

The Ad Hoc Committee for the General Education Reform Initiative

Report on the Opinions of the Academic Advisors on the
Reform of the General Education Requirements

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The Ad Hoc Committee for the General Education Reform Initiative was formed on August 8, 2015, and was given the responsibility of reviewing the current general education program and to begin to determine the values that should distinguish that program at Wayne State University. Specifically, we were told to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the current program, and to also identify what academic advisors hoped to have included in our future general education program. The committee members are Ryan Ferrante (Political Science), Laura Hetzler (UAC), Casey Rue (Engineering), and Royanne Smith (English), with Ryan Ferrante acting as chair of the committee.

The first meeting of the ad hoc committee was spent with each member discussing their own view of the general education program, and we soon found that while we had much in common, there were also key differences in how we evaluated the program. We also thought that this approach was very productive in identifying aspects of all of the themes we were supposed to investigate for our report. It was at this time that we realized that in order for us to get a true sense of what were the strengths and weaknesses of the current program and how academic advisors thought it should be changed, that we would need to create the same kind of environment as our meeting provided. Our committee then decided that we would do interview surveys to get both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the opinions of the academic advisors at Wayne State.

The following report will discuss the methods that the committee used to conduct the surveys, and the results that were obtained from our interviews. Our committee also decided to add a section that further detailed some of ideas mentioned by our participants that our committee thought were significant suggestions to be considered as improvements to our current general program, or as ideas for the formation of a new general education program. While our committee was not charged with proposing new structures and ideas for the general education program, we felt it was prudent to include the suggestions as possible starting points for the reform of the current general education program.

Survey Design

To get an understanding of the opinions of the academic advisors at Wayne State University, our committee decided to conduct open-ended interview surveys of a sample of the academic advisors and academic service officers at Wayne State. Academic advisors from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Communications and Fine Performing Arts, Nursing, University Advising Center, Education, and Business participated in the survey. Participants were assured that their answers would be kept confidential, so as to allow each

participant to freely express their opinions of the general education program at Wayne State, and thus will not be named in the report.

A sample of 20 academic advisors and academic service officers were chosen to participate in the interview surveys, but they were not chosen randomly. Academic advisors and academic service officers were chosen to participate in the survey by the committee in order to get an even distribution throughout the university and the colleges they represent. Academic advisors and academic services officers of varying levels and experience were chosen to be participants. Each of the four members of the committee interviewed five of the selected participants and recorded the results of the answers from the survey. The committee members made the initial contact with the survey participants to get them to participate. Each participant was made aware that their participation was not required, and that their answers would be kept confidential. The survey was tested with an additional participant, but the results from that interview were not added into the results of the study.

The survey consisted of five questions asking the participants about their length of service at Wayne State, the strengths of the general education program, the weaknesses of the general education program, the values they expect Wayne State graduates to have, and what they hoped the general education program at Wayne State would look like. Two survey scripts were used by the members of the committee during the interviews, and they were evenly administered to the participants. The only difference between the two survey scripts was the order of when a participant was asked about the strengths or weaknesses of the general education program. This was done in an effort to reduce the development of a bias of how participants answered those questions based on their order in the survey.

Participants were emailed the questions for the interview at least twenty-four hours prior to their interview, and they were encouraged, but not required, to submit written answers to the survey questions to supplement their oral interview responses. Participants' answers were recorded by audio recording programs and with written notes by the committee members during the interviews.

Data Collection

The committee thought it would be best to compile the data from the survey into an excel spreadsheet with coded answers. After completing the survey interviews, each committee member created items to be coded based on the themes present in the participants' answers. The committee as a whole then convened to consolidate the items into the list created in a master coding sheet.

A "1" was marked on the coding sheet if a participant had an answer that referenced the item on the coding sheet. A "1" was recorded even if the participant referenced the item multiple

times while answering a question. An item was left blank if the participant did not reference the item in their answer. Some items were also coded with additional information to give a clearer understanding of the meaning of the reference to the item. Additional information in the coding of an item could include specific subject codes, group requirements, college requirements, or university requirements.

