

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL EDUCATION

University faculty involved in general education find themselves facing a twofold task: first, preparing people to use the powers and freedoms bestowed upon them as democratic citizens wisely, and second, fostering the student's realization of his/her highest potentialities. This twofold task underlies the ultimate goal of general education: learning to become self-reliant and responsible in thought and behavior. These qualities require more than merely accumulating isolated bits of knowledge, or becoming clever at certain skills. An effective general education program sets students upon the tasks of understanding and self-mastery in a complex world.

Many members of the faculty already possess a genuine commitment to these goals of general education and to a long-overdue review and reform of our program. However, our General Education program, as it now stands, does not have the support of all the faculty currently teaching its courses or of the entire University faculty for its advancement. Therefore, some faculty commitment must yet be established. The processes of claiming and building faculty commitment can occur, as they have in the past, slowly and incrementally, one faculty member at a time. A more assertive, collaborative approach requires that there be departmental, college, university, as well as administrative support. Thus, in order for there to be a thriving general education program, one that truly educates students in becoming reflective citizens and self-reliant individuals, there must be support from individual faculty members, departments, and colleges, as well as commitment of predictable and sufficient resources by the University to the program. Without all of this support, reviews will be pointless and proposed reforms in the General Education program will fail.

Given this justification for review and reform, the General Education Review Committee has read widely, discussed extensively, and reflected critically upon various nationwide trends in general education. From these readings, discussions, and reflections (See Appendix and Website) the Committee identified several fundamental principles, which we deemed most appropriate and suitable for our program at Western Carolina University.

- Student Sense of Place
- Liberal Arts and Sciences Emphasis
- Fundamental Skills
- Integration of Knowledge
- Moral Reflection and Criticism
- Faculty Commitment

Student Sense of Place

Central to our students' experiences is an identification with both the idea of the university in the abstract and with Western Carolina University in particular. A sense of place, or, perhaps more accurately, a sense of this place, as it was, as it is, and as it can be, can provide roots for our students. Such a fundamental identification with place can

draw students into participation in a growing set of traditions at WCU. It can also inspire students and faculty to utilize the rich resources and traditions of the region as learning resources, to see the community as a learning text. Some of the distinctive characteristics of the WCU experience as a potential learning environment include: (a) the history and traditions of the region that give it a distinct identity; (b) the unique physical environment of the western North Carolina mountains and our responsibilities for stewardship of this environment; (c) the distinctive institutions of the region, including the Cherokee Reservation, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, The Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Forest Service; (d) the special cultural expressions of our area, including regional literature, music, and folklore; (e) the role of cultural diversity-Cherokee, African-American, and European-in the mountain region; (f) the changing nature of our region as retirement- and tourism-related industries grow; and (g) the relationship between our region and the world.

Liberal Arts & Sciences Emphasis

Many professional programs and universities have recognized the centrality of liberal arts and sciences to a university education. Understanding history, culture, and language, the fine and performing arts, science and technology, and ethics is important for developing a broad world perspective and knowledge base. Liberal arts and sciences acquaint students with various modes of inquiry, make students aware of connections across the disciplines, guide students in their investigations of physical, biological, and cultural environments, and challenge students to explore diverse viewpoints. Emanating from a liberal education is the development of solid ethical behavior, the development of individual and social values, and a recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity. In preparing students for their social responsibilities, liberal arts and sciences have a pre-eminent role.

Fundamental Skills

Reasoning and communication skills form the foundation of continued learning. Writing, speaking, listening, and verbal and nonverbal expression are the tools for life-long intellectual and professional growth. Communication is complex, but must be enhanced if students are to develop critical thinking skills. Skills required to meet the objectives of critical thinking (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) include:

- recognition of the purpose (problem, opportunity, etc.);
- identification of questions and issues, key assumptions, points of view;
- discernment of relevance of qualitative and quantitative data for the assessment of information;
- organization and interpretation of ideas and information (inferences); and
- recognition of implications of conclusions and actions.

These are the building blocks of critical reasoning which an educated person relies upon as he/she reads, writes, listens, and speaks. They are useful in every aspect of life whether students are learning independently or collaboratively. Thus, the blending of reasoning

and communication skills is as important to becoming an informed and tolerant individual as to achieving occupational success.

Integration of Knowledge

Students face cultural, social, moral, economic and political issues of a global society that do not respect the traditional boundaries of the academic disciplines or the specialized nature of the professions. The individual who is able to integrate knowledge is equipped to see a larger picture and suggest solutions, unravel contradictions, or help reach compromise.

A strong general education program should provide students with the skills and opportunity to integrate knowledge by practicing the ways of thinking, knowing, connecting, and communicating. All parties-general education faculty, all faculty of the disciplines and professions, student development, and academic administration-bear responsibility for demonstrating the value and means of relating what is known in one discipline to what is known in others. Shared responsibility requires close cooperation among faculty in the liberal arts and sciences and between these faculty and those of the other majors. It also requires cooperation between these faculties and Student Development and the strong support of Academic Affairs.

Integration of knowledge should create links between the foundation disciplines of general education and should form a bridge between the general education program and the majors. This combined effort to teach students integrative character of knowledge enhances our learning community.

Moral Reflection and Criticism

The full development of an educated person goes beyond the achievements of mere technical competence. In particular, it includes the awareness of, growth towards, and culmination in moral maturity. Accordingly, a fully educated human should analyze conventional moral principles and traditions (moral dogmatism), assess the adequacy of each moral system by raising questions about implications for theory and practice (moral reflection), and assemble those concepts, principles, and judgments in light of a consistent moral theory (moral criticism). It is not the place of public education to indoctrinate or impose particular moral codes or belief systems on its members. To do such would be to remain locked in an uncritical acceptance of moral dogmatism. Nor is it the place of moral education to rest content with skeptical questioning of all moral concepts, principles, and traditions. To assume this would turn moral reflection into moral cynicism. Rather, mature citizens of a republic of moral reflection and criticism will practice the following: recognize and inquire into varied moral concepts, principles, and theories engagingly; discuss moral issues openly and attentively; accept ambiguities and disagreements respectfully; and form reasoned moral judgments responsibly, while examining the perhaps different judgments of their peers considerately.

Faculty Commitment

One basic premise is that all members of the faculty must have a clear understanding of the purposes of the general education program and the relationship of their own courses to the program.

The members of the faculty must value teaching in the general education program. They must regard teaching in the program as an opportunity for investigating new ways in which one's discipline can illuminate the problems and questions of the common life.

The members of the faculty must view our general education program as a community. They must interact across disciplinary lines in team planning of course syllabi and instructional delivery, revisions of guidelines for requirements and in conversations about student development and curricular issues.

Members of the faculty must also be committed to the principle that all students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function in a diverse nation and world. To act on this principle, members of the faculty must not only seek to understand the barriers of race, social class, ethnicity, gender, physical challenges and learning differences that some students face in attaining an education. They must also be committed to:

- engaging in the debate over the historical, literary, and scientific canon;
- using instructional methods that facilitate the academic achievement of all students;
- conceptualizing the university as a locus of reform so that students from diverse groups will acquire a sense of membership in a community of scholarship; and
- serving as role models who will promote students' awareness of diversity, thereby encouraging them to eliminate prejudice.

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