

General Education Task Force

September 12, 2014

Note: Text in italics is directed at task force members. It generally indicates text that needs to be written or questions that need to be answered.

Task Force Members

This report, and the recommendations herein, represents a long-term effort by numerous faculty, staff, and administrators across the University of Delaware. This report has been deeply informed by the work of the authors of “Focused Strategic Planning at the University of Delaware: A Special Topics Self-Study Submitted to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education as Part of the University’s Decennial Reaccreditation Panel” as well as the work of multiple incarnations of the Faculty Senate Committee on General Education. This particular report was prepared by a tripartite group consisting of a “Core Working Group” and a “Steering Committee” appointed by the Deputy Provost as well as the current Faculty Senate General Education Committee. Committee members are listed below.

Core Working Group

- John A. Pelesko
- Joseph Harris
- Kathleen Kerr
- Kelvin Lee
- Eric Rise
- Douglas Buttrey

Steering Committee

- Deborah Allen
- Steven Bernhardt
- Nicole Donofrio
- Lesa Griffiths
- Steve Hastings
- Michal Herzenstein
- Lynette Overby
- John Jungck
- Sue McGeary
- Frank Newton
- Bob Opila

- Cindi Shenkle
- Bahira Trask

Faculty Senate General Education Committee

- Norman Wagner
- Avron Abraham
- Erin Brannick
- Iain Crawford
- Meryl Gardner
- John Gizis
- Christopher Knight
- Bernard McKenna
- Kathy Pusecker
- April Veness
- Lynn Worden
- Kathleen Kerr

Executive Summary

This I envision as an introduction to the process, an overview of the major recommendations, and an orientation to the rest of the report. Here we need to reference and explain the new MSCHE requirements. For reference, the MSCHE standards on general education are reproduced here. In the latest standards document, this is item #5.

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

5. a general education program that:

- a. offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field;
- b. offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives;
- c. provides evidence, in graduate programs that do not include general education, that, at admission, students can demonstrate appropriate general education skills;
- d. provides evidence that students can demonstrate general education skills in non-US institutions that do not include general education;

The Purposes of General Education

In large part, the history of the undergraduate curriculum in the United States has been characterized by tension as institutions have sought to balance the expanding specific bodies of knowledge and skills needed by disciplines with the broader knowledge and skills needed by every student. Although there is widespread agreement in the United States that an undergraduate education should encompass more than the requirements of a particular discipline, there has never been widespread agreement in how this “general education” curriculum should be designed or administered. This has resulted in tremendous variance across general education programs in the United States. These range from a fully prescribed general education curriculum such as at St. John’s College to a completely un-prescribed program such as at Brown University. Institutions often create general education programs to distinguish themselves from other colleges and universities and to address the needs of their particular stakeholders.

Like most other colleges and universities, we believe that students should have choices in how they achieve the goals of a general education. Choice is useful for increasing student motivation and often a practical necessity in providing a course of general education to a large and diverse student body. At the same time, we believe that there is a set of goals that are essential for students to achieve during their time at the University of Delaware. The fact that this focused set of goals exists, creates the contradictory belief that choice in general education should be limited. The tension we experience in this regard is no different than the tension experienced across the higher education landscape.

While it is clear that we will not resolve this tension, it is also clear that maintaining our current general education program is not an option. In our most recent self-study we recognized the need to add greater coherence to our program and to address numerous shortcomings. These recommendations were echoed by the report of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education during our most recent reaccreditation cycle. In addition, our faculty have expressed dissatisfaction with individual components of our program, with its confusing complexity, and with its drift toward “all choice.” Here, this task force makes a commitment to acknowledging the tension in redesigning general education, while at the same time makes a commitment to bringing to the table a coherent program that will better serve our students in the years ahead. We begin by articulating the *purposes* of general education at the University of Delaware.

The overarching purpose of general education at the University of Delaware is to set students along the path of possessing the characteristics of one who is both broadly and deeply educated. In particular, we seek to prepare students who are:

- Capable of civic engagement, involved in the world around them, and who understand the major challenges and debates of the day;
- Aware of their intellectual strengths and interests and of their ethical values and commitments;
- Aware of and capable of interpreting the arts and culture of modern and past societies;

- Equipped with the essential skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving world including the ability to be a lifelong learner, creator, and innovator.

Capable of civic engagement, involved in the world around them, and who understand the major challenges and debates of the day.

