General Education Review Committee Report

Background and Purpose

The current General Education (GE) program was revised between 2005-06 and 2008-09. The design process attempted to address concerns over having too many courses and insufficient content areas. It also incorporated ambitious goals of integrating new and innovative ideas, such as FYE, and suites of courses containing related content. The subsequent implementation produced mixed results, including the abandonment of the use of suites. However, this report is primarily focused on the size of the GE program and its ability to be assessed and reviewed. Over the years, the General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC) has noted the following issues and concerns:

- In terms of the number of courses, the GE program has greatly increased in size since the program revision. At that time, the prior GE program was considered too large, and there was a desire to reduce the number of GE-designated courses.
- Some of the GE designation definitions are rather vague. For example, Global Studies, as currently strictly defined, could exclude foreign language courses. As a result, many of our foreign language courses were approved for this designation in the past, but in the last couple of years, language courses have been denied the designation, creating a point of contention. Another example comes from the Health & Well Being designation. Its definition does not clearly indicate whether credit is met by physical activity, by learning about physical activity, or by something else. As an example, some dance classes and sports-related physical fitness courses (e.g., basketball) were approved in the past but more recently have not been approved because of the confusion over whether they meet the definition for Health & Well Being. Each time this happens it causes frustration among the faculty, because there is no concrete way to explain the discrepancy.
- Many of the learning outcomes are vague and not measurable; for example, GELO 1, “Reflect on one’s own learning processes”, includes the potential indicator “Examine the aims of higher education and intellectual inquiry.” Although this indicator may be an appropriate pursuit within a GE course, it does not represent a measurable outcome. The same rubric also uses unmeasurable words/phrases, such as “thinks deeply”, “is curious about”, and “is attentive to”. There is no tangible way a teacher can measure whether, or the degree to which, a student is thinking deeply, curiously, or attentively that is not subjective or somewhat arbitrary.
- The Committee did not find measurement rubrics for learning outcomes 8 and 9.
- The high turnover rate of faculty on the GECC, combined with unclear and subjective interpretations of the definitions for GE designations and learning outcomes, resulted in a highly inconsistent application of rules over time, as far as accepting courses into the GE program. For example, in some years course
petitions were easily accepted, while in other years, similar course petitions were denied.

- Although learning outcomes have been assessed on a rotational basis since 2009-2010, the process of continuous improvement is not clearly documented nor implemented. Furthermore, not all learning outcomes have been assessed.

To address the above concerns and for the following reasons and purposes, GECC created the GE Review Ad Hoc Committee (‘Committee’). The Committee, comprised entirely of faculty volunteers, was initiated in June 2016 through a process in which GECC solicited participation from among the University Governing Faculty. Members of the Committee view this as an important task for the following reasons:

- Since the inception of the GE program, no formal program review has been completed.
- The desire for student success requires a process of continuous assessment and improvement in our offered curriculum.
- UM-Flint has a Higher Learning Commission accreditation visit scheduled in 2019-20. This GE Program Review will demonstrate our commitment to continuous improvement in our programs.

This Committee, acting as an advisory committee to the GECC, met 30 times between June 2016 and August 2017. This report documents the Committee’s review of UM-Flint’s General Education Program. It includes documentation of the Committee’s review process, identification of issues and concerns, and recommendations for program improvement. For shared governance purposes, this report will first be distributed to the GECC, who will then disseminate the information to faculty governance and ultimately to the Governing Faculty for approval.

History and Background

The Committee was asked to look primarily at two issues: the proliferation of general education courses and the assessment process. The number of GE courses increased from around 250 in 2009 to over 530 (as listed in the catalog) by 2017, arising from several factors (discussed next). Although assessment of learning outcomes has occurred, several issues remain regarding GE assessment (discussed later).

The issue of proliferation resulted from several factors. One factor was the budget model driving creation of general education courses in pursuit of revenue. While the budget model is not part of this review and is tasked to the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee for Budget and Strategic Planning, the Committee notes the concern that if the model does not change, it may be very difficult to convince faculty to change the GE program.

