.

Preface

- Though we may bemoan the financial challenges facing the University and the State of Missouri, those challenges are likely to persist. Even if the economy were to improve dramatically in the coming months, many question the long-term commitment of the State to adequate funding of the University. Thus, we cannot expect a flow of funds into the General Education Program in support of program revisions.
- We assume that all faculty members are fascinated by their individual disciplines and that they believe students would be well served by taking one or more courses within those disciplines. However, we also maintain that it is inappropriate and impractical to translate those personal disciplinary commitments into general education requirements.
- A mere checklist of general education requirements should not replace or hamper good academic advising. We must acknowledge that the advising students receive at MU is too frequently uneven, and we suggest that an institutional commitment to quality academic and career advising ultimately is as important as is a commitment to a particular common set of graduation requirements.
- The determination of whether an individual student has satisfied the requirements of the General Education program currently rests with the student's Division. It should come as no surprise that the interpretation of those requirements varies somewhat from Division to Division even though the Divisions adhere to the spirit of the requirements. Accordingly, students should be reminded to consult with the Divisions and Departments in which they currently major, or potentially might major, to ensure that they receive the most accurate information concerning degree requirements.
- The General Education Program should be viewed as only one component of the education that a student receives at MU. One should not expect, therefore, that general education courses alone bear the responsibility for developing critical thinking and the habits of mind that one associates with higher education. Courses taken in the major are equally responsible for addressing the Core Learning Objectives as defined by CUE.

- A comparison of the MU General Education Program with requirements at other universities suggests that the MU program is fairly typical, consisting of distribution requirements plus additional specified requirements (e.g., WI and MRP courses). The on-line resources for students planning their general education programs are woefully substandard, however. Students generally appear to be unaware of the lists of courses that satisfy general education requirements and unaware of the general education requirements themselves. If a student goes to the MU homepage, clicks on the “Current Students” tab, that student does NOT find a direct link to the general education requirements. Only by clicking on “Undergraduate Advising” and finding “General Education Program” buried in the list of items under “Information About” does that student get to a page where the requirements can be found (after another click). Even if one overlooks the unattractive manner in which the information is (eventually) presented on the MU website, one still has to admit that the difficulty in finding the information in the first place is embarrassing and a deterrent to good advising.
- Any alteration of the General Education Program requirements necessarily involves a transition period during which confusion is likely to derive from having multiple sets of requirements. We urge Divisions to be as accommodating as possible in easing students through this transition.

Recommendations

- *A “diversity” course requirement*
We agree that incorporation of a course requirement dealing with diversity in the most general sense is desirable. In particular, such a requirement should permit exploration beyond the consideration of “race/ethnicity, gender, and social inequality” issues typically associated with “diversity” courses. Courses that introduce students to a broad range of cultures have a place as well, as do courses that “internationalize” the curriculum. Therefore, we recommend that the current general education breadth requirement be modified to require that one course be chosen from the list of courses approved for inclusion in the Multicultural Certificate program. Reflecting the expansion of the “diversity” definition inherent in this recommendation, this new requirement would be termed the “multicultural” or “world cultures” requirement.
- *Laboratory course requirements*
The following statement is proposed as a guide to determining whether a particular course should qualify as a biological or physical science laboratory course.

The aims of laboratory science General Education courses are manifold. A major aim of many such courses is providing non-science majors with both science content and an understanding of how science “works”. Since observation of the natural world and experimentation are integral parts of the scientific process, participation in these procedures necessarily is an integral part of science

education.

Specifically, we use the term “laboratory” in reference to courses or portions of courses that satisfy the following criteria.

- They provide students with an opportunity for the active collection and/or analysis of data from real-world observations and experiments. These activities need not take place in a conventional “laboratory” setting but may be undertaken anywhere that an appropriate experiment or observation can take place (*e.g.*, in the field).
- They promote scientific literacy and critical thinking/problem solving skills.
- Whenever possible, they include opportunities for students to design experimental or observational protocols.
- If the laboratory is directly associated with a specific lecture course or is included as part of a course that also includes lecture, the laboratory activities promote understanding of the content presented in the lecture.

- *Performance-based classes (e.g., musical performance)*

We believe that performance-based courses certainly have a role in general education, but the current restriction to no more than three credit hours in such courses per general education category seems reasonable and appropriate.

