

This report summarizes information gathered from faculty and staff focus groups and surveys, organized around the general theme of “perspectives on our current program” (other reports are organized around the themes of “values” and “goals for a future program”). This report is centered around points of consensus that emerged from the focus groups, supplemented by responses on the surveys. An overview of our process of data collection, focus group data, and survey responses are posted here: <http://wayne.edu/engaging-gened/data/focusgroups/>.

What is clear from the survey and focus group data is that faculty and staff are engaged with and have thoughts about the General Education program as currently conceived, designed and implemented on campus. Several themes arose from the data in the survey and focus groups.

1. Change is needed and it needs to be substantial; Good idea, poor operationalization and implementation
2. Breadth of exposure and foundational knowledge and skills are viewed as valuable
3. Impact of elements undercut by lack of integration
4. “One size fits all” design does not.
5. Serving multiple needs means serving none well.

Change is needed. In terms of the survey, the majority of both faculty and staff respondents indicated they were familiar (Q6) with the Gen Ed program and felt they had an opinion (Q7) to offer on the program. Academic advising staff had the greatest familiarity with the GenEd program with 68% indicating very familiar to expert familiarity. Rates for tenured faculty (48%), tenure-track faculty (2%) and untenured faculty (FT 11% and PT 18%) were notably lower. The overall opinion offered was that the program needed substantial modification (Q8; degree of modification was 62% 70%, and 73% for non-tenured faculty, TT/T, and academic staff with advising responsibilities, respectively). Of particular note is that *the more familiar respondents indicated they were with the GenEd program, the greater the degree of program modification they felt was needed.*

Focus group data provides some insight into the details of this faculty and staff opinion about the program and its modification.

Breadth. The current GenEd program was viewed as providing breadth of knowledge and skills by creating the requirement and thus, opportunity, to take courses outside the major. Of particular note was the perceived value of the group requirements in encouraging breadth of thinking and experience of the world. By exposure to multiple disciplines and a variety of substantive knowledge and methods, focus group participants felt that students’ ways of “seeing and hearing” the world were expanded. The opportunity for breadth was also perceived in terms of the flexibility of options for addressing each group requirement in terms of content, format, and timing. Thus,

although these were “requirements”, students were often provided with multiple ways in which they could meet those requirements.

Foundational. This program quality was articulated at broad and specific levels. Most broadly, focus group participants noted that the Gen Ed program in its entirety lays the groundwork for a quality education and facilitates the development of a well-educated whole person. In this articulation, the GenEd program was viewed as focused on developing students’ abilities to 1) approach and express themselves and 2) identify, gather and integrate information critically. More specifically, the competency requirements, framed as skills that make possible the acquisition and expression of self, were recognized as strengths of our current GenEd program, in particular the writing and oral communication skills.

Lack of integration/coherence. As with any good idea, issues of operationalization and implementation can make or break the concept. As much as focus group participants recognized the value of foundational knowledge and skills and breadth of exposure to diverse perspectives, they articulated structural and implementation issues that undermined the articulated vision and desired outcomes for students of a Gen Ed Program.

Regarding the group requirements, respondents noted that the insular or compartmentalized nature of the group requirements was a barrier to integration. They raised questions about how the various group requirements connect beyond simply having taken a foreign culture course or a life science course. According to the learning objectives for group requirements, they are to enable students to develop and **apply** a range of methodological skills to facilitate exploring and understanding “something” in its complexity. Respondents did not see the opportunity within the current GenEd program for students to move beyond “exposure” to demonstrate this complex understanding of “something”. They also raised the concern that without explicit opportunities for such integration, that student choice within group requirements may be driven more by convenience (schedule, instructor) than by how a particular course facilitates their ability to explore and understand complex situations and phenomena.

The implementation of the foundational knowledge and skills elements was viewed as problematic. It was noted by several focus groups that some of the competencies, particularly the math competency did not occur early in a student’s educational career at WSU, effectively undermining the idea of foundational and viewed as symptomatic of lack of program coherence and integration. Thus, the question was raised if indeed these skills and knowledge are considered to ground education, then they needed to occur or be demonstrated early in the student’s educational time. Specific concerns were raised about the math competency and how it appeared to be a barrier to efficient movement through degree programs for some students, often being left until the end of

a student's program. Further, participants suggested that many of these skills, e.g., critical thinking, were also being acquired or developed in non GenEd courses. So the need to distinguish between "basic" or foundational level of skills and more advanced levels required for success in undergraduate education and thus sequencing of such skill-building was considered vital to a reform of the GenEd program.

A perhaps more fundamental implementation issue for the competency requirements, is the perception that these "foundational" skills and knowledge are actually remedial, i.e., making up for deficits in education for some of our students. On the one hand, this was viewed as a recognition of the importance of addressing our students where they are and building needed skills. However, this only applied to some of our students. The challenge was that GenEd courses focused on these competencies had students representing a range of skill level in the same class. Examples were given in writing courses, where in the same class, some students were below basic levels and others had exceeded them. This created challenges for the instructor and the students in the class. Focus group participants wondered whether the opportunities for developing these core foundational skills were best provided by the current structure and composition of courses.

In addition to concerns about the intellectual and conceptual integrity of the program, focus group participants focused on the impact of the current structure on student progress to degree. They raised concerns about the perceived complicated nature of the Gen Ed structure and how too much choice in some requirements but relatively little for other requirements themselves may restrict efficient student progress and undermine making connections across requirements. The overall size of the program in terms of number of credits required was of concern for focus group participants. A frequent observation was that our GenEd program required too many credits compared to other institutions in Michigan. Concerns were raised about the implications for majors, double majors and for minors due to fewer credits available for specialization and also for higher level courses reflecting a greater proportion of the degree. The implications of this for the competitiveness of our programs in relation to other institutions was noted. Thus, the tension of the need for explicit coherence and connection across requirements and courses to allow broad and complex learning versus the need for the program to be streamlined in terms of overall size and structure for efficient achievement of this learning was recognized by respondents.

One size does not fit all. The operationalization of the Gen Ed program as insular elements without integrative opportunities raised the question for focus group participants of how well the needs of students were being served. Particularly, they suggested that the current checklist structure and operationalization particularly of the competency courses does not seem to acknowledge and embrace the diverse backgrounds and experiences of our students. Specific characteristics of the WSU student population that respondents felt needed to be considered in the design and

implementation of GenEd included first generation, economically disadvantaged, academically under-prepared and prepared, transfer students and FTIAC, and working adults. There was a recognition that the Gen Ed program was expected to be of relevance to and to address the needs of numerous student "worlds" and that this was a major yet important challenge to address.

Serving multiple needs. Throughout the discussion of the current WSU GenEd program were considerations of the "why" of the current structure. While the value of the notion of competencies and group requirements as a whole seemed reasonable to respondents, some respondents suggested that the current program implementation was a reflection of addressing not only student needs for general education and educational success but also the needs of departments/colleges for enrollment and for opportunities to support doctoral programs. Concern was expressed that these needs were often in opposition and when that occurred they feared that student needs were not given priority. This narrative often arose in the context of consideration of specific competencies or group requirements when questions were raised regarding how a specific competency or requirement was identified as important and what courses were selected as the best ways to address those competencies and requirements. The respondents perceived this as a reflection of institutional structure and dynamics that fuels an internally competitive environment.

In sum, faculty and staff embrace and are committed to the intellectual notion of general education and its value in facilitating the development of well-rounded and educated individuals. The consensus is that the current structure and operationalization of the Gen Ed program fails to deliver on this goal and in some cases, actively works against student educational success.