Results

The aggregated data from the coded results of the participants' answers to the survey questions are shown in tables for each question of the survey. The additional information that is added to some items should be thought of as a guide to certain trends within the item, but that information is not a perfect representation of the opinions of all of the participants. Depending on the interviewer and interviewee, sometimes follow up questions led to more specific subjects being mentioned, but others let the generalized answer stand. This is a byproduct of the difficulty of conducting interview surveys with open ended questions. However, as with all of the data, anything mentioned in the additional information can lead to important discussions about how to reform the general education program, and can shed some light on what to focus on in regards to specific items.

Strengths of the Current General Education Program

Table 1 provides aggregated data of the participants' answers to the questions regarding the strengths of the current general education program. A majority of advisors referenced items 1-3, and those answers all included important educational outcomes. Other important educational outcomes answers also appeared at lower frequency in items 4, 5, 7, 8, and 11. The rest of the strengths referenced by the participants seemed to focus on procedural and structural strengths that helped students to make it through the general education program, such as items 6, 10, 12, 13, and 14.

Table 1

| Strengths of the General Education Program at WSU | Number of Participants that Referenced the Item (% of Participants) | Additional Information |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1) Competencies are important for building student's skills | 14 (70%) | BC – 2 (10%), IC -2 (10%), OC -1 (5%) |

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| 2) Offers a well-rounded education | 13 (65%) | |
| 3) Exposes students to different subjects and research styles | 13 (65%) | |
| 4) Foreign Language helps to increase language and cultural awareness | 7 (35%) | |
| 5) Group requirements are important subjects to learn | 6 (30%) | |
| 6) Helps students to decide their major and/or minor | 4 (20%) | |
| 7) Helps students to form their own opinion of the world | 3 (15%) | |
| 8) Helps to prepare students for the general workforce | 3 (15%) | |
| 9) Good variety of choice in the group requirements | 3 (15%) | PL -1 (5%) VP -1 (5%) |
| 10) Adding statistics will be a positive move for the program | 2 (10%) | |
| 11) Differentiates students from the non-college educated workforce | 1 (5%) | |
| 12) Helps to break up the monotony of technical courses | 1 (5%) | |
| 13) ANT 3150 is a strong foreign culture course | 1 (5%) | |
| 14) Requirements are consistent across schools and colleges | 1 (5%) | |

Weaknesses of the Current General Education Program

Table 2 provides aggregated data of the participants' answers to the questions regarding the weaknesses of the current general education program. Responses to the weaknesses questions created the second most items out of the four questions. Five themes seem to be present in the participants' answers to the weaknesses questions. These themes include procedural/structural weaknesses, weaknesses in the general education categories, a lack of purpose for the requirements, omitted aspects, and the instructors of the courses in the program.

Items 4, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 21, 22, and 24 focused on weaknesses that were procedural and structural in nature. These items all focused on different aspects of the program, but they all had the commonality that the structure of the program, not the content of the courses,

are creating problems for the students. The plurality of items that focus on this weakness speaks the possibility of significant procedural and structure weakness of the current program.

Several of the weaknesses identified by participants referenced the general education categories themselves. A large majority of the participants' referenced item 1 and 2, and specific subject categories were often named for both items. Items 10, 11, 12, and 25 also reference specific problems with the general education categories.

Items 3, 5, and 6 all deal with a lack of purpose to the general education requirements. According to the participants, students are either unaware of the purpose of the general education requirements, or unable to find meaning in them. Some requirements were even thought to be unnecessary general education requirements for our students.

The two remaining themes were referenced at a much lower rate than the others, but are still important in their appearance in the interviews. Items 16, 17, and 23 all focus on omitted aspects that weaken the program. Items 15 and 18 referenced the instructors as a weakness.

Table 2

| Weaknesses of the General Education Program at WSU | Number of Participants that Referenced the Item (% of Participants) | Additional Information |
|--|--|---|
| 1) Lack of clarity, ambiguous or unrepresentative categories | 15 (75%) | HS- 8 (40%), AI- 1 (5%), Group Req.- 1 (5%), FC -1 (5%) |
| 2) Lack of options in each category | 13 (65%) | HS- 7 (35%), AI- 1 (5%), CT-1 (5%), FL- 1 (5%) |
| 3) Hard to connect courses to the major area of study | 13 (65%) | |
| 4) Math placement and sequence is a roadblock | 11 (55%) | |
| 5) Unnecessary requirements | 10 (50%) | FL- 6 (30%), CS- 5 (25%), 2 nd SS- 4 (20%), 3 rd SCI- 4 |