A second factor creating significant proliferation is the lack of a strong, clear policy for GECC to use when determining the suitability of a course to be included in the GE program. This factor is exacerbated by the turnover in GECC members. Due to varying
understanding of the intent (but not letter) of the policies as written, a certain degree of arbitrariness is added to the decision-making process when new members join the committee every year. A related third factor is course permanency; this occurs because once a course is listed as GE, it remains a permanent part of the program, regardless of how often it is offered. This has led to hundreds of courses continuing in the GE program, as (presumably) departments sought to have more and more courses listed as GE in the hope of attracting students. With limited and subjective criteria and high turnover of members, GECC denied or accepted courses in a seemingly arbitrary fashion and did not have strong support for removing an already approved course.

A compounding factor is that some departments may lack a clear understanding of the GE designation criteria. Some departments appear to hold the view that disciplines that are ‘naturally’ or ‘most closely’ aligned with a GE designation should automatically get most or all of their courses designated as GE courses. Alternatively, some departments seem to hold the view that as long as a course strives to address three to five of the General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs), the course should be accepted as a GE course. Both of these views are invalid.

In order to recommend stronger criteria, we needed to understand what the current GE model was intended to accomplish. We consulted the documents available, which described the current general education model and the revision of the old (prior) GE program. We identified four particularly useful unique concepts from two documents used in the General Education Reform process:

From the reform task definition, ‘…to create a core curriculum of liberal arts and sciences, unique to our university, that’:

1. Is integrated across curriculum and interdisciplinary among the units
2. Fosters intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning; prepares students for global and local citizenship and cultural competency; and challenges students to develop critical and creative habits of mind
3. Is consistent with the Mission’s Three Pillars
   - Teaching & research
   - Student centeredness
   - Engaging citizenship

And from the vision statement for the 2005-2010 Strategic Plan (the period of GE reform):

4. General education engages the minds of undergraduate students through critical thinking and reasoning, and humanistic and scientific inquiry to understand themselves, their surroundings and their own culture as well as other cultures.

These four concepts address two primary purposes: what GE will do for students and how it will be designed, summarized as follows:

**What it will do for students:**
- Foster curiosity & lifelong learning
• Prepare global & local citizenship  
• Develop cultural competency  
• Develop critical & creative habits of mind  
• Engage minds through:  
  o critical thinking/reasoning and  
  o humanistic, social, & scientific inquiry to understand themselves, their  
    surroundings, their cultures & other cultures

**How it will be designed:**  
• Be unique to UM-Flint  
• Integrated across curriculum  
• Interdisciplinary among units  
• Consistent with the three pillars

Understanding these two purposes also provides a basis for the second major issue  
tasked to this Committee: assessment of GE.

Although assessment procedures were conducted regularly with annual reporting, there  
are a number of issues that concerned the GECC. The first concern is that the data was  
not effectively used to continuously improve the program or its learning outcomes.

A second concern is the quality of the data collected. The learning outcomes and  
associated rubrics contained statements that are not precisely measurable (e.g., GELO  
3: how can we measure when someone is ‘interested in moving beyond the surface of  
observations’?). The learning outcomes definitions are not clearly reflected (e.g.,  
GELOs 6, 8 and 9.) Some definitions provided in the documents are more judgmental  
than measurable (e.g., GELO 1 and its rubric.) Even after approximately 10 years,  
GELOs 8 and 9 still do not have rubrics to measure them, indicating that these learning  
outcomes are not easily measurable.

The third concern is participation in the assessment process. Many faculty members do  
not find TK 20 a particularly easy or useful tool. Thus, they have stopped participating  
in the assessment process. Although the rate of use of TK20 remains relatively good, it  
has been declining over the past several years.

Understanding what GE was intended to do informs how good assessment practice can  
be used to continuously improve both individual courses and the overall program.  
Continual improvement is a key to student success and retention.

