**College of Arts and Sciences’ Response to the Report of the General Education Task Force**

November 27, 2013

Thank you very much for providing the College of Arts and Sciences with the opportunity to comment upon the Report of the General Education Task Force. Feedback was collected from members of the college community by electronic mail and through an open forum held on November 20, 2013. The minutes of the forum and electronic feedback are provided in this document.

The College appreciates the time and effort of the Task Force to develop the report. Clearly many hours of work individually and collectively were spent in the development of the curriculum proposal. However, the College has serious concerns that can be organized into three broad categories:

(1) Concerns regarding the quality of student learning. There was a general consensus that the proposed program has several shortcomings in its laudable goals of providing students with a liberal arts education. These drawbacks include:

* Reduction of the total hours of the program from 42 to 39 hours.
* Reduction of the total hours of required natural sciences from 6 to 3 hours.
* Reduction of the total hours of required social sciences from 6 to 3 hours.
* Elimination of history as a required component.
* Ambiguity in the description of the Global Awareness category – the proposal appears to require 2 semesters of a language.
* Concerns of the value of the first year seminar.

(2) Concerns regarding the costs of the proposal. The members of the College community felt that the proposed program will be very expensive to implement compared to the current Liberal Studies program, and take resources away from gateway and major courses. The high cost involves financial considerations and faculty and administrative time that include:

* Capping the First Year Seminar at 22 students.
* Requiring 3 integrative courses for all students.
* Limiting disciplines to a maximum of 2 courses in each of the integrative experience categories.

(3) Concerns regarding the age of the proposal. The development of the proposal began several years ago. Since then there have been changes to the faculty, the administrative leadership, and the university’s strategic vision as described in the WCU 2020 Plan.

Based on these concerns, the College of Arts and Sciences recommends that the current proposal should NOT be adopted. The College appreciates the excellent work of the task force and the opportunity to comment on the proposal.

**A&S Meeting on Proposed General Education Program**

**3:30 p.m. Wednesday, November 20, 2013**

Ted Coyle called the “college curriculum meeting” (in a sense) to order at 3:31 p.m.

Ted also mentioned other members on the A&S Curriculum Committee, those present and those not able to be present.

We’re going to talk about the General Ed proposal. We have a lot of people who have been involved in crafting the GE proposal and Carolyn is here, and she’s been collecting your information about the proposal. Their plan is to combine all of that information, look at it in the committee again before they send it back to the joint task force empowered with the new proposal. [Ted has the file up on the screen and he has no particular order to this discussion.]

* Could you talk about the process?
  + The proposal was presented to the college committee about a month ago. It came from the combined UCC/LSC task force. This has been in discussion since 2009. The proposal gives more of a history. But it’s to us now.
  + After [Gen Ed] Task Force presented it to Senate, and Senate accepted receipt of it, Senate kicked it back to UCC/LSC for final consultation. This final round is to recommend adoption of this proposal (an up or down vote in Senate), but the LSC/UCC has the right to adjust this proposal. If there is a yes, then LSC/UCC should provide information on implementation.
  + Based on discussion in this [curriculum] committee, there is more interest in changing than saying “yes” to the proposal. The question before us is, if it’s yes with changes, what are the changes that need to happen?

Discussion on cost and resources:

* Are we just talking about the intellectual ideas today and implementation discussion is for a later stage?
  + One thinks both should be vetted now [intellectual merit and implementation] because if we say yes, then there is implementation to face. We want to ask is “can this be implemented”
* Follow up question: Have any people who would be required to pay for this seen it and what have they said?
  + The new provost couldn’t have seen it, and they would be the one paying for it.
* Question of whether it’s an up or down vote in Senate … This is the case. But the UCC/LSC has the right to adjust it.
* Seems inappropriate that the provost who has to pay for it hasn’t seen it.
  + Curriculum must start with the faculty though.
  + It’s concerning that the hand that holds the purse strings hasn’t had input yet.
* Comment that the Senate isn’t the final word, and it’s the Chancellor who says yes or no.
* It comes down to cost, but some of the paper requirements come down to class size requirements. It will take some time, and if we implement this there will be some changes in faculty, it’s a major change in curriculum (as Bruce Henderson said when presenting it to Senate). This is a pretty big burden to take on.

Impact on SCH’s generated, class sizes, and future program prioritization

* We just went through program prioritization where one of the big criteria was how many students are you serving in your program. This is going to have a major effect on the sciences, basically, if you cut out half of the science requirement in the Liberal Studies program (it will cut down on how many science faculty you need, and History is also losing some of its direct mandate). Are we going to have to go through program prioritization again?
  + We [Anthropology & Sociology] are going to be required to teach some of the writing for the social science, where our classes are larger (English is smaller in their English 102).
  + We teach a lot of liberal studies right now and we can’t fulfill needs of our majors, and this would be a larger burden.
  + My read is that most of discipline courses will fit in under the civility and interdisciplinary aspects … these are very intensive classes that will alter how we teach.

STEM and Languages

* We’re moving our university towards STEM where this document reduced the science requirement which didn’t really coordinate with those either.
* On behalf of MFL colleagues, I think it’s important for everyone to know how MFL requirements will be affected in this [Response: We’ll follow up on this at a different point. It’s not quite on this topic. Getting back to original point….]
* Math & CS department discussed this and there was a lot of concern that we’re cutting sciences and the integrated pieces would be very expensive when we aren’t getting any new funds, meaning they would come from somewhere else. Both of these raised red flags in the department.
* On a personal note, if we want a liberal arts program how can we not include a requirement for a foreign language at a higher level.

Other institutions and articulation agreements

* I think we need to remember that we’re not an island unto ourselves, and we’re impacted with other universities are doing, and how much we’re duplicating what other universities are doing.
* We have articulation agreements with all of the community colleges. Having someone in my household relying on these articulation requirements. Wondering if they’re required to meet those requirements?
  + The new Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) is to be presented to the Board of Governors in January. If a student has an AA or an AS, they’ll still have general education waived.
  + There is an issue about the difference between waiving the whole general education program versus the wording in the CAA which indicates waiving of the lower-level general education courses [how WCU is treating this now] … thus, this could mean students were still required to meet upper level general education courses of our (which would disenfranchise those students as they’d have to take more hours)

Discussion of First Year Seminar (FYS)