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| | | (20%), AI- 2 (10%), HS- 1 (5%) |
| 6) Students do not understand the purpose of general education requirements | 8 (40%) | |
| 7) Difficulty moving between institutions and counting general education courses | 8 (40%) | |
| 8) Too many general education requirements | 5 (25%) | |
| 9) English placement and sequence is a roadblock | 4 (20%) | |
| 10) Critical thinking is cross-curricular so it is redundant as a requirement | 4 (20%) | |
| 11) Categories are too specific | 4 (20%) | PS- 2 (10%), LS-2 (10%), All groups- 1 (5%), HS-1 (5%), AI- 1 (5%), SS-1 (5%), VP-1 (5%), PL- 1 (5%) |
| 12) Not all categories all disciplines are represented in the general education categories | 2 (10%) | |
| 13) Unenforced competency deadlines | 2 (10%) | |
| 14) Need to remove the “only 2 course in a subject code limit” on general education courses | 2 (10%) | |
| 15) Students need to be more engaged in their classes | 1 (5%) | |
| 16) No service learning requirement | 1 (5%) | |
| 17) No first year experience | 1 (5%) | |
| 18) No instructor buy-in | 1 (5%) | |
| 19) Cumbersome general education website | 1 (5%) | |
| 20) No course in ethics | 1 (5%) | |
| 21) Inconsistency between colleges | 1 (5%) | |
| 22) Revenue for departments seems to be the | 1 (5%) | |

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| motivating factor for requirement courses | | |
| 23) Does not include a minimum mastery standard (i.e., C or better in all courses) | 1 (5%) | |
| 24) Does not take into consideration what is learned in high school | 1 (5%) | |
| 25) More focus on how the SS courses are related to each other | 1 (5%) | |

Expected Values or Characteristics of Wayne State Graduates

Table 3 provides aggregated data of the participants' answers to the questions regarding the expected values or characteristics of Wayne State graduates. The major themes produced by the items in table three are citizenship, educational development, attitude, and moral/ethical development.

The citizenship theme can be further split up into global, national, and local aspects. Item 1 was the most referenced item by participants, and it focused on Wayne State graduates being global citizens. Items 6, 11, and 14 focused more on the national or local level of citizenship.

The educational development theme had a plurality of items included in it, and items 2 and 3 had 50% of the participants reference them in their answers. The items identified with this theme are 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 17, 19, 20, and 21. The themes cover both aspects of what students learn and their ability to apply what they have learned later in their lives.

The items in the attitude theme include 9, 10, 15, and 16. The items connected with this theme focus on the development of the student's attitude to deal with adversity in life. Participants were aware that going through college should prepare students for a type of mental toughness that they may not have developed otherwise.

Items 5, 13, and 18 centered around the moral and ethical development of the student. The items focused not only on personal, but professional ethics as well. Morally, social responsibility and religious faith were mentioned as desirable characteristics. Answers in this category may have been influenced by the wording of the questions, as it the question asked what "values" a Wayne State graduate should have, and values is a very broad term.

Table 3

| Expected Values or Characteristics of Wayne State Graduates | Number of Participants that Referenced the Item (% of Participants) | Additional Information |
|--|--|--|
| 1) Be able to navigate, appreciate, and participate in a diverse global experience | 14 (70%) | |
| 2) Intellectual diversity/ well-rounded education | 10 (50%) | |
| 3) Competencies | 10 (50%) | CT- 5 (25%), BC- 4 (20%), IC- 4 (20%), OC- 4 (20%) |
| 4) Use their skills to make informed decisions in their own lives | 8 (40%) | |
| 5) Personal and Professional Ethics | 5 (25%) | |
| 6) Be an effective/productive citizen | 4 (20%) | |
| 7) An appreciation for all subjects | 3 (15%) | |
| 8) Life-long learner | 3 (15%) | |
| 9) Confidence | 2 (10%) | |
| 10) Hard work/ discipline | 2 (10%) | |
| 11) Involved in the local community | 2 (10%) | |
| 12) Being competitive in the workplace | 2 (10%) | |
| 13) Social Justice and responsibility | 2 (10%) | |
| 14) Service to others | 2 (10%) | |
| 15) Sense of accomplishment | 1 (5%) | |
| 16) Perseverance | 1 (5%) | |
| 17)Appreciation of the fine arts | 1 (5%) | |
| 18) Religion | 1 (5%) | |
| 19) Academic excellence | 1 (5%) | |

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| 20) Be knowledgeable in a student's chosen field | 1 (5%) | |
| 21) Be able to analyze while reserving judgement | 1 (5%) | |

Hopes for the New General Education Program

Table 4 provides aggregated data of the participants' answers to the about what the participant would hope to be included in the new general education program. The themes from items in table 4 are procedural/structural, subject matter, educational goals, developing meaning for the program, and citizenship.