Higher education is not solely a private investment in one's future, but a public good that inculcates citizens with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate effectively in our political culture. An educated citizenry is essential to a functioning democracy, a responsive and accountable government, a vibrant marketplace of ideas, thriving communities, global awareness, and to the solution of urgent social problems. The general education program can foster students' capacity for civic engagement in at least three ways. First, the intellectual competence that is fostered by general education—critical thinking, ethical reasoning, historical and cross-cultural perspective, breadth of knowledge, multicultural awareness—enables students to evaluate policy options and make reasoned judgments about complex and diverse challenges such as inequality, climate change, education, health care, infrastructure, and international instability. Second, courses in the curriculum provide knowledge of fundamental concepts that inform active citizenship, including the structure and institutions of government, political theory, economics, constitutionalism and the rule of law, and United States and world history, politics, and culture. Third, experiences beyond the classroom can familiarize students with pressing issues of the day, provide experience with participatory democracy, encourage public service, and create an awareness of the real-world impact of laws and public policies. These experiences may include service learning, field experience, volunteer work, participation in the governance and decision-making of student organizations, involvement with political campaigns and organizations, and attendance at public lectures on current events and controversies. Our graduates should leave the University of Delaware with the ability and desire to vote, serve on juries, engage in civic discourse and collective action, and participate meaningfully in the public life of their communities.

Aware of their intellectual strengths and interests and of their ethical values and commitments.

Students identify intellectual passions that they can pursue over the course of their lives. They see themselves as both formed by and contributing to the cultures of which they are part. They are able to articulate the reasons behind the positions they hold on key ethical questions and to explain the values and commitments that drive their work and thought. While self-awareness is a perpetual process, UD graduates must have acquired enough maturity, perspective, and insight to provide strong footing during post-academic pursuits. What they are passionate about, what they value, what they are good at, (and not so good at), and how they are unique are understandings that will serve to propel them forward. An awareness of how they have connected and can continue to connect their minds with their hearts and then with their hands are essential for a potential of life-long success and happiness. It helps them identify intellectual passions that they

can pursue over the course of their lives, recognizing the values and commitments that drive their work and thought. While they will not have achieved their fullest potential upon graduation from UD, they should graduate with an understanding of their potential and with aspirations to fulfill this potential.

Aware of and capable of interpreting the arts and culture of modern and past societies,

A well-rounded individual has the ability to appreciate the arts and culture of modern and past societies and the fact that arts and culture often are connected to the perennial issues that have characterized human experience and shaped contemporary culture and debates. Understanding how themes such as justice, conflict, and the nature of good and evil have been represented in philosophy, literature, drama, and the visual arts exposes students to different modes of intellectual inquiry and aesthetic expression, as well as scholarly approaches to critically analyzing those perspectives. Historical and cross-cultural inquiry emphasizes the contingent nature of present conditions, introduces customs and beliefs different from one's own, and provides alternatives for imagining how society should be organized. Students should understand that their identities, experiences, and values are rooted in cultural traditions, but that those traditions are not universal; sensitivity to and appreciation of cultural difference and change over time and place is essential to living in a global society.

Equipped with the essential skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving world including the ability to be a lifelong learner, creator, and innovator.

While the knowledge students gain in their disciplines through courses required for their majors will prepare them specifically, general education at UD needs to prepare students broadly for a world in motion. They must have the capacity to be successful in communities that are remarkably both interconnected and dynamic. This constant variability requires leaders and citizens who can creatively and critically adapt with a conscience, understanding that their actions affect the lives of those around them. At the same rate that contemporary science and technology and the political, economic, and cultural arenas change; so too must graduates be able to change. It is essential that UD graduates can acquire new skills and knowledge and be innovative while understanding the corresponding ethical and social implications.

The Objectives of General Education at the University of Delaware

The program of general education proposed in this report aims at building five key sets of competencies in all University of Delaware graduates. In particular, the proposed program of general education at the University of Delaware prepares students who are able to:

- (1) Read critically, analyze arguments and information, and engage in constructive ideation.
- (2) Communicate effectively in writing, orally, and through aesthetic expression.

(3) Work collaboratively and independently within and across a variety of cultural contexts and a spectrum of differences.

(4) Critically evaluate the ethical implications of what they say and do.

(5) Reason quantitatively, computationally, and scientifically.

Objective #1: General education prepares students who are able to read critically, analyze arguments and information, and engage in constructive ideation.

Critical reading skills are essential for acquisition of knowledge and advancing understanding. Students need to contextualize written content and respond to it effectively, differentiating their own contemporary and culturally influenced values from those expressed by another. They must be able to analyze and critically evaluate information presented and the arguments that have been constructed. Arguments may pose challenges to the values and beliefs of the student, requiring the student to reflect on their own attitudes and presumptions about our civilization or about the natural world, or perhaps about their place as an individual. Following careful reflection and synthesis, students should be prepared to engage in constructive ideation, building new ideas and concepts, and contributing to the solution of previously unsolved problems.

Objective #2: General education prepares students who are able to communicate effectively in writing, orally, and through aesthetic expression.