**Current Status of the GE Program**

The Committee obtained and reviewed two documents regarding the current status of  
the Gen Ed program. The first document is entitled “Relative Contribution of Top 10  
Credit Hours by GEDD” (general education designation description). This report
identifies the top 10 courses for each GE designation for the academic years 2010-11 through 2016-17. (See Appendix A\textsuperscript{1}).

The Committee identified the following patterns:

1. A majority of the credit hours are being taught by a relatively small number of courses. For every GE designation, over 50% of the credit hours are taken in the top 10 courses, the least coverage at 59.5% for Social Sciences (S) and the highest coverage at 93.2% for finance and quantitative (FQ) within the 2016-17 academic year (note that if foreign languages (FL) are removed from Global Studies, their top 10 account for 96.2% of all credits). For 6 of the 9 designations, over 70% of the credit hours are covered by the top 10 courses.

2. When considering the number of unique course listings per designation, per year, we used a measure of efficiency denoted as “high-productivity percent” in Appendix A. This is computed as \(10/(\text{number of listings})\), i.e. it is the fraction of the top 10 out of the total number of unique courses listed. For example, in 2016-17, FQ had 19 unique listings, so its high-productivity percent was 52.6% (i.e. 10/19). On a year-to-year basis, the designations with higher values of this measure tended to have fewer course listings that produced low or zero credit hours.

3. For certain GE designations, the number of classes listed in the schedule has remained relatively low. These designations (HW, N, T, FQ, in particular) tend to have higher values of the high-productivity percentage and a lower number of low-enrolled courses. It is also important to note that for these designations, the “remaining” courses (those not in the top 10) may also collectively produce low numbers of credit hours. For example, in 2016-17, the top 10 FQ courses produced 93.2% of the credit hours generated, so the remaining 9 courses produced only 6.8% of the credit hours that year.

4. For some designations, there are typically high numbers of unique courses listed every year. In these designations, the top 10 courses produced a smaller percentage of the overall credit hours but still well above 50%, and the designations have higher numbers of low-enrolled courses. For example, in 2016-17, there were 96 unique H courses offered, with a high-productivity percent of 10.4% (10/96). The top 10 courses produced 61.4% of the credit hours, while the remaining 86 courses produced 38.6% of the credit hours, and of these 86 courses, there were 56 with low-enrollment.

5. Across all designations, significant numbers of courses were listed that produced no credit hours for a given year. There were also many courses that produced a relatively low number of credit hours, apparently being offered with enrollment below the typical cancellation threshold (estimated at 14 or fewer students for this section). This appears to be more pronounced in the F, H, and GS designations.

\textsuperscript{1} The Committee could not determine the authors of this report and discovered that it apparently contains some factual errors. Therefore, we used WebFocus and similar tools to re-generate (and supplement) the data for use in the appendix as included.
6. Even as more courses are added to the GE program, the dominant courses have consistently maintained high percentages in their credit hour production. For most designations, the top 10 (on a yearly basis) have generated a relatively consistent percentage of the credit hours between 2010 and 2017, with some yearly fluctuation. In some cases, the percentage has actually increased.

7. A few courses cover a very high (relative) percentage of credit hours. For 8 of the 10 designations, positions 1 and 2 of the top 10 courses cover double-digit percentages (i.e., greater than 10%).

8. Certain designations have dropped significantly in credit hour production since 2011, yet they continue to have a high number of courses listed on the yearly schedules. The enrollment in these designations has mostly stabilized in the past few years, and the Committee attributes the early drop to the re-distribution that occurred in the new (current) GE program, as well as the large number of remaining students in fiscal years 2011 and 2012 who were still taking classes under the prior GE program.

9. New categories have experienced significant gains in the number of credit hours. This is likely due to similar reasons as in the prior point: in 2010-12, there were many students still using the old GE program who didn’t need classes in the new designations. Additionally, there may also be significant numbers of these courses that are being taken by majors but which cannot be counted for GE purposes.