A plurality of the items are focused on the subjects that are deemed important to the new general education program. The items that identified specific subjects to be included in the new program are 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 15, 22, 24, 26, and 30. Some items include subjects already in the program, and some include subjects that are not currently required courses. However, item 13 and 26 run counter to each other as two participants said they would get rid of the Foreign Language as a requirement, and one participant said it should still be required. Item 10 and 15 both focused on certain subjects being taught in a cross-curricular manner.

The procedural/structural theme includes items 1, 11, 12, 18, 19, 25, and 29. These items commonly suggest that a new general education program make it easier for students, whether transfer or FITIAC, to complete the requirements. Only some items give suggestions as to how that can be done, but most importantly it significantly suggests that the participants desire a simpler structure for the new general education requirements.

Many of the items in table 4 focused on educational outcomes as well. Items 9, 21, 23, 28, and 31 were focused on outcomes for the students. Most mentioned goals for the development of the student for post-bachelor life, while 21 was concerned with student engagement in the classroom.

Increasing the meaning of the general education program was mentioned in items 2, 3, 14, and 20. Increased meaning was not only for the students, but for the university as a whole as well. Four participants felt it was important to have all general education courses have higher standards, and item 20 made sure to keep Wayne State's past in mind while forming the new general education requirements.

Citizenship returned as a theme when participants were asked about their hopes for the new program. Once again the citizenship theme covered the global, national, and local aspects, and are referenced in items 5, 17, and 27.

Table 4

| Hopes for the New General Education Program | Number of Participants that Referenced the Item (% of Participants) | Additional Information |
|--|--|-------------------------------|
| 1) More simplified/flexible system to complete requirements | 8 (40%) | |
| 2) Making the general education program more meaningful and transparent to students | 8 (40%) | |
| 3) Higher Standards in general education courses (more rigorous content or higher grade requirement) | 4 (20%) | |
| 4) First year experience | 3 (15%) | |
| 5) Incorporate the urban experience, specifically Detroit | 3 (15%) | |
| 6) Ethical education | 2 (10%) | |
| 7) Math | 2 (10%) | |
| 8) Science | 2 (10%) | |
| 9) Broad education | 2 (10%) | |
| 10) An interconnected curriculum allowing courses and skills to cross categories | 2 (10%) | |
| 11) Same requirements for all students | 2 (10%) | |
| 12) Group requirements tailored to each college and major | 2 (10%) | |
| 13) Get rid of the FL requirement to meet FC | 2 (10%) | |
| 14) Use the general education courses to help students find a minor | 2 (10%) | Require a minor-1 (5%) |
| 15) Integration of WC, OC, and CT into all courses across the curricula | 2 (10%) | |
| 16) Fewer credits and group requirements | 2 (10%) | |
| 17) A requirement focused on the state of Michigan | 2 (10%) | |

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| 18) All programs and departments represented in the general education course catalog | 1 (5%) | |
| 19) Easier for transfer students to complete the general education requirements | 1 (5%) | |
| 20) Keep Wayne State traditions in mind while creating the new program | 1 (5%) | |
| 21) Student focused | 1 (5%) | |
| 22) Stress management/ health behavior courses required | 1 (5%) | |
| 23) Creating better ways to prepare students for the work world (ENG 3050 type classes) | 1 (5%) | |
| 24) Reinstate the Computer Literacy exam/requirement | 1 (5%) | |
| 25) Curriculum aligns with high school standards | 1 (5%) | |
| 26) Foreign Language required for all WSU students | 1 (5%) | |
| 27) Exposure to global perspectives | 1 (5%) | |
| 28) Fosters intellectual curiosity | 1 (5%) | |
| 29) Manageable in four years regardless of the major | 1 (5%) | |
| 30) Fluency in Writing and Oral skills with a basic competency in Math | 1 (5%) | |
| 31) Include internships and career exploration | 1 (5%) | |

Suggestions for the General Education Program

Increased Transparency for the Requirements

The “why” behind each general education requirement needs to be clear, and the “how” each course fits the requirement should also be clear. This approach would help students make meaning out of their general education and help them understand why they are spending tuition money on their general education classes. Transparency will also make it easier for academic advisors and academic service officers to communicate the requirements to students.