* How do we feel about the first year seminar?
  + How is it defined?
  + I’ve always liked the first year seminar, but the opportunity to have the students when they’re making the transition from HS to college, to teach them about my discipline and scholarly engagement. 22 is still not really a seminar. Unless, as a DH, I’m going to be forgiven student credit hours, then I’m not going to schedule them (or departments who give them should be rewarded)
  + The big bonus about FYS is supposed to be retention, but because it’s gotten too big we’re doing other versions of it (USI class the person is teaching now). We’re already having to work around requiring a first year seminar. We really have to do them, but we have to make them have TEETH!
  + There is a set of LEAD classes that serve the function of retention for student affairs, and makes the first year seminar redundant in some part.
  + Teaching the USI class, I don’t think it compares with a first year seminar that has a topical type of focus. I’d like to see the data. I don’t think they’re a good substitute for the FYS.
  + If we’re going to be committing great amounts of resources to people in their first year, that means we’re taking away resources in their junior and senior year (since we won’t get new resources), then it’s putting resources into people who may not be ready for college. Not the best use of money.
  + There’s also the issue of we don’t know students are being exposed to in the community college or what community college advisors are telling them. They’re telling them an AA degree is a terminal degree and they’re prepared to go out and work in the field. When they come into us, they have to make up general education courses. They don’t really advise them well in the community college. They come here and they’re in trouble.
  + One advantage of the FYS is providing the student the opportunity to take a class that’s normally not a part of the other liberal studies courses (by discipline).
  + I question the “with an emphasis on depth rather than breadth” comment in the proposal on FYS (p.6). I taught four different years with FYS in chemistry, but how deep can you get? It’s more like Chem 101, like chemistry for poets.
    - That [quote] is in the literature
    - Studies that were done [on FYSs] are done on types of courses more like study habits courses. A lot of people call that a first year seminar. Studies suggest that it’s not the kind of seminar that works. Students are exposed to disciplines. The idea is, if we have a FYS, class sizes have to be small. (Kimmel School and FPA wanted to have FYS of 100 students … that’s how the class size got into this statement.) Much like we offer now. This is the kind of seminar that promotes retention.
  + For several years Anthropology and Sociology haven’t scheduled FYS, because it doesn’t help us at all. Can’t get the low class size and we’re not in the hunt for majors. If we do it as service to LS, then we have to hire new faculty, and will there be money for LS coming down to the college.
  + Part of it is making connections with the faculty in the discipline. But if class sizes are too large, it seems like we’re not giving it to our [full-time?] faculty then, so it’s defeating this point.
  + In my opinion, I found it interesting that [FYS] is continuing in this proposal but we cut sciences.
  + Also with new CAA, they have a universal core of 30 hours, plus 15 more hours of general education. That’s what their program is going to look like. This document wasn’t about 42 or 39 hours, but it was about 42 or 30.
  + If we agree that 39 is a good number, in that 39 we could say that another science is more important than the FYS.
  + What if we take the current Liberal Studies (LS) program, get rid of the Upper Level Perspective (ULP), kick everyone [current courses on that list] out, let everyone reapply.
    - That would be a simple approach, and something that had come up even before the Gen Ed Task Force
  + There’s a lot of good work that’s been done in the document, and you could make the argument based on this document, get rid of the ULP and it would end up the same.

Integrated Courses and Engagement

* Student engagement and service learning bothers me … we have students who work and the idea that they pay us and are required to go out and volunteer bothers me.
* Trying to incorporate all of that into a single class is very difficult. Also, we’ve got lower level students going out and doing service learning and our upper level students are going out and doing experiential learning, with class sizes of 45, and that becomes a challenge.
  + We don’t have enough places for them to go
  + The idea of 45 students going out to work is frightening
  + People going out to pick up trash that has no meaning and purpose
  + Whole idea is to have people truly engaged, and that’s more happening in the major. Much better than a one size fit all.
* The other example of this is the capstone experience. If we could demonstrate if all of our students are having a capstone experience. Is it true that we already deliver the experience (of these integrated learning courses), that there are courses that could be designated as doing it, like with a capstone we can capture it and demonstrate that all students are doing it.
  + It would be like a new book keeping method
  + When I look at integrated I look at the expense and no money coming. Discussion about calculus with 80 people. We could say it’s cross disciplinary and take all the boxes in my own major, then I’m fine with it.
* Difference between engagement and integrated learning.
  + Many of our engagement classes are taught by adjuncts, and now we’re going to ask them to go and pick up trash, at a salary that’s too low already