These trends suggest we may not need hundreds of GE courses when the top 90 courses are providing, on average, over 70% of all GE credit hours. Having so many courses in general education creates too large a number of choices for students, resulting in low course enrollments and course cancellations that leave departments struggling with faculty course loads and assignments. It also tends to make enrollment management more difficult, as it becomes more difficult to accurately predict future course enrollments.

The second document is entitled, “General Education Analysis”, prepared by Fawn Skarsten, Director of Institutional Analysis. This document contains information about the Gen Ed courses offered between fall 2011 and Spring 2017. (See Appendix B)

The Committee identified the following patterns:

1. We are offering too many courses on a semester-by-semester basis. For all GE designations, more course sections are offered than are actually sufficiently enrolled. The report shows that on average, 87% of course sections offered have sufficient enrollment to run. Humanities has the greatest difference in number of sections offered versus sections enrolled, at 80% of sections with sufficient enrollment; whereas natural science has 91% of offered sections with sufficient enrollment.

2. Upper level (300 and 400 level) courses with sufficient enrollment during the period represent 27% of Gen Ed courses offered. Of this amount, 21% are
capstone courses. Comparing this information with the previous report of the top 10 courses by designation:
  a. Health and Well Being has 4 upper level courses (300 level) in the top 10 courses, providing 26.3% of the credit hours in this designation (as of 2016-17).
  b. NUR, HCR, PSY, and PHS offer the most upper level (300 level) courses in several GE designations, most of which provide less than 10% of the credit hours in the designation.

3. Overall, 35% of Gen Ed courses require pre-requisites (excluding Capstone courses). Finance and quantitative, foreign language, and natural science have the greatest percentages of courses requiring prerequisites, 83.53%, 48.85%, and 54.41%, respectively. The report does not distinguish whether the prerequisites are for basic skills (e.g., Math 090), for the second course in a sequence (e.g., French II would require French I as a prerequisite), or for another GE course (e.g., Psychology 100 being required by another Psychology GE course). Fine Arts designation has the lowest percentage of prerequisites at 5.83%.

4. Regarding GE assessment, the report identifies the following:
   a. Before rubrics were developed and before the TK 20 system was implemented, learning outcomes 1, 2, and 5 were assessed.
   b. The rotation continued as:


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<th>Learning outcomes</th>
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<td>3 and 10</td>
<td>2013-14</td>
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<td>7 and 12</td>
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c. Learning outcomes 6, 8 and 9 have yet to be assessed. Currently, no rubrics exist for learning outcomes 8 and 9.

d. The volume of assessments (i.e., faculty participation) has declined every year since Fall 2013.

e. Assessment data varies not only by learning outcome but also by GE designations. Only 5 of the 9 GE designations had assessments for all 8 learning outcomes assessed during the 2013-17 period. The most assessed learning goal was number 3, critical thinking, for which 40% of all assessments have occurred.

General Principles of GE Program

Examining the available GE documents, the Committee reviewed and discussed the characteristics and aims of the GE program. The intentions are clear that the types of classes that should form the GE curriculum should develop certain intellectual approaches (cultural thinking, scientific inquiry, creative thinking, critical thinking, etc.) thought to be useful in a set of domains (understanding one’s self, one’s culture/surroundings, being a citizen, etc.). Like our predecessors, the Committee wants general education to be integrated across the curriculum and interdisciplinary
among units. Integrated GE means that the curriculum knits together the diversity of methods and disciplinary approaches into an understanding of human inquiry generally. Such a vision requires all the units at least be able to contribute, as they have distinctive methods and approaches that help define their areas of study. Students will understand the connections and differences among the different areas of study while developing transferable skills (critical thinking, scientific inquiry, creative thinking, etc.) valued by academia and employers.

Although the goal of integrated GE is widely accepted, the Committee notes some additional issues increasing the proliferation of courses. First, some GE courses require a prerequisite course. Some prerequisites are necessary, for example, basic math or English, but when a course requires another course in the same discipline (e.g., PSY 100 being a prerequisite for a higher-level GE course), we hold the opinion that the higher-level course should not be a GE course.

