Towards a Re-structured FYE Program

Report of the FYE Program Review Committee
to the General Education Curriculum Committee

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Executive Summary

Charged by the GECC to examine the existing FYE program, the ad hoc FYE Program Review Committee engaged in information gathering, discussion, and development of recommendations between June 2016 and July 2017.

We identified two major concerns in the existing FYE program:

- hyper-variability of courses
- lack of integration of the FYE course into UM-Flint’s General Education program

To align the widely varying courses and integrate the FYE into general education, we make these key recommendations:

- Clarify the purpose of the course as supporting students in their transition to the university academic learning environment and positioning them for academic success and rename the course a First-Year Seminar (FYS). As the initial building block of the General Education curriculum, the main purpose of the First-Year Seminar at the University of Michigan-Flint is to provide all first-year students with a foundation for success in their education. The FYS prepares students to pursue a liberal education that develops them 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.

- Refocus the course and its learning outcomes to more closely reflect these purposes and to appropriately and realistically reflect what can be accomplished in a single first-year course: Understand the purposes of higher education; develop productive intellectual habits and learning competencies; develop a constructive attitude towards learning challenges; develop an integrative understanding of the course theme; and integrate into the University of Michigan-Flint environment.

- Design and offer content-rich, thematic courses that closely align with the designated purposes and intended learning outcomes. FYS courses should engage students in big and important questions and genuine, sustained inquiry while developing higher education skills and dispositions.
• Require a learning environment that includes appropriately qualified faculty; small class size (1:20 or 25 faculty-to-student ratio) with one instructor; comprehensive written syllabi; an emphasis on both classroom and independent learning as vital; use of a range of appropriate pedagogies that challenge and stimulate active engagement with course material; classroom cultures of integrity, civility and respect; community building among course participants; and support for participation in course-related co-curricular activities and use of campus services.

• Designate a Faculty Director and Faculty Advisory Board with adequate administrative resources to oversee the FYS program. **Seek funding/support for the program and for faculty engaging in development/re-development of courses.**

• Develop meaningful assessment of learning and of the FYS program.

• Implement a transition plan that extends from Fall 2017 to Fall 2019.
Introduction

Background. In May 2016, the General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC) created an ad hoc committee to review the existing First Year Experience program and make recommendations for improvement. GECC asked this FYE Program Review Committee (from here forward referred to as “the Committee”) to initially report back to them so that they could consider the recommendations and disseminate the report to faculty governance bodies and ultimately to the Governing Faculty.

First-year experience (FYE) courses were officially introduced into the University catalog in academic year (AY) 2010-2011, after a couple years of developing and piloting courses. The intention was to introduce students “to the goals and expected outcomes of the General Education program at the beginning of their career[s]” (Barnes, 2011, p. 2). Those goals were to integrate students into the learning community of the University of Michigan – Flint; enhance students’ written, verbal, and non-verbal communications skills; enhance students’ breadth and interconnectedness of knowledge; engage students’ understanding of citizenship, from local to global; and deliver a quality first-year experience course.

However, over the years, FYE courses have been unable to meet these multiple broad goals in their entirety. The wide scope of these objectives led to great variation in course design and a certain detachment from General Education objectives. Many recent FYE course proposals resemble introductory courses in areas of study. Student Government has shared with the GECC some student concerns about the design and variability of FYE courses. In addition,

- There has been no formal review of FYE courses since their introduction.
- GECC raised a set of questions about the operation of existing FYE courses.
- Institutional standards and student success require continuous improvement in our programs.
UM-Flint has a Higher Learning Commission accreditation visit in 2019. An FYE course review demonstrates commitment to continuous improvement in our programs.

The Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) study identified FYE course offerings as an opportunity to increase retention and persistence.

Academic Affairs regards the effectiveness of General Education and the FYE as a key curricular issue.

Concerns about the FYE are particularly warranted given the number of students it touches, its function as a gateway course to university study, and its critical role in the General Education Program. Institutional analysis data for academic years (AY) 2011-2012 to 2015-2016 indicate that the total number of FYE courses approved over that time span was 22. Between AY 2011 and AY 2016, 139 sections of FYE were offered. Specifically, the number of courses ranged from a low of 9 (2013-14) to a high of 16 (2015-16). The number of sections offered ranged from a low of 21 (2011-12) to a high of 33 (2015-16). During the 2011-2016 period, FYE courses were offered mostly in the Fall semester (total of 82 sections), followed by the Winter semester (total of 46 sections), and the Summer (total of 11 sections). No courses were offered in the Spring semester. Of the 22 courses offered during 2011-2016, seven courses are no longer offered, but new courses were introduced each year (e.g., three in 2014-15 and two in 2015-16). The FYE program served an average of 729 students per year and a total of approximately 4,370 between 2011-12 and 2016-2017.

This report documents the review of the UM-Flint’s FYE courses, describing the