New Gen Ed Proposal Versus Altering Current Liberal Studies

* Not yet do we not have a Provost in place and we don’t know what GA’s going to do in terms of common outcomes. The issue is this other proposal that he’s asking us about, keep the Liberal Studies categories and basic structure as it stands now, eliminate the ULP, and find a way to designate courses that we can show these students have had these kind of experiences.
  + Can we demonstrate everyone is getting engaged learning? Think we can do that through Banner. I don’t believe it needs to be designated courses. They can get the engaged requirement through additional work.
* Asking Brent what’s his perspective as an A&S member, on what we should do
  + This document was not written with the strategic plan in place, which is a strategic flaw
  + The strategic plan indicates we want to do these things
  + I’m not an advocate of making new work for people. Are there ways we can demonstrate we’re already doing this stuff? So courses and instructors can be encouraged to promote these types of experiences.
* This proposal came out at a different time, and it could be difficult for our college and likely the rest of the university. Discussing implementing small changes seems better for the college and the university
* Can we put it back in banner and going back to the FYS, can we not put it there. Some FYS having an engaged focus? And in addition, if we’re trying to use it as a way of retaining students, it can be a way of getting students involved in the community. First year students are less likely to become engaged other ways.
* I like the idea of keeping our current gen ed and modifying it, and if we need to, we can find three credits to cut.
* If we just vote no, there’s a fear it starts over and we’re likely to get a 30 hour program.
* Aligning the first year seminar we mandate in the capstone experiences allows us to see, when they get those experiences similar in kind to capstone but in FYS, then we can demonstrate that they’ve been exposed to this and grown. Originally this was the idea because of doubts of capstone experiences viability. Also the problem with capstone experiences in the gen ed program because of the articulation program.
* If we are already having a hard time to find departments to offer FYS, if we add more requirements it will be even harder to find people to offer them.
* Why does not adopting this leave us with a 30 hour LS program?
  + It doesn’t. There’s a general consensus documented in this that our current LS program is not meeting our needs. Soon, there’s likely to be another push to revise. Looking at the survey that says a lot of our faculty wanted a 30 hour gen ed program.
* The more I look at this, we’re trying to say one size fits all. It doesn’t. Can’t have a rigid program. Not everyone is a 17 or 18 year old kid who needs to study so many hours. Some of my students are parents with sons and daughters, some are military. They’ve been around and don’t need this propaganda (and what some call foundations). They don’t need this stuff.
  + We will have at least a 30 gen ed program, that’s a SACS requirement
  + In my experience, with older students they’re more engaged with the liberals studies
  + Needs to be flexible, that’s understood
* Not in agreement that our current gen ed is a current disaster. The survey wasn’t answered by a large percent of our faculty. But it was 390 (?) faculty. Question #20 in the survey about hours how many should be included: 121/283 said 30 hours; but that still says more than 50% want more than 30 hours
* When I was on the Gen Ed/LS Committee, one of the main complaints was about double dipping. Ten or 12 years ago we wanted to make LS sacred so it couldn’t count towards anything else. Was there conversation on this in the Gen Ed task force?
  + Yes. A lot of conversation. There’s a lot of double dipping in this program. Regardless of having some kind of model where we vote to approve this program as long as it looks like the other program. Every course will be out and the outcomes will be rewritten and then we’ll get new proposals.
* It seems that the attitude that if we abandon this one then we’ll start all over again, is to give up on the piecemeal approach. If a piecemeal approach is a plausible option, then it’s not clear that there would have to be need to start all over again. We could use this as a model after voting this down.
* Get rid of ULP means go from 42 to 39, like this one. It has a lot of fans and a lot of problems (particularly in terms of articulation). The current LS program needs to be rewritten to fit with 2020 and the QEP as there’s a complete disconnect. It would need to take into account all of the things that have happened since 1999.
* Bringing up the question of categories, like histories, P’s and C’s and all that. My fear, if we get away from that, then everyone is competing for students. Then my take on the current situation is that historians are protected from the wrath of the undergraduates because they can’t get around it by going in other directions. No fear to have high standards because they’re going to lose faculty because of program prioritization and loss of SCHs. If we get away from specifying the courses students have to take, this is my fear.
* Complaint about the document, as it relates to the sciences. As you witness the scrolling, notice how long these sections are. The description for the science category is two sentences
  + The member of the committee from the sciences only attended one meeting in two years.
* We move to the 2020 document as our rationale for aligning the programs. I question how useful that is. There’s no mention of STEM in that. The disciplines that show up in there were the ones that had members on the 2020 committee. I’m opposed to using that.
* Does this mean that we have to dump our capstone programs? I would think not.
* With the integrated experiences, do you have any sense of resources? If this is presented to Senate you also have to present something to implement? Idealistically the best way would be team taught courses.
  + Our task force was not given this piece. We were asked to design a program for implementation. In our attempt to get something done, we really didn’t talk about that.
  + This implementation will not be as easy as the last implementation (the senate passed it, and Fred Hinson implemented it).
  + If this comes before senate, with these integrated experiences, and senate votes in favor of it. Could we face the possibility that the chancellor says there are no resources for this? He hasn’t expressed any kind of sentiments about this.
  + I think it’s possible that the provost or chancellor that would say we can’t afford to do this, but it’s just as possible to restructure how we handle SCH’s and other things to make it more possible. I personally would like to see us as faculty put forth that we believe in pedagogically. Feel DH’s has been jaded, in English don’t get credit for small class sizes in English. I’d like to be optimistic that there are possible model changes.
* How much of an impact assessment has been done on this? What is significant about the changes and are they really desirable changes to be made? I think that’s what’s missing here.
* Committee members here, what do you think?
  + Right now, not hearing a yes but I’m not sure.
* Someone’s personal comments on the proposal
  + Not liking dropping science hours down
  + Also, although liking the idea of integrated and experiential learning, I don’t think WCU is in the place to support this administratively; ideally this would be a team taught or interdisciplinary course and we don’t support that.
  + Also, I think gen ed should be a part of your education every year, so I’m not in favor of dropping gen ed from upper level courses.
* With upper level courses, some LS categories you can satisfy with upper level courses, like Mathematics, but that’s not so for other categories

Limitation of courses offered from one discipline

* What about the number of courses offered by a department
  + Discussion of offering liberal studies classes and people who would be happy not to offer so many liberal studies courses; do you offer a LS course or one for majors – we don’t have the faculty to do this; we generate number to warrant more faculty but we don’t have them to teach the courses
  + Why is this an issue? Assessment! Hard to see a common topic when there are so many classes.
    - This is a problem that’s always been there
    - The document does offer types of assessment for these categories. People from different disciplines and we’d be looking at the same topic from different viewpoints or disciplines.
* I’m not a linguist, so perhaps my understanding of liberal is not correct? It stems from “freedom”, right? (Laughter)
* What other comments do you have? You’re running out of time. Only 7 minutes left.

Meeting adjourned at 4:53 p.m.

**Electronic Feedback From the College of Arts and Sciences**

Here’s my feedback. I like the ideas laid out in the program but I have serious questions about implementation.   
  
FYS is a great idea and I have taught these in the past, but they butt up against the requirement for departments to meet certain targets in SCH generation. There are not enough rooms on campus where we could teach large classes to offset the FYS, capped at 22.   
  
I love the idea of interdisciplinary courses but the report does not spell out how these would be counted by departments for SCH and I am dubious about just letting each department figure this out for themselves. There has to be some system in place that rewards rather than penalizes departments that teach interdisciplinarily.  
  
 I wonder about the feasibility of the assessment of FYS seminars and the other courses to be so assessed. Will assessment become the “fourth stool” of the teaching-research-service requirement? Obviously, there must be some kind of oversight but this looks to me like overkill.   
  
I like the ideas about global awareness but I’m not sure how one would measure this as a “behavior.”  
  
 I endorse “service learning” but wonder what kind of burden this might put on working students (how many of our students must work for wages?) or on faculty who are attempting to coordinate it.   
  
I really, really like the idea that every student will take a foreign language but since MFL has been pretty much gutted in the past 15 years, I don’t know how that department could handle the traffic—unless the idea is that they have no majors, teach no upper level classes and just exist as a service department. There are some equity problems there.   
  
In short, although I heartily endorse the concepts enfolded into this proposal, I doubt that we have the capacity, the money, or the personnel to carry this out.  
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As a former WCU graduate (attended from ‘04-’07) having went through the liberal studies program and a current liberal studies lecturer in the Communication department (I teach Com 201), I would say that this proposal for the most part represents an improvement upon the former requirements. I think the addition of a class requirement with a focus on global perspectives in particular is a great choice. I know that when I took the Global Issues liberal studies class offered by the Political Science department  it was one of the classes that I got the most out of. I believe another positive is having a requirement of only 3 hours of Natural and physical sciences. When I was a student that requirement was 6 hours and while natural and physical science is certainly an important area it is such a drastically different field of study from what many students will end up majoring in that requiring six hours did not seem that beneficial. Especially when considering mathematics (a similarly vastly divergent but seemingly no less important field) only required three hours.

However, in my mind, there are some further improvements that could be made to this proposal. In particular, Eng 202 should go back to being Eng 102 and a requirement of the second semester of freshman year for students. As a student that was the model that I worked with and it was extremely beneficial to my college career to have Eng 101 my first semester and Eng 102 my second semester. This strongly helped me in improving my writing and research skills. I can safely say that my writing skills were ill-prepared for collegiate work. Now as a Com 201 instructor I get many freshman enrolled in my classes and almost all of them have not had a chance to take Eng 202. I would say that they are even more woefully prepared when it comes to the skill sets of writing and researching than I was as a freshman. In particular, many of those skills they seem to lack (like writing and researching) would be significantly improved by being required to take Eng 202 during that second semester of freshman year. Not only would it help them with regards to my class but it would also give them three years of classes to use their improved skill sets in instead of only two and a half years worth of classes. That could help their grades and in turn possibly help retention and graduation rates.