Second, the original intent was to integrate GE throughout the curriculum, at all course levels (100, 200, 300, 400). This intention led to both a proliferation of courses (many courses having prerequisites as discussed above) and to students taking more GE in just a few disciplines rather than receiving broad disciplinary exposure. Additionally, the professional schools (SOM, SON, SHPS) prefer to have students complete their GE requirements in their first two years of coursework, at the 100 and 200 level, because their upper level coursework fills their time at the 300 and 400 level.

Third, by definition, GE courses should be of interest to non-majors. Some of the current GE courses are closer to major courses than non-major courses. When majors in the discipline take these courses, they count as GE credits even though the students have not been exposed to something outside their major. A GE course should be broad enough to attract students who are not majoring in the discipline and allow them to succeed in the course.

Fourth, to help reduce proliferation of GE courses and keep course enrollments higher, departments or prefixes could limit the number of GE courses. For example, a prefix or department could limit their GE courses to two distribution areas, making it harder for a student to take GE within his/her own major.

Fifth, if the GE learning outcomes (GELOs) are to be considered of equal importance, each one needs to be equally covered within the entire GE program, in terms of both the curriculum and the assessment process. By way of example, the critical thinking GELO should be covered in a similar number of courses as the written work GELO. Currently, some GELOs are selected much more often than the others for GE designated courses.

To this end, we recommend the following requirements/restrictions:

1. No general education courses should have pre-requisites except for basic skill courses (e.g., Math 090 or English 111).
2. With the exception of capstone courses, no general education course should have an upper division number (300, 400) unless the department/discipline has no 100 or 200 level courses.
3. General education courses must be of interest to non-majors as well as majors. The courses should be broad enough to attract non-majors and not be so discipline specific that non-majors cannot succeed in the course.
4. Departments (or prefixes) should be limited to a maximum of two distribution area attributes.
5. GELOs need to be spread across courses in a more equitable distribution so that some are not avoided, since no weight distribution currently exists for the GELOs. All GELOs are currently of equal importance.

We believe these recommendations will accomplish two important goals: encouraging study from outside the student’s area of concentration and breaking down the tendency to silo the student’s GE studies.

Naturally, all these suggestions, if adopted, should have an appeal process. The appeal process applies to individual courses as well as a series of courses. We fully recognize, for example, that there are some disciplines that offer courses that embody three or more of the designations. If a department wished to offer GE courses in all three areas, they could apply for an override from GECC, explaining how they would meet all three designations. Similarly, there may be departments who only offer upper division courses – there could be corresponding overrides in that case.

**Designation Descriptions/Definitions**

One of the issues noted in the document review is that the current GE designation descriptions/definitions are rather vague. As discussed above, departments were making cases for being included in GE on the grounds that their discipline was included in a particular designation area (e.g., a traditional humanities course should automatically be an H designation). The Committee considered why the designations were included in the GE program, which is to say, what purpose the particular designation was serving with respect to the GE program.

The Committee felt the Natural Sciences description/definition was very clear and made a compelling case for inclusion in GE. The Committee reviewed and discussed each designation description, using the Natural Sciences description as a template. The Committee membership representation was comfortable in revising all but one designation – Health and Well Being. This resulted in the Committee inviting representatives from SHPS and SON to assist in the revision of this designation.

Appendix C presents the recommended revised designation descriptions and the current descriptions for comparison. These revised designations provide clearer criteria for including a course in GE and thus will aid GECC decisions with consistency over time.
Assessment Review

The assessment of GE courses and the program as a whole is very important for student success, and it is necessary and highly important for purposes of HLC accreditation. However, for the past five years, faculty participation in the GE assessment process has declined significantly.

Accordingly, the Committee examined the current set of General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs) rubrics. The review process included the following activities:

1. Focused on what types of skills and attributes our general education program seeks to develop in our students. To this end
   a. Outcomes were reviewed for an ability to be assessed
   b. Goals, potential indicators, and rubrics were rewritten to reflect accessibility and clarity
   c. Rubrics were condensed into fewer indicators and levels for easier and clearer use
2. Obtained the value rubrics from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and used the ones similar to our learning goals as a source of reference. We used the AAC&U rubrics and definitions to help develop our recommended definitions, indicators, and rubrics.
3. Invited members from other schools and departments not represented on the Committee to help develop some of the rubrics.

