Overview of the First Year Experience Review

Preface:

The GECC thanks the First Year Experience Review ad hoc committee for their hard work and recommendations. This document is an overview of the FYE review and is presented for discussion purposes.

Background:1

Since officially implemented in 2010 to introduce students to the General Education Program at UM-Flint,2 First Year Experience courses have had a set of goals aimed at addressing the general goals of the General Education Program, which are:3

1. To integrate students into the learning community at UM-Flint;
2. To enhance students’ written, verbal, and non-verbal communication skills;
3. To enhance students’ breadth and interconnectedness of knowledge;
4. To engage students’ understanding of citizenship, local to global.

To accomplish this, First Year Experience courses were expected to be multidisciplinary,4 provide orientation to higher education,5 contain a research and writing component,6 and include a civic engagement component,7 as these requirements would address, and partially fulfill, the following five specific General Education learning outcomes:8

Learning Outcome #1: Reflect on one’s own learning processes
Learning Outcome #2: Demonstrate facility with research methods
Learning Outcome #5: Produce competent written work
Learning Outcome #10: Use multiple perspectives and methodologies to analyze real or

1 See the 2010 First Year Experience Request for Proposals issued by the UM-Flint General Education Curriculum Advisory Committee.
2 According to its description on the university’s General Education web-page (https://www.umflint.edu/gened/fye), “This course is multidisciplinary in approach and exposes students to multiple perspectives of a particular theme. These topics can vary broadly but all make connections between local, national and global issues. In addition, students learn how to navigate through the university community and are introduced to research and information literacy skills that will benefit them throughout their academic careers. Students entering the university with fewer than 25 transfer credit hours must fulfill the FYE requirement within their first academic year. Please refer to the schedule of classes for specific sections and topics.”
3 https://www.umflint.edu/gened/goals
5 Part of which “should be specific to UM-Flint and involve exposure to local procedures, locations, and resources” (2010 First Year Experience RFP).
6 “The key point is that students begin their exposure to research and writing at the college level.” (2010 First Year Experience RFP).
7 “This may take the form of service learning or community involvement. It may also take the form of reflection upon the larger socio-political implications of the topic under study” (2010 First Year Experience RFP).
8 https://www.umflint.edu/gened/goals
hypothesised problems
Learning Outcome #12: Apply knowledge to complex issues such as social justice, globalization, economic growth and distribution, environmental sustainability, public health, etc., in increasingly broad spheres of influence

Over the years, FYE courses have not been able to meet these multiple goals entirely. There has also been great variation in course design, and in some instances detachment from the original General Education objectives. This has led to concerns about the FYE and its critical role in General Education.

Ad Hoc Committee Findings

After reviewing several documents and data,9 and conducting discussions with previous FYE coordinators and committee members with a long-standing record as FYE faculty, two major concerns emerged:

1. **Hyper-variability of FYE courses:** FYE courses vary greatly in their key objectives, balance of activities,10 design, and relationship to general education. Syllabi show variability in whether courses:
   a. are text-book driven or structured in a multidisciplinary way with different types of materials;
   b. focus on student success and UM-Flint resources or embed skill development;
   c. focus on experiencing the community or on classroom-based activities with traditional reading/critical thinking/writing;
   d. focus on the local, national, or global, or on the interconnections of these;
   e. include “research” via training in library use and the discernment of types of information, or via the actual production of knowledge by evaluation of information and ideas.

Positive factors that explain this hyper-variability: 1) the difficulty in pursuing the broad list of FYE objectives comprehensively and meaningfully in a single course; 2) few faculty and administrative resources for consistency oversight.11

Negative consequences of hyper-variability: 1) lack of adherence to standardized outcomes (both with regards to the FYE stated objectives and to its role within general education), with resulting difficulty in conducting meaningful assessment; 2) student confusion, with resulting complaints.12

2. **Lack of consistent integration of FYE courses into the General Education Program:** due to the variability of FYE courses, not all contain significant elements for developing

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9 These included initial General Education and FYE documents, past and existing FYE course syllabi, relevant assessment data, 2014-2016 student evaluations, and courses in 20 other first-year programs.

10 Including variability in the amount of effort students are required to put forth.

11 This was exacerbated by the demand for sufficient sections of FYE courses.

12 These include students’ perceptions of the amount of effort required.
university-level reading, writing and critical thinking skills, or content for preparing students for the challenges of future courses.

As a foundational course in General Education, and a key element for student retention and success in UM-Flint’s academic environment, all FYE courses should share common elements for developing university-level reading, writing and critical thinking skills, and related dispositions, with rich, university-level content. This will add meaning and value to students’ learning experience within the General Education framework.

**Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations**

1. Rename the UNV 100 course as First-Year Seminar (FYS) to distinguish it from the broader First-Year Experience (FYE).
2. Emphasize consistency and tight links of FYS to the General Education Program.
3. Standardize the First-Year Seminar by renewing the following key elements:
   a. **FYS purposes.**
   b. general **course design** elements, such as revised and consistent course syllabi, emphasis on reading and writing skills, and courses with different primary content areas.
   c. key **learning objectives and outcomes** that address the need to strengthen reading and writing skills as students move into coursework in a variety of disciplines and practice areas, and integrate into higher education and learning at UM-Flint.
   d. **learning environment** characteristics, such as smaller class size, courses that provide cross-disciplinary knowledge through a multi-perspective approach, and challenging pedagogies that stimulate active engagement, and cultivate a culture of respect and community.
   e. general **assessment procedures**, such as the following: multi-method, two-year assessment cycle with regular feedback; data collection of FYS learning environment with program feedback; data collection of faculty classroom effectiveness and program engagement; analysis of assessment outcomes and processes for ongoing program improvement.

4. Identify resources and support structure for improving FYS

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14 Proposed language: “The main purpose of the First-Year Seminar at the University of Michigan-Flint is to provide all first-year students with the foundation for success in their education in and beyond UM-Flint. It is the initial building block of the General Education curriculum, a sequence of courses focused on students’ intellectual and academic development and grounded in liberal education. The FYS prepares students to further pursue this liberal education—an education that develops students as readers, critical thinkers, writers, and participants, who have some knowledge of the key areas of humanities, social sciences, science and technology, and the arts.” (FYE Ad Hoc Committee Report, p. 11).