The final recommendation I have is a small one but I think it would also be useful to have First-year seminars be predominately required during the second semester of freshman year.  The reason I say this is because that gives students a chance to take a semester of classes, get an idea of what college is like, and possibly establish some new interests. I know when I took my freshman seminar it was Creative Writing and I was basically placed in the class first semester without any real choice. It would have been more beneficial to me to have had a semester of classes and then chosen a first year seminar. I think ultimately I could have picked something that may been more useful and if nothing else I would have gotten a lot more out of the class after having a semester under my belt. Like I said overall I think this proposal is a step in the right direction but it could still use some tweaks.

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I’m responding to your request for feedback on the revision of the Liberal Studies program.

While oral communication competency is recognized in the committee’s report, intercultural communication competence did not receive the attention I believe it warrants. I want to propose that COMM 415 Intercultural Communication be included in the revision of the Liberal Studies curriculum.

In the Structure of Proposed Program described in the Report of the General Education Task Force: A Proposal for Change Western Carolina University (Spring, 2012), “Global Awareness” is identified as an area of integrative experience, and described as follows:” Courses in this category should explore issues of cultural diversity in order to increase awareness of diversity in the context of interrelationships among world cultures.”

COMM 415 accomplishes this overall goal across a broad range of majors. It is a core requirement for students majoring in Communication. As an Upper Division Liberal Studies Perspective selection (P6), it draws students from every program of study at WCU. International students from International Programs and Services Intensive English program regularly attend class sessions, improving their comprehension skills and adding their perspectives to class discourse. This mix of interests and programs creates the kind of integrative educational experience the Liberal Studies Committee has described as their goal.

Please put forward my proposal that COMM 415 Intercultural Communication be included in the revision of the Liberal Studies program.

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Should the plan come as it is to the faculty senate, I would vote the plan down, and would encourage other senators to do the same. I think the program which we have is not broken, and continues to serve our students well. I think we have lots of room for adjustment in our current Liberal Studies program but I think it is flexible and sound. I teach my liberal studies courses thoughtfully and very differently than my majors courses, and I assume colleagues do the same. If they do not, and if certain departments or courses are flawed, change what needs changing, but don't jettison a system that serves our students effectively. We do need to change the name, though, back to General Education.

Gen Ed is such a point of debate within our system, the state, education, that our changes need to be practical and pointed, and definitely in line with the 2020 plan. The proposed plan, commissioned in 2009, predates our current strategic plan. At this point, we are a different university, and part of a larger system facing change. As we hear of a general education review or revision, including common competencies, from the state, do we really want to adopt a new plan or should we simply adjust the plan we have in more moderate and meaningful ways? While Art Pope is possibly one of the most dangerous individuals to our system, the recent article from the News and Observer (<http://www.newsobserver.com/2013/10/25/3312473/think-tank-takes-aim-at-unc-ch.html> ) actually makes a few decent points about the value of a general education for our students: "*The study from the Raleigh-based John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy suggests shrinking the available courses at the university from over 4,000 to about 700* [NOTE FROM ME – Wow – at least we're not THAT bad, right?] *and zeroing in on a short list of essentials —history, statistics, logic, philosophy, western civilization, literature, arts, writing, science and political and economic systems."*  That's the bit that I want to emphasize – general education in its truest sense – equipping our students with a necessary set of skills and knowledge, which I think the current proposal veers from in somewhat notable ways, at least for 9 hours.

While I agree in principle that it is a fine idea to review and revise, in sensible and realistic ways, our extant Liberal Studies program, I think the proposal presented to us is unrealistic in implementation and a bit conceptually overwrought. I also don't think it offers a clearer path to assessment than our current program. While I appreciate the efforts of the task force, I don't think the final product, as proposed, can be implemented or is necessarily even suited for WCU.

Specific points:

Limiting "disciplines" (not depts or programs?) to a finite number of liberal studies / general education courses (2) seems somewhat misguided, as it may not account for disciplinary breadth and depth. I don't think this limitation was explained or supported clearly in the overview or report.

The omission of the History category would mean that our students could graduate without a single history course. What prompted or motivated this change? Why eliminate this category, rather than expand or change it to include other disciplines (i.e., make the category History and Civics?). Students require some historical (or civic) context, especially related to American history and / or govt., in order to contextualize all the experiences which we provide in the other categories, including global and local themes. I would advocate for the maintenance of this category as is, or if necessary, a change to "History AND (other)."

I concur with the reduction of the liberal studies program in hours, but I would reduce hours by eliminating the first-year seminar rather than categories or reduction in the sciences (social science from 6 to 3 hrs seems reasonable; not so for the natural sciences). There are certain colleges and programs that have protested our liberal studies program as too weighty in hours and have found ways around this by double-counting. 39 hours is more than reasonable. And, the first-year seminars are so frequently waived anyway, I'm not sure this is a necessary facet of our program. The upper-division perspective probably also should go. It is a problematic aspect of our current plan, with respect to availability and advising.

The Integrative Experiences component, in my mind, seems the most flawed portion of the plan, and at nine hours, it takes up valuable hours that could be maximized through a simpler revisioning of our current program. The categories seem somewhat overwrought and based on trends, rather than serving universal or "general" need (as "general education" should be). A more realistic and simpler approach here would be to link these "integrative experiences" to certain courses or other categories within the "ways of knowing" courses.

Finally, stipulating requirements in liberal studies classes (i.e., "students in humanities courses will be required to write reflective pieces (individually in the form of short essays and/or collaboratively, in the form of blogs or wikis, for example) in response to required readings and cultural events") isn't useful, helpful, or welcomed. Unless my department mandates such a requirement, it isn't necessarily valid or useful in my discipline for students to write "reflective" pieces.

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                The General Education proposal from the Task Force seems problematic to me for a number of reasons, and does not seem to me to represent a substantial improvement in the education of our students. Indeed, in certain ways it seems to be deficient when compared to our current curriculum, and fails to make a significant contribution to improving the status of inquiry in the Academy. I outline below some of the chief reasons I take this to be the case.

1)      Within the 75 comparable institutions to WCU that the Task Force examined, an average of 38% of their curricular hours were devoted to General Education. (This corresponds to 45.6 hours in a 120 hour degree.) Further, as the Task Force notes, the standard deviation was small, indicating that most Gen Ed programs were clustered around this number, and our own current requirement (42 hours) is actually in the lowest third. The new proposal (39 hours with a radically different structure) represents an even lower percentage (32.5% of a 120-hour degree) and would place us in excess of a full standard deviation outside the mean (and below the 20th percentile in the comparison group). As the Task Force explicitly notes, the desire to reduce the number of hours in Gen Ed is at least partially driven by the desire of some programs to increase the number of hours in their programs. This strikes me as placing the cart before the horse, inasmuch as it puts the (putative) needs of a few programs in front of the general educational needs of all of our students. Some of the substantive consequences of the reduction in hours are as follows:

                a.       In the “Ways of Knowing” part of the curriculum, there is no history requirement at all. In an era of know-nothingism in civil discourse, this seems short-sighted.

                b.      There are 6 fewer hours devoted to the sciences than in the current program. In face of the current emphasis on STEM coursework as valuable work-force preparation, this is somewhat incredible to me.