Consolidating General Education Categories

Combining the group requirements would make the general education requirements more flexible and easier for students to complete. The Life science and Physical science categories could just be a science category. The Historical Studies, American Society and Institutions, and Social Science categories, could just be the Social Science category. Visual Performing, Philosophy and Letters could just be the humanities category. The same amount of courses could be required, but combining categories would give students more flexibility to take courses that interest them and fit with their desired educational goals.

Quantitative Literacy

The Math Competency requirement should be changed to Quantitative Literacy, which would allow the requirement to include broader spectrum of courses that students will better be able to connect with their major areas of study.

First Year Experience

A first year experience that not only teaches important study skills, but also teaches life skills. Students need to have financial literacy, information literacy, and current events included in this experience. The first year experience could also be used to teach students about the importance of the general education courses, and how they can apply the skills learned from those courses in their educational, personal, and professional careers.

Investment in the Local Community

The general education requirement should work to get students connected to the local community in the Metro Detroit area. This can be done through service learning projects, or requiring courses with Detroit as the focus of the course. This can be done through any subject, for example a Detroit Art History course or a History of Detroit course. Wayne State University is an urban institution and it needs to do more to connect students to the urban environment, and to develop the leaders of tomorrow that will be leaders in the Metro Detroit area.

Connect Group Requirements with Skills and Competencies

The general education requirements need to have meaning to them, and if students are able to identify the group requirements with specific skills and competencies then they will understand the importance of taking the courses. This can be done by either renaming the categories, providing descriptions that identify skills learned in each requirement group, or through education in a First Year Experience course.

Increased Diversity Awareness

Attending a diverse university is not enough. We need to teach students about how to live, work and understand diversity on a micro and macro level.

Changes to Math Placement and Sequence

Give a math placement exam at orientation rather than relying on ACT scores that do not take into account work done by the student after the test was taken. Another option is to automatically make all students eligible to take MAT 1000. Leave MAT 0993/MAT 0900 as an option to students if they want to start at that level, or if they are unsuccessful at in two attempts at MAT 1000.

Create General Education Requirements that are Not Redundant with High School Requirements, or Out of Touch with Foreign Students

The American Society and Institutions (AI) and Historical Studies (HS) requirements are both requirements that are required in high school. The new general education program should either eliminate those courses, or should create courses that do not provide the same content as a high school course would require. The AI requirement can be seen as unimportant to foreign students. Giving foreign students an option to opt out of the course, or to take a replacement course more important to their own country, could be beneficial to their education.

Conclusion

It was not the charge of this committee to determine the structure of the new general education program at Wayne State, and the information provided by the report would not be able to provide a clear plan for the reform program. The purpose of this survey was to identify important aspects that were strengths and weaknesses of the current program, and to brainstorm ideas for the reforms that are to occur to the general education program at Wayne State. While our committee has identified key aspects of the current program that academic advisors and academic service officers think are either beneficial or detrimental to the students of Wayne State, it has also given a wealth of ideas for new opportunities for the reform of the program. While the numbers may be important in some cases, our committee would also like to strongly suggest that each item discussed in this report be reviewed for its potential merits in the new general education program being assembled. The purpose of our committee was to find new ideas to help reform the general education program, and so while those ideas may not be popularly held now, they could potentially be important aspects of the new general education program.

The other important conclusion to draw from this report is that the academic advisors and academic service officers at Wayne State should play an important role in the formation of a new general education program. This report would not have been possible without the cooperation of the academic advisors at the university. Wayne State is lucky to have such a dedicated staff that is not only willing to help improve the university, but also has a wealth of knowledge about the students, the university, and the importance of the general education requirements. While this

report is meant as a springboard for the development of the new general education program, our committee hopes that the academic advisors will continue to be a part of the discussion of the formation of the new general education program.