



Faculty Forum

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General Education at WCU: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Change?

The half-life of university general education programs is not very long. About every 12-15 years reviews are likely to occur, and Western has followed that pattern over the past 30 years. General education is the responsibility of the entire faculty. It was our Faculty Senate that designed a procedure for electing the General Education Review Task Force and provided its charge at the end of the semester last Spring. This *Faculty Forum* provides a progress report each month on the work of the Task Force.

The Faculty Senate's resolution charged the Task Force with reviewing programs at institutions similar to Western, assessing concerns of our own faculty about our current program, considering the requirements of employers and accreditation agencies, and examining the needs of the students we are serving today. We are also charged with making recommendations for changes in our current program.

Our Task Force has initiated a number of activities to meet the charge of the Senate. We have begun to examine the general education programs of more than 100 other universities, mostly those like Western. We have invited college position statements and conducted three public forums attended by faculty members from across campus, and we have begun to review the recent literature on general education. Our texts have included the Lumina Foundation report on degree qualifications, and journal articles about general education and internal documents, including the Honors College proposal on general education, the Liberal Studies Assessment report, and the Liberal Studies Action Plan. Finally, we have developed a set of General Principles for General Education at Western.

Our immediate to-do list is ambitious and may require more than the Spring 2011 semester to complete. We are planning a brief survey of the faculty about general education, an analysis of the data we collected on the programs at other universities, a summary of information from internal and external reports, and the development of a set of learning outcomes for general education.

The Task Force is aware that we face several important challenges in proposing changes in general education at Western. One is to balance student interests, the need for training in particular disciplines, and concerns about the breadth of knowledge expected of a liberally educated student. Faculty members are creatures of their disciplines. Sometimes it is difficult to avoid seeing general education through the lenses of those disciplines. Another challenge is to design a program that is realistic about the secondary school preparation of our students. While we can complain about what our students do not know when they get here, we are responsible for what they do know when they leave. We also know that we face the challenge of being sensitive to the internal political problems of shifting responsibilities for the education of our students. Changes in the general education curriculum can have significant implications for patterns of staffing.

So, reorganizing general education can be controversial and even threatening. There are many owners and many constituencies. There are many different curricula and many differences in student abilities

and interests. As a result, general education programs inevitably represent compromises that rarely please everyone. Here is a sampling of some of the specific issues we will be dealing with that may engender controversy.

1. What proportion of a student's education should consist of general education? What responsibility does the university have for broadening students' educations beyond their current interests or even helping them find new interests? Perhaps most important, what can we do to help students prepare for a future that neither they nor we can envision? How important is the "general" part of a student's education in a world where many students, perhaps a majority, are no longer working in the areas they majored in five years after graduation? The proportion of general education in our current program is among the smallest: 30% (for 120-hour degrees) or 20% (for 128-hour degrees) of proportions among our peer institutions (using the 83 university comparison group the Task Force has identified). Reducing our program to 39 hours would make ours one of the smallest general education programs at state masters universities.
2. How should general education be related to the major in the era of the QEP? Is the provision of a capstone experience the responsibility of the general education curriculum or should that be left to the major?
3. Should the learning outcomes of general education be addressed by a large number of courses from a wide array of disciplines, basic and applied, or by a limited set of courses from more traditionally basic disciplines? Should there be limits on the participation of any one discipline in the general education curriculum?
4. How can we deal with the widely held perception that general education courses lack rigor and are too much like high school courses?
5. How should the outcomes of the GE component of our curriculum be assessed?

As we deal with questions like these, the members of the Task Force wish to be transparent. Minutes of our meetings are available to the faculty on the H-drive. As we complete sub-tasks (e.g., the faculty survey, the analysis of other programs, the identification of learning outcomes) reports also will be provided on the H-drive. When we are ready to propose changes, we plan to hold another set of public forums. We ask the Western faculty to take a positive attitude toward possible changes and to try to take a university-wide perspective on what is best for all of our students. We invite you to share your concerns and ideas with any member of the Task Force.

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Numerous faculty members tell us each month that they read the Faculty Forum articles, but we regret that we do not receive many responses. So, we did not hear from any of you in response to last month's Faculty Forum feature article by Lois Petrovich-Mwaniki entitled **Climb Higher! See Beyond our Borders--Strategies for Internationalizing WCU**. PLEASE do let us hear from you! The Faculty Forum is now in its 23rd year; PLEASE help us keep it going!

Editorial Notes

We urge you to add your comments to **Faculty Forum** articles. It enriches the faculty dialogue about these many issues that concern us all. This is a particularly poignant time for faculty at WCU, as we contemplate a new Chancellor. Please take this opportunity to add to this important discussion. You may comment to this article by clicking on this link, then select the article under **What's Hot** on the top right:

<https://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum/>. The command requires you to use your email username and password to access the article. The Faculty Forum is a publication by and for WCU faculty, but we do invite comments from staff, who are equally important in the pursuit of excellence here at WCU.

To access the article as a PDF, please select the article link at the following URL:

<http://www.wcu.edu/27638.asp>.

The direct link to the main Faculty Forum Webpage is: <http://www.wcu.edu/7480.asp>.

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