                I know the argument has been made that we ought to consider the educational outcomes that we want from our courses rather than the actual number of hours of the curriculum. However, it seems a bit hubristic to me to assume that we can achieve all the educational outcomes we want in so many fewer hours than all of these comparable institutions. Are our faculty that much better as teachers than those at other institutions? Or do we have fewer educational goals than those institutions – and if that is the case, is the general education our students receive less important than that of students at other places? Perhaps the (admittedly innovative) Integrative Experiences category of classes mitigates some of these losses, but surely we should not be in a race to the bottom in terms of the percentage of our curricula devoted to General Education. In fact, I would argue that at least some of the outcomes certain programs must demonstrate for accreditation purposes could actually be achieved – and perhaps achieved better – in the context of an enhanced General Education curriculum.

2)      In the current proposal, departments (or programs, in the case of multi-disciplinary departments) are generally limited to two courses in a particular category (in both the Ways of Knowing and Integrative Experiences, though with no limit for cross-listed interdisciplinary courses). This ignores the fact that some of the categories, particularly in the Integrative Experiences section, represent substantial areas of expertise – or even sub-disciplines – of particular fields. For instance, within the Global Awareness category, Sociology and Anthropology (in addition to Modern Foreign Languages) ought in principle to be able to offer more than 2 courses, given the nature of the expertise in those disciplines. Within the Civic Engagement category, Political Science and Public Affairs should surely be able to offer multiple courses. Finally, given that the study of ethics (including environmental ethics, medical ethics, and ethics in war) is a core subdiscipline of philosophy, it makes very little sense to allow only 2 courses from Philosophy there. The fact that assessment becomes more difficult after the fact does not seem to me to be a tenable objection to this point: at most, it is an argument for rigorous consideration of which courses ought to be included in the program at the front end. There is also a provision in the proposal that major programs may not require these courses for the major (though they may be electives within the major), which seems to me to neglect the same issues.

3)      Guiding principle 11 of the task force notes that Gen Ed should occur throughout a student’s career, yet this proposal removes entirely the upper level perspective requirement in the current program and replaces it with an Integrative Experiences component that does not specify that any of those courses must come from the 300-level or above. Either we think this principle is important or we don’t. If it is, then some more significant provision ought to be made in order to be certain that Gen Ed does actually occur throughout the student’s education.

4)      With respect to resources, I would make a couple points.

                a.       We have seen such an increase in the first-year seminar sizes that we really need to consider what this course is supposed to do. If FYS is to remain a requirement within our Gen Ed program at all, there has to be some institutional-level commitment to absorb this as a cost of doing business, as has been done with Honors College courses, and not penalize departments on SCH for offering one at a standard seminar-size (say, 20-22 students). Furthermore, first-year seminars are “high-impact practices” (according to AAC&U) only when they’re done well – quality is important! – and there’s no sense calling a 30+ student section a first-year “seminar.” Many departments are going to continue to refrain from offering these courses in the future not only because they will be dinged for lower SCH production, but because they do not see a pedagogical benefit accruing if they cannot be taught as seminars.

                b.      As the task force recommends co-taught courses as the principal way of approaching the Integrative Experiences categories, and I see no additional funding support for this approach forthcoming, that set of courses would seem apt to collapse under its own weight, or else be taught predominantly by departments who are willing to commit their own resources primarily to Liberal Studies. (In fact, this is precisely what has happened at WCU in the past, and is the historical reason that Philosophy and Religion offers so many courses in the current iteration of Liberal Studies: we were asked by administrators to offer those courses for LS credit because there were not enough seats otherwise.)

                Given all these factors, it seems to me that a better approach would be not to attempt an overhaul of the entire current Liberal Studies program, but rather to make targeted changes to the program as it currently exists. If there are courses that should not be in LS now, fine, let’s remove them. If the quality of other courses needs to be raised, or if some need to be made more rigorous, great, let’s do it. If we need to make a more concerted effort to assess the LS program, let’s commit to it. But let’s not embark upon a plan that is problematic in all the ways this proposal is, both in terms of substance and implementation, and for which we admittedly don’t have the resources to realize as its creators ideally envisioned anyway.

Thanks for this thoughtful response.  I do not believe that the fight for Gen Ed as it moves forward will be between the current program and the new one (42 v. 39) – the choice and the fight will be centered on this proposal (I hope modified) and the 30-hr core program recently adopted by the community colleges. In the faculty survey conducted by the Task Force, and in informal conversations I’ve been hearing about around campus, many faculty desire this 30 hr. program, in the name of logic, ease, articulation, desire to get those hours in the major, etc.

Let me go through quickly, each of your points –

1) This represents one of the first things we negotiated in the task force – we presented similar data – 42 hours is at best middle of the pack when it comes to hours. Even then the choice was 30 hours versus 42 – the fight to make the proposal 39 hours was not an easy one. It cost the Boilermaker Phil Sanger, for one, several conniptions.

2) Here you definitely recognize a problem – the Integrative Category as it is articulated in the proposal needs a lot of refinement / clarity / revision – we did not have the Strategic Plan when we designed it, for one thing. I’d appreciate ideas on how to fix it, remembering that it will be easy for us to eliminate these nine hours, but we will not be to get them back. The case for not limiting the number of courses offered by a specific department needs to be made, but there has to be some limit – one of the problems of the current program (valid or not) are the immense number of courses approved to be offered – there is no coherence, and it makes assessment a nightmare. And then there is the lingering (mis)perception that somehow PAR has taken advantage of the LS Program. The compromise that we came to was to limit courses but not sections of courses – the desire was to bring some coherence to the offerings that also could be managed from an assessment perspective.

In number 3, absolutely – those 9 hours should be at the 300 level or above. I have thought that all along—I think it’s just a matter of the document being unclear on that point.

Making targeted changes to the current program will carry little or no water, I am afraid; at least it won’t on the LSC – and I have heard that the UCC has already asked Erin to inform them on the 30 hr. program for the Community Colleges.  I really do believe that this approach will simply lead to the targeted cut of 12 hours to make our program consistent with the community colleges. We would, in fact be the heroes of the Legislature, who are demanding seamless transfer. I would ask that instead of rejecting the proposal outright that you help me to make the case for modifying this proposal so as to improve it (plenty of headroom). If you are correct in feeling the 39 hours diminishes what we have now, then think of what 30 hours will mean.

I have attached a draft of a thing I thought I might submit to the faculty forum – I’d appreciate your response to it – but I am reconsidering that forum, since I see by the email list that most of the people interested in reading me on this subject (or not) are on this list, except for my mother; I’ll BCC her.

