



Faculty Forum

*from the Coulter Faculty Commons
for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

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**Editor's Note
Mark Mattheis**

Proposed changes in the state wide general education program is the Faculty Forum topic of the month. Brent Kinser in the English Department has written in "Defense of Thirty-Nine Hours" which expresses his views about the process. Comments can be made directly on the wiki at the end of his article. Your articles are always welcomed at the Faculty Forum.

**A Defense of Thirty-Nine Hours
Brent Kinser**

Faculty are now well into the process of submitting 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 proposed program features four components. Students would take a 3-hour First-Year Seminar, 15 Hours of Foundational Experiences, 12 hours in a category called Ways of Knowing, and 9 hours in a category called Integrative Experiences.[1] The program represents 39 hours of coursework for students who spend their entire undergraduate career at Western. I am writing to explain to you why I support the adoption of some version of this proposal.

The world is a much different place than it was when the current Liberal Studies Program was written and adopted late in the last century. 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. 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 with dated outcomes, has surpassed its life expectancy, no doubt having been designed by good people with due diligence and with the best interests of our students in mind. Still, the time has come for us to choose a new path for our students.

And so the General Education Task Force went through a similarly rigorous process of reviewing literature, of looking at other programs, and of negotiating philosophical differences, all of which led to what the members of the task force agreed by consensus to be a workable proposal, one in need of clarification and revision, but one that represented a sincere effort to construct a program

that would serve the best interests of our students. The proposal was reviewed by the Faculty Senate and then sent back to the Liberal Studies and University Curriculum committees with a charge: to gather a final round of commentary and to make joint recommendations on adoption and implementation. Since that Senate action, or lack thereof, the world has changed yet again. When the Task Force completed its work, there was no Strategic Plan, nor was there a determined effort at the GA level to address issues of seamless transfer for the UNC System, an entity viewed by the campuses as a loose confederation of unique institutions, and by the state as a single, seventeen-campus university (check the UNC System website). And so as the faculty considers “final” commentary on the General Education Proposal, the world is a different place than when the conversation began. Rest assured, that world will also be different by the time the conversation is finished, and whatever program enters the implementation phase will require extensibility, especially in terms of how the university will meet the needs of its various stakeholders. This flexibility will lead to program drift and also to subsequent changes intended to hold that drift at bay. But the conversation needs, desperately, to be finished, and the best interest of the students should remain paramount.

Yes, I understand that regular raises seem a thing of the distant past, and that program prioritization has been painful, for some more than others. I know that it is very likely that further cuts are coming and 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 16 hours 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 end of November.

More relevant to the current discussion, the North Carolina Community College System—responding to major pressure from the legislature to enact seamless transfer, or else—have been working on revisions to their general education program. I was present at a meeting in Chapel Hill when representatives from GA attempted to explain the NCCCS plan to faculty members from the four-year institutions. They had called us together to identify courses offered at the community colleges that would transfer to all 17 four-year institutions. What they were proposing was a new 30-hour general education core that would be universally transferrable. The faculty at the meeting assumed that this meant a new 30-hour general education program for the community colleges. I heard the question asked more than once: “What, then, will the second 30 hours of the AA and AS degrees look like, and how is that going to affect the Gen Ed programs at the 4-year institutions?” At no time did a GA representative at this meeting mention that these thirty universal hours also would require 14–15 additional hours in General Education for a student to receive an AA or an AS degree. Some of you reading this essay will have heard me pontificate on this issue many times, especially if you have shared an adult beverage with me. As far as I can tell now—and I have been told that this was the plan all along, though no one ever told me of that innocent fact—the proposed Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) maintains 44–45 of General Education coursework for students receiving an AA or AS degree. The sky, apparently, has not fallen yet, at least in terms of the number of Gen Ed hours. But there are plenty of other reasons to co-opt Chicken Little’s worldview. The community colleges are still 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). Clearly, according to the disciplinarians, what our habitual course-withdrawers really need is a swift, figurative kick in the backside (my daughter withdrew from 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 besides engineering, no matter how long or much they have thought about that dream. Faculty will simply have to have a hard conversation with them and show them their 8-semester plan and deem them unworthy (perhaps we might tell them all to consider a degree in English?). So why should the faculty not simply adopt the 30-hour universal core that the community colleges have implemented? SACS does not care about the extra 15 hours; why should we? A 30-hr boiler-plate program would be cheaper for the institution; faster and easier for the students. As much as I appreciate and respect the community college system (both of my children are products of it), I do not see the structure of their model (in its 30 or 45-hr manifestation) as the aspirational model of this university. Our motto is not "Embracing minimum requirements since 1889," nor solely should it be "cheaper, faster, and easier." 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. All members fought their good fights, 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 the work was done without the benefit of the newest 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.