- *Limitation of general education courses to no more than one prerequisite*

We believe that the “one prerequisite” rule is unnecessarily restrictive, that it should be interpreted broadly to include course blocks that conventionally are taken as a sequence. Examples here include micro- and macroeconomics, the beginning foreign language sequences, the Calculus sequence, the general chemistry sequence, and the introductory physics sequences. More generally, though, we propose that all 1000-level and 2000-level courses be deemed appropriate for general education save for (1) those courses that may be classified as “discipline-focused” or “orientation” courses and (2) those courses specifically identified in general education requirements other than distribution requirements (*e.g.*, MATH 1100 and ENGLSH 1000). (Ultimately, CUE would decide which courses fall into the “discipline-focused” and “orientation” categories.) Note that this proposal implies a change in the basic understanding of which courses are appropriate for general education credit, a shift from those that are *open* to all students to those that are *appropriate* for all students. (For example, the enrollment in JOURN 2000 necessarily may be restricted to Journalism majors, but that restriction would not preclude the course from being used for general education credit if a student subsequently changes to a degree program in another college. Furthermore, the capacity of any particular course need not be increased merely to accommodate students desiring to take the course for general education credit.) This same shift in understanding should apply to the approval of 3000- and 4000-level courses as well. We do not propose, however, treating these more advanced courses as suitable for general education by default; inclusion of a course at the 3000 or 4000 levels would continue to be based on the results of CUE deliberations.

- *College algebra and freshman composition requirements for MRP and WI credit, respectively*
Although it is highly desirable that students be advised to take college algebra prior to an MRP course and ENGLSH 1000 prior to a WI course, we cannot justify withholding MRP and WI credit if class performance was satisfactory but the prerequisites were not met.
- *Assessing the quality of general education at MU*
The assessment issue has proved particularly troublesome. We recognize that the existing mandated assessment program says little or nothing about the actual quality of general education at MU, but we understand that designing an effective assessment methodology is difficult, perhaps impossible, on a campus that hosts a plethora of majors and is a transfer “destination”. On the other hand, the guidelines for the General Education Program appear to be well aligned with the 1986 statement by the Board of Curators concerning the preparation of baccalaureate graduates.
- *Impact of the growing enrollment on the delivery of capstone and writing intensive courses*
Although the increasing need for capstone and writing intensive courses taught by (at best) a non-increasing pool of faculty is acknowledged, we believe that focusing only on enrollment pressure misses the real issue, at least in the case of the capstone courses.

The capstone course requirement is one of the few requirements introduced as part of the General Education Architecture that applies to graduation qualification in individual majors rather than to coursework that broadens students’ “intellectual foundation in the liberal arts and sciences”. (The quotation is from the 1986 statement of the Board of Curators.) Although the capstone requirement is easily implemented in some disciplines (the senior-level engineering design courses come to mind here), the implementation is problematic in other disciplines simply due to the nature of those disciplines. (Mathematics and English are two such disciplines.) Still other disciplines, because the coursework already is “layered”, with each course building on those taken earlier in the curriculum, it is not clear what purpose the capstone course serves. Given these issues associated with implementation of the capstone course requirement, we recommend that this course requirement be stricken from the University graduation requirements. We nonetheless encourage disciplines to retain the capstone requirement *if doing so makes academic sense for those disciplines*. Presumably, the faculty members within those disciplines are best positioned to make curricular decisions of this sort.

- *The education that MU undergraduates receive outside their majors*
Recognizing that courses taken outside the major are not solely responsible for addressing the Core Learning Objectives as articulated by CUE, the sorts of courses, distribution, and depth requirements currently embodied in the General

Education Program appear to be appropriate and reflective of the variety of educational opportunities presented at MU.

- *General education vis-à-vis the Core Learning Objectives*
This issue has been addressed above.
- *College or program requirements that hamper fulfillment of General Education requirements*
Many of the issues concerning transfer between colleges or programs have been addressed in recent years, and any remaining impediments are not likely to be resolved easily, given that MU offers a variety of degrees having differing graduation requirements and that these differences generally are appropriate. Proposed changes to the current prerequisite restrictions (cited above) also would remove some of the remaining problems that students face.
- *Information literacy requirement*
The question of whether to require a separate course in information literacy is not without controversy, but the prevailing consensus appears to argue against such a requirement. Consideration of such issues in general education courses and in courses taken in the major remains important, however, and all instructors are urged to include content appropriate to the course that addresses information literacy. We generally believe that existing courses provide the best context for addressing these issues.
- *Requirement for a service learning or community service course*
Although suggestions that such projects or courses be required are well-meaning, we believe that implementation of such a requirement at MU (including the organization of the courses and the monitoring of the students) would be impractical. Certainly any such requirement would need to be expanded to include study abroad and undergraduate research in order to provide the course capacity. We believe that students should be encouraged to take advantage of such opportunities (here again, the emphasis on quality advising throughout the institution is important), but imposing a graduation requirement is another matter.