I apologize for the fractured quality of this email;  – I am in the middle of an interim report to the NEH – I would be (very) willing to have a beer some time to discuss the proposal and ways it might be improved.

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A Defence of Thirty-Nine Hours

Faculty have recently been asked to convey their final commentary on the proposed General Education Program that was submitted to Faculty Senate last year (Spring 2012), after more than two years of industry by a representative Task Force. In brief, the program features four components. Students will take a 3-hour First-Year Seminar, they will take 15 Hours of Foundational Experiences, they will take 12 hours in a category called Ways of Knowing, and they will take 9 hours in a category called Integrative Experiences.[[1]](#footnote-1) As taken by students who spend their entire undergraduate career at Western, the program represents 39 hours of coursework. I am writing to explain to you why I support the adoption of this proposal, with modifications.

The world is a much different place than it was when the current Liberal Studies Program was written and adopted. Those many years ago, assessment was more of a nuisance than an imperative. UNC Tomorrow and “Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning” did not exist. And then there was the intervening financial crisis and the new political environment and the endless stream of budget cuts as the pressures of “cheaper, faster, easier” began to define a burgeoning environment of “do more; make less” (parking, anyone?). Never mind the older and wiser adages of “you get what you pay for, haste makes waste, and not everything is supposed to be easy.” But this is the world in which we live, and this world, alas, seems healthy enough to last for some time. The current Liberal Studies Program, with no logical pathway to assessment and with significant amounts of program “drift” and dated principles, has lived out its life expectancy, having been designed with due diligence and with the best interests of our students in mind. But the time has come for us to choose a new path for our students. And it is important to understand the choice we now face, for it is not whether we wish to require 39 or 42 hours in General Education; the choice is whether we wish to require 39 or 30 hours. Either way, the primary directive must remain the same: that which is best for our students.

Yes, I understand that regular raises seem a thing of the distant past, and that program prioritization has been painful for some. I know that it is very likely that further cuts are coming, that we are being required to perform as teachers, as scholars, as recruiters, as development officers, as committee members, as committee chairs, as community citizens; do more; make less. Most if not all of you also will be familiar with the latest set of mandates from GA. We will limit to 4 the number of withdrawals a student may make, and we will preach the doctrine of the 8-semester plan, and the Senate will please affirm these mandates by voting yes by the middle of November. More relevant to the current discussion, the community colleges—responding to major pressure from the legislature to enact seamless transfer, or else—have adopted a new 30-hour general education core. The community colleges are also seeking input from campuses regarding advising plans to create “pre-major” sequences so they can track students towards particular majors: no drifting, please. The state is no longer going to subsidize drifting, much less useless degrees in irrelevant subjects such as women’s studies (ask the governor), and what you habitual course-droppers really need is a swift, figurative kick in the backside (my daughter dropped a class this semester at NC State because she works too much; do not kick her, please). At Western, we are in the process of implementing a math placement exam. Students who cannot demonstrate that they are ready for Calculus need to be told that they should pursue another path; have a hard conversation with them, and show them their 8-semester plan (perhaps you might tell them to consider a degree in English?).

So why shouldn’t we simply adopt the 30-hour core that the community colleges have implemented? Logic demands it, I’m told repeatedly. Much as I appreciate and respect the community college system (both of my children are products of it), I do not see them as the aspirational model of this university. Our motto is not “Embracing minimum requirements since 1889.” Surely we can do better, for our students.

And in fact, the General Education Task Force spent more than two years trying to design a program that would be better for our students. Everyone fought their good fight, and we met in the middle with a compromise that addressed most of the concerns that the pro- and anti-liberal arts forces had. But we did that work without the benefit of a very important document, one that now serves as the primary set of guiding principles for the university, the strategic plan, “2020 Vision: Focusing Our Future” (<http://www.wcu.edu/about-wcu/leadership/office-of-the-chancellor/wcu-2020-plan/>). Strategic Direction #1 of the plan is to “Fulfill the Educational Needs of the State and Region.” Consider Goal 1.2:

Fully integrate into the general education program and into each major and minor at both undergraduate and graduate levels an emphasis on those core abilities expected of all WCU students: to integrate information from a variety of contexts; to solve complex problems; to communicate effectively and responsibly; to practice civic engagement; and to clarify and act on purpose and values.

You recognize these core abilities as the learning outcomes mandated by the Quality Enhancement Plan. Raising the question of useful assessment, by which we can make programmatic changes on the basis of data instead of lore, where is it that ALL of our students develop and demonstrate proficiency in these core abilities? Where do they all integrate information? Where do they all demonstrate their Civic engagement? Then consider Goal 1.3: “Ensure that all programs include cross-curricular, experiential, applied, and international/global awareness opportunities for all students.” Where is it that ALL of our students are not only exposed but demonstrate proficiency in these areas? If we do the easy thing and accept the community college program, then where is it that all of our students meet the expectations of the strategic vision of the university? Soon, I expect the Senate will be asked to vote yes to adopt pre- and post-testing instruments such as the College Learning Assessment. But when CLA becomes the über-assessment of the university, how are we going to know how to revise and improve curriculum? And more important, if we “choose” to use the CLA, will we be able to say that we have acted in the best interest of our students, or will we have confused their success with the institution’s?

I realize that many of you are deeply concerned about the Integrative Experiences category that form the final 9 hours designed into the General Education Proposal. But these nine hours are crucial. They provide us with the opportunity to create a unique and high quality educational experience that is integrated with both the major programs and the strategic vision of the university. Faculty will not be required to co-teach classes, but Initiative 1.3.1 directs us to “Reduce, and where possible eliminate, bureaucratic and financial barriers to cross-curricular design and team-teaching.” Neither the strategic plan nor the general education proposal suggest that faculty will be required to teach such classes. But both does commit to making sure that they will be able to teach them, and that is a joyful prospect for faculty who might wish to teach them. Initiative 1.3.2 calls for “Incorporat[ing] expectations for experiential and applied learning opportunities, including undergraduate research opportunities, in the curricular review process.” How is it that we can demonstrate that we have incorporated these expectations for all of our students. The Task Force designed the proposal specifically to accomplish this type of competency-based expectation.

Granted, the Integrative Experiences category needs to be articulated more clearly. And as you consider this last round of feedback being solicited by the college curriculum committees, Please suggest ways that the articulation of this category and its sub-categories—Civic Engagement, Ethical Commitment: Acting on Purposes and Values, and Global Awareness—can be modified and strengthened to be more firmly aligned with the Strategic Plan. In addition, GA has also recently identified two primary competencies shared by all of the institutions in the UNC system: Critical Thinking and Written Communication (Senate will, of course, vote yes, please). The 9 hours of the Integrative Experiences Category will allow us to demonstrate that our students have been exposed and have developed proficiency in these competencies. And the focus should be on the competencey and not the discipline, which is not to say that the disciplines that serve the current Liberal Studies Program will not serve the proposed General Education Program any less. I would also contend that it would be good for our students to make one or all of these courses writing intensive (and that means smaller class sizes). Or they might be devoted to critical thinking, or perhaps to critical reading. Instead of 1 Upper Level Perspective, the Gen Ed proposal requires three, 300-level courses. These represent a cohesive set of competencies that all of our students need, a set that would also help to spread out the course of general education study throughout a student’s career at WCU. The proposed program would allow us to address the goals of the strategic plan just as we are working to incorporate them into our major programs. Should the faculty decide to approve this program, with modifications, we will have made a great stride towards defining what it means to receive a degree at this institution. More important, we will have done something tremendously good for all of our students. The rest is implementation.