Effective written and oral communication skills are essential components of learning and critical thinking. They are necessary for personal growth, meaningful social interaction, and participation in civic debate and in the modern workplace. These skills allow individuals to foster comprehension of complex or competing ideas, organize and disseminate knowledge, and persuade others to reconsider their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The development of written and oral communication skills equips graduates to communicate effectively to general and specialized audiences, employing multiple genres and different technologies, including text, voice, data, and images. A student with these skills will understand how to advance a credible argument using logical reasoning and the use of evidence; how to write and speak with clarity and grace; how to account for different audiences and contexts; and how to employ the standard conventions of writing. Similarly, it is essential that students recognize and are able to communicate in a variety of media that go beyond the written and spoken word. These include forms of artistic expression such as theater or dance and emerging forms of expression enabled by technology.

Objective #3: General education prepares students who are able to work collaboratively and independently within and across a variety of cultural contexts and a spectrum of differences.

An understanding, appreciation, and assimilation of common and diverse perspectives facilitates social, cultural, technical, and economic progress. The general education program herein establishes a foundation for appreciating what each individual brings and what diversity brings to modern society. The definition of culture is intentionally broad and encompasses an international perspective derived from various peoples and cultures, a social and economic perspective that may be derived from individuals from different segments of a society, a discipline-based perspective obtained through experience or study, and others. The development of skills to work independently and collaboratively within a culture ensures that graduates have a well-established foundation of basic knowledge and awareness and can communicate and work with others of similar background. A student with these skills will build upon their own knowledge, perspective, and experiences to communicate and work effectively with those of similar background providing an important base for interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. The development of skills to work independently and collaboratively across cultures ensures that graduates will understand the limitations of a single perspective and the value of diverse perspectives and cultures in creative problem solving of major challenges and discussion in debates, and establishment of an engaged society. A student with these skills will learn from diverse perspectives, assimilate this knowledge, and synthesize new solutions and ways of thinking.

Objective#4: General education prepares students who are able to critically evaluate the ethical implications of what they say and do.

Students see themselves as members of communities. As such, they consider the potential effects of their words and actions upon other people. In their speech and writing, they strive for mutual understanding. In their work as professionals, they aim to serve a larger community. They are responsive to the views and needs of others, and they acknowledge the strengths of differing perspectives. They understand their own positions as partial and fallible. They seek not simply to provide technical solutions to clearly defined problems, but to situate their work in broader historical and social contexts, to question assumptions, and to pose and consider alternatives.

Objective #5: General education prepares students who are able to reason quantitatively, computationally, and scientifically.

The ever-increasing growth of scientific knowledge and the subsequent application of that knowledge has been a principle driver for change in modern society, impacting individuals and societies worldwide. The general education program proposed here prepares students to thrive in a rapidly changing scientifically and technologically driven world by equipping them to reason using the principal tools of science and by introducing them to the central concepts of science that form the basis for modern reasoning about the physical and biological world. The development of quantitative reasoning skills equips graduates to understand and interpret quantitative information presented in multiple forms and given in multiple contexts. A student with these skills will understand data, the visual presentation of data, the statistical analysis of

data, as well as essential concepts such as exponential growth and the law of large numbers. The development of computational reasoning skills equips graduates to both understand and utilize the explosion in computational power available to a member of modern society. A student with these skills will understand algorithms, the power of approximation, recursive thinking, and the notion of computational complexity. The development of scientific reasoning skills equips graduates to understand the evaluation of evidence in modern science. A student with these skills will understand the scientific method, inductive and deductive thinking, causal reasoning, and how to evaluate the evidence for and against a scientific theory.

Student Outcomes

In order to be able to effectively implement a general education program where students are able to achieve the five objectives set out above and the faculty are able to assess and measure this achievement it is necessary that we define specific *learning objectives* or *student outcomes*. Here, for each objective, we define the minimal criteria which every student earning a degree from the University of Delaware is expected to satisfy.

Objective #1: General education prepares students who are able to read critically, analyze arguments and information, and engage in constructive ideation.

To start constructing these, we've been studying the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics. For working purposes, we list relevant rubrics for each objective. Discussion is needed as to how to bring this into a manageable form. Note that some objectives are fairly sharp in the sense that only two rubrics seem necessary to cover what we've stated, while others seem to require elements of multiple rubrics.

Relevant Rubrics:

- Information Literacy
- Reading
- Inquiry and Analysis
- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Integrative Learning

Objective #2: General education prepares students who are able to communicate effectively in writing, orally, and through aesthetic expression.

Relevant Rubrics:

- Written communication
- Oral communication
- Creative Thinking

Objective #3: General education prepares students who are able to work collaboratively and independently within and across a variety of cultural contexts and a spectrum of differences.

Relevant Rubrics:

- Teamwork
- Intercultural Knowledge and Competence

Objective#4: General education prepares students who are able to critically evaluate the ethical implications of what they say and do.

Relevant Rubrics:

- Civic Engagement
- Ethical Reasoning

Objective #5: General education prepares students who are able to reason quantitatively, computationally, and scientifically.

Relevant Rubrics:

- Quantitative Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Inquiry and Analysis
- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Problem Solving
- Integrative Learning