These core abilities are derived from the learning outcomes mandated by the WCU Quality Enhancement Plan, which serves as the center for the academic vision of the strategic 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 to but demonstrate proficiency in these areas? OK, they do so in the programs, but would it not be a good idea to prepare students for these experiences and to affirm them, since ultimately the goal is not exposure but proficiency? If we do the "easy" thing and accept the community college program after their process is concluded, then where is it that all of our students will meet the expectations of the strategic vision of the university? Further, and soon I expect, the Senate will be asked to vote yes

to adopt pre- and post-testing instruments such as the College Learning Assessment that the apparently well-heeled [*sic*] GA funded to pilot in the system this year. But if and when CLA or something like it 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 success?

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, whatever shape they take. 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 suggests that faculty will be required to teach such classes. Both documents do commit us to making sure that faculty will be able to teach co-taught courses if they wish, and that is a joyful prospect for those of us 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. That prospect will require positive and practical suggestions for revision and improvement. Yes, the Integrative Experiences category needs to be articulated more clearly, so 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, and Global Awareness—might be modified and strengthened to be more firmly aligned with the Strategic Plan and to do what is best for our students. GA also has recently identified two primary competencies shared by all of the institutions in the UNC system: Critical Thinking and Written Communication (GA no doubt will soon ask the Senate to vote yes on these). Where is it that all of our students demonstrate these essential skills proficiently? An adjustment to the 9 hours of the Integrative Experiences Category might allow us to establish that our students both have been exposed to and have developed proficiency in these competencies. It might also be adjusted to reduce administrative fears of affordability. Take Service Learning, for example. How many of our students are already exposed to that kind of experience? Most? Vast majority? A few? Should they all be exposed to learning through serving? If the answer is yes they should be, as the strategic plan instructs, then where is it that they will all receive it? The proposed program—requiring a course that includes service learning, not one devoted to it—offers ways to realize these competency-driven goals. And truth be told, most of our students are being exposed to these types of learning—all of them should be. Identifying classes in which it is happening should be cheap enough, and easy enough. Developing classes that include these types of experiences also should be interesting enough, if the reduction of administrative barriers is fast enough. I would also contend that it would be in the best interest of 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. Surely there is a way to align the competencies of the universal capstone experience with those competencies espoused by our General Education program to show GA, the

legislature, and the taxpayers that students who are graduated from WCU are prepared to succeed. Instead of 1 Upper Level Perspective, the Gen Ed proposal could be revised to make it clear that these 3, 300-level courses deliver a cohesive set of competencies that all of our students need, a set that would also spread the requirements of general education throughout a student's career at WCU.

The proposed program would allow WCU to address the goals of the strategic plan just as we are working to incorporate them into our major programs. There are other possibilities. Many faculty have complained to me, "why can't we just keep the program as it is but drop the First-Year Seminar?" I reply wearily, recalling two years of arguing among the members of the Task Force, "It is the only kind of course that research has shown consistently to have benefits in relation to retention" (see the Task Force literature review). Or, they tell me, eliminate the ULP: "our students don't like it, and it causes Banner trouble." Thus fares the last attempt at making general education less of a check-sheet-driven experience. Rest assured, and this is not Chicken Little speaking, an attempt to hang on to the Liberal Studies Program will require a complete re-write of the LS document, with all courses kicked out before re-approval under a rubric of new guidelines and learning outcomes. If we can figure a way to modify this proposal into a workable program that serves our students, both in terms of their direct experiences and of our ability to achieve useful assessment, then 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. For them, I am willing to put aside the worldview of Chicken Little in favor of Chaucer's immortal Chaunticleer. The rest is not silence, but implementation.

[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

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