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I think that there are many good proposals as part of the new Gen Ed program proposal, however, my concern is in how these will be implemented in our current situation.  Some of these concerns/questions are outlined below:

* (Section IV: First Year Seminar): With growing enrollment, and a desire to increase student growth over time, we will be unable to offer a 22 student first year seminar without serious repercussions to the enrollment numbers in other courses in said departments.  If a professor is teaching one of these courses, in order to keep student credit hours up in the same department, either more students will have to be admitted to other courses, or we will have to hire additional faculty which poses budgetary concerns.  I agree that if we are going to offer these types of seminars that they must be small in order to function the way that they should, but these concerns as noted above are in cross-purposes to that small enrollment .
* Removing the History category seems to go against many of the goals stated in the proposal.  History is particularly, and I would argue uniquely, suited for giving students a “sense of place” as well as global awareness that is only enhanced by foreign language skills.
* Need for all students to have foreign langue skills.  As noted above, this will cause a large demand on the faculty of the MFL department, one that has seen its numbers shrink (along with its offerings over the past few years).  This seems to be at cross-purposes from where we are currently as a university and college and would need to see increased numbers of faculty to see this changed/implemented.
* Having cross-listed courses is an excellent idea, but how can it be implemented in such a way that one of the co-departments does not suffer a loss of student credit hours/other penalty.  There has to be some way to facilitate this kind of exchange.  Frankly, I’ve hesitated in attempting to propose something like this as a faculty member because of the inherent complications/difficulties/challenges involved.

That said, I do agree that the following are excellent ideas:

* Requirement of 6 credits of English composition (students at all levels and all degrees/majors need clear writing skills)
* Requirement of 3 credits of communication (likewise, students need to be able to orally communicate no matter what their major)

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The Biology Curriculum Committee, in consultation with the Biology faculty as a whole, has

reviewed the Final Report of the General Education Task Force and would like to respond

mainly to the sections related to the Natural and Physical Sciences category of “Ways of

Knowing.” **This document was unanimously endorsed by the Biology Faculty on 30**

**October 2013.**

I. One of the major changes in the proposal compared to the current Liberal Studies program

is to reduce the number of required credit hours in the Natural and Physical Sciences from

6 to 3. We are opposed to this reduction for a number of reasons. First, reducing the

number of required science hours is in opposition to the stated goals in the WCU 2020

Vision Strategic Plan for our graduates to be “ready to compete in a challenging, changing

and global environment; and who are prepared to contribute to the intellectual, cultural and

economic development of our region and state”; and for WCU to be acknowledged as “the

regional educational leader” in areas including “environment and environmental policy,

health professions, innovation and technology”. If this is true, we should expect science

literacy not only of our science majors, but of all WCU students. As revealed by the data

gathered by the Gen Ed Task Force, derived from comparable universities across the nation

and across other UNC system universities, one 3-hour college science class is not

considered sufficient to accomplish the goal of science literacy.

It is clear by examining the data that reducing WCU’s required Gen Ed science hours from

6 to 3 would put us **not merely below average, but at the very bottom of the**

**distribution** in the number of science hours required in General Education (See **Figure 1,**

**below**). This includes the 36 state comprehensive universities for which data were

compiled in the Gen Ed Task Force’s Comparison Narrative of April 2011, and across 9

universities in the UNC System. The latter data were compiled at a Biology Transfer

Discipline Advisory Team meeting convened by UNC GA on March 8, 2013.

• **Only 1 school out of 36 in the Comparison Narrative requires as few as 3 hours;**

**most require considerable more. The average number of hours required is 7.1 (Fig.**

**1)**

• **No UNC System schools require fewer than 6 hours of science. The average number**

**of hours required is 7.**

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I want to thank the committee for their hard work and for taking the time present this proposal for reform to our general education program. While I appreciate the effort, I do write with some concerns. After reading the proposal and discussing it with colleagues, I favor a new proposal that mirrors our status quo system. While there are a lot of courses that may be out of date and too much choice, I think that working within the system we now have is wiser. I believe this for the following reasons:

--We should not reduce the overall credit hours to 39 from 42. We are already among the lowest gen. ed. requirements in the system. This would put us close to lowest in hours. We should be preserving liberal arts.

--The global category is simply languages. Either call it that or consider a list of other courses (like Global Issues or others) that actually focus on culture, politics, and economics of the global world.

--The requirement for science drops at a time when STEM is emphasized nationally. We should be doing more not less.

--History is being dropped in hours. Again, national reports show that our youth and citizens suffer from a lack of knowledge in history.

--American Govt. should be required, but dropping is really shocking. Our students do not even know enough to vote. Our citizenry is hit with tons of media now on politics with no background whatsoever in what govt. does and our system of govt. is almost foreign to our students. This is a problem nationally also.

--We should drop first year seminar completely. It has never been a seminar and the effort to reduce it to 22 students is helpful but still not a seminar. Students frankly hate the course. The grading system is strange and the effort to put together a great course is a lot of work. I have taught it twice. Students are disengaged and they don't really know enough to know what they are studying and why its important. I like teaching what I am teaching and have worked hard at it, but my students see it as a box to check and they have little real choice over the topic.

--On the seminar. The drop in hours will mean more sections are needed. Will resources come to departments to do this? If not, our departments will be offering lots of these courses instead of major courses and courses that are entry points for our major such as Global Issues and American Government.

--Last, you will not find a bigger proponent of engagement and the Boyer Model on our campus. I build engagement into all of my courses. Engaged learning is real learning. But I worry about the requirement for all freshman. Many do not have cars and there are a lack of opportunities in Jackson County without transportation to neighboring counties or Asheville. I also want them to know more before they go out to engage.

I hope that this feedback is useful in some way. I would support our current system with modification of the list of classes and getting rid of the first year seminar.