Appendix D summarizes the current GELOs and rubrics, the AAC&U value rubrics, and the Committee’s recommended definitions, indicators, and rubrics. The current rubrics and AAC&U value rubrics are included in the appendix for reference when reviewing the recommended rubrics.

The Committee tried to retain the essence of the original learning outcomes except for GELO’s 8 and 9. These learning outcomes dealt with specific discipline knowledge, which is not a goal of a general education program. Furthermore, these outcomes currently have no rubrics and have not been assessed since the general education program was adopted in 2010. Accordingly, the Committee recommends eliminating these learning outcomes and reducing the number of outcomes from 12 to 10.

The Committee recommends the following actions for GE assessment:

1. Adopt the recommended/revised definitions, indicators, and rubrics. Reduce the number of GELOs from 12 to 10.
2. For a course to maintain its GE designation, it must be assessed at a minimum of once per every 3 years.
3. To obtain sufficient and effective continuous improvement, the GELOs need more frequent assessment. The assessment of all of the GELOs need to be performed more frequently than the current six year rotation. For the
recommended 10 learning goals, the Committee recommends a rotation of three years – GELOs 1, 4, 7, 10; GELOs 2, 5, 8; and GELO 3, 6, 9 or a similar pattern.

4. Implement a GE program review on a regular schedule, for example every six years.

Renewal Process for General Education Courses

Each year, GECC will generate a list of the courses that have reached the three-year period on their general education designation. GECC will contact the chairs of the departments to explain which courses are up for review and provide a short form for the chair to complete. The form should contain the following request:

Course XYZ 123 has reached the end of its designation as a general education course. If you wish to renew its GE designation, please provide the following information:

A. How often has this course been offered and had sufficient enrollment during the current period?
B. Was this course regularly assessed through the general education assessment process? If so, how?
C. What alterations or improvements were made as a result of this assessment?
D. Please describe how this course satisfies its designation description/definition?

GECC will then consider this information on balance with the other requests. It is expected that regularly offered, assessed, and improved courses that achieve the ends of their distribution description would be renewed. This process should also serve to prune the number of courses in GE through attrition, reducing the number of courses to a more appropriate level as determined by the departments and not by GECC. The process should also make sure the GE courses in the various programs are regularly offered.

Conclusion

In summary, based on the Committee’s review, we make the following recommendations:

A. Regarding general principles of the GE program:
   1. No general education courses should have pre-requisites except for basic skill courses only (e.g., Math 090 or English 111).
   2. With the exception of capstone course, no general education course should have an upper division number (300, 400) unless the department/discipline has no 100 or 200 level courses.
   3. General education courses must be of interest to non-majors as well as majors. The courses should be broad enough to attract non-majors and not be so discipline specific that non-majors cannot succeed in the course.
   4. Departments (or prefixes) limited to two distribution area attributes.
5. GELOs need to be spread across courses in a more equal distribution so that some are not avoided, given no weight distribution exists for the GELOs.

B. Adopt the revised designation descriptions/definitions as presented in Appendix C.

C. Concerning GE assessment:
   1. Adopt the recommended/revised definitions, indicators, and rubrics presented in Appendix D. Reduce the number of GELOs from 12 to 10.
   2. Implement a course review process to ensure that in order to maintain their GE designation, all courses must be assessed at a minimum of once per every 3 years.
   3. Assess GELOs more frequently to obtain sufficient and effective continuous improvement. The assessment of all of the GELOs needs to be done more frequently than the current once every six years. For the recommended 10 learning goals, the Committee recommends a rotation of three years – GELOs 1, 4, 7, 10; GELOs 2, 5, 8; and GELO 3, 6, 9 or a similar pattern.

D. Implement a GE program review on a regular schedule, for example every six years.