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The “Civic Engagement” integrative area states *“students will demonstrate information literacy (the ability to find, evaluate, and use information) and complete a significant writing project derived from a service-learning component (p. 16)”*. There are two significant issues involved here:

1. The recent trend with increased enrollments in LS classes makes the actual execution of such projects difficult to manage. For example, an instructor teaching two sections of LS will be faced with overseeing 80 service learning projects (with a resulting paper). Doing this in a way that would provide proper guidance, feedback, and assessment will not work in class sections that large. The time and administrative attention required would either require an undue amount of labor on the part of faculty (especially adjuncts at $2700 per course), or will result in a lack of quality and follow through in the actual implementation and assessment of such projects.
2. The second issue relates to the university’s relative size compared to the surrounding community. This requirement will send hundreds (if not thousands) of students out looking for servicing learning opportunities every semester. I have worked closely with non-profit organizations here in Jackson County, and I have learned that the “the more the merrier” assumption to service learning may actually hinder these organizations more than help. Many organizations would prefer fewer volunteers so they can properly instruct and orient them to be of real use; being bombarded by volunteers often times is more of a hindrance than a help.

In the Social Sciences “Ways of Knowing” category the report states that courses are to be writing intensive, stating *“All courses will require students to demonstrate their ability to use library resources and services in a written or oral assignment”* (p.15). I am assuming the intent is that students are able to build upon what they have learned in the composition portion of the “Foundational Experiences” area; there are two issues here that need to be considered:

1. Under both the current and prosed LS programs, many students are, or will be, taking their social science courses ***before*** they have completed (or even started) the composition sequence. Ideally, students should have had at least *some* college level instruction on composition to build upon in these “Ways of Knowing” classes. The substantive knowledge of the various “Ways of Knowing” disciplines is equally important to the knowledge in the “Foundational Experiences” areas. If instructors have students that have significantly less formal instruction in composition, then expecting them to “teach writing” will require them to do it in a more remedial way (which these faculty are not trained to do). This will take away from time spent studying the discipline itself.
2. The phrase “*ability to use library resources and services”* (p.15) appears nowhere else in the document. While it may be implicit, I think it is important to make explicit that instruction on how to use library resources also takes place in the composition sequence. ***Also,*** there is no mention of any of the other “Ways of Knowing” categories being responsible for instruction on using library resources. I am thinking this was a simple oversight in the process of writing the report, but if not, I vigorously disagree that the responsibility for instruction on using library resources should fall solely on the social sciences programs.

Overall this proposal stands in contrast to the actual direction the university has taken in the last few years. There is an emerging gap between what WCU perceives itself to be (engaged, “high touch”, and student focused) and what it is actually is doing (larger classes and prioritizing programs based on a fiscally oriented formula, assessing the amount of revenue generated in relation to program costs). To execute this program effectively, it would require a financial commitment on the part of both the North Carolina state government and the UNC administration that would allow departments and programs to commit to smaller class sections and provide more resources to help with the engagement centered activities. If this program is adopted, at best it is *once again* asking instructors and programs to do “more with less”. The more likely reality is that it is asking instructors and programs to “do the impossible” given the current climate of the UNC System. What’s more, these demands will create significantly more work for a still committed faculty that is growing weary from watching their salaries and standards of living shrink since 2008.

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I agree with many of the critiques in Whitmire's letter.  Generally, I am concerned about the weakening of the general education requirements and see this as part of generally declining educational standards.  I would like to see a much more robust and demanding liberal studies curriculum.  Since Western is becoming a more selective institution, taking incoming students with higher scores and GPAs than in the past, we have an opportunity to build a more rigorous core appropriate to our current student body.  The present proposal has some good ideas in its design, but would represent an overall step backwards.

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This document offers my comments upon the proposed revision of WCU's general education program.

I agree with the elimination of the upper-level perspective, which has always been a problem for

students. I am not opposed to the reduction of hours to 39, although we need to be careful to remain with the norms followed by the larger university system. The best way to reduce total hours would be simply to eliminate the freshman seminar. I have taught the freshman seminar many times and value it; however, thanks to increased class sizes, it long ago ceased to be a seminar. The proposed revision looks to cap freshman seminars at 22, but no one can reasonably expect that this will be possible in the current budget environment.

Most of the other proposed changes are unworkable and potentially damaging to the university and its students. Reducing science and eliminating the history requirement represent a significant dumbing down of our general education program. At a time when the United States is thought to be losing ground to other nations' education systems, I would hate to have to explain to parents that we had eliminated science and history requirements to make room for courses in "ethical commitment."

The new "integrative experience" categories will make credit transfers a nightmare – this at a time when UNC system leaders want us to streamline transfers.

The "integrative experience" categories encourage the development of interdisciplinary courses. This is a worthy goal and one I support; however, in my experience, WCU has never encouraged or rewarded interdisciplinary teaching. The plan says nothing about how this transformation of the university culture is to be achieved.

This revision was obviously driven by the values expressed in our current QEP. I am a strong proponent of the QEP, having led its implementation in my department. I wrote a department QEP document that has been offered to other units as a model. The QEP, however, makes a poor template for the revision of general education. It was meant to guide us as we adjusted and improved programs within our disciplines, and it was meant to help us ensure that our students made connections among varied disciplines and educational experiences. It was not meant to replace those disciplines with vague categories based on ed school fads. If we cannot encourage civic engagement and ethical commitment within our disciplines, we will not be able to do so through the rearranging of the general education program.

My advice would be reject this proposal and begin the revision process anew.

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I have two substantive comments about the change in liberal studies requirements:

1. I find that many of the perceived problems with the course mixture stem from a lack of leadership at the University. For example, a lack of connection between the QEP and liberal studies goals, inconsistencies in course categories, and over-representation of some disciplines are all issues that could be managed without changing the program. My perception of the current liberal studies program is that generally there is no cost to a College, Department or Program if their courses do not actually meet liberal studies goals. As a member of the prioritization task force last year, I can say that program ranking had nothing to do with how well programs that participated in general education served the students. Programs continue to offer courses and slurp up the liberal studies credit hours without any sense of whether they are doing anything productive. No-reorganization of the program will fix this—only administrative oversight will make sure that liberal studies goals are met. This is true about the QEP broadly—despite its advent many years ago now the cost of not participating is not clear. My view is that if programs offer classes that consistently fall short on satisfying goals, then perhaps they should not be allowed to participate in the liberal studies program (and load up on credit hours). Somebody (or some group) needs to make sure that programs are achieving the objectives and not just offering a survey course in some content area. This becomes increasingly important if you are going to add new upper level courses to the program. Thus, I am in favor of modifying the way the program is administered before looking at whether the components in the programs make sense.

2. As a STEM scientist, I am a little concerned with the removal of 3 science credit hours from the curriculum. Science like social sciences is increasingly squeezed from a K-12 curriculum that values testing and therefore math and English over science. Further, with Gallup polls showing that almost half of Americans believe in creationism and a significant number do not believe climate change is happening, addressing these issues with our students is critical. I understand that the curricular changes mean we can address these issues at upper curricular levels, but these changes would mean developing new classes at the 3-400 levels for general audiences because most classes at this level are too technical for the general student population. It can and would happen, but it would involve more than a simple tweak to an existing class to meet broad liberal studies goals.

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1. The complete report of the General Education Task Force is readily available online at <http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/Gen_Ed_Task_Force_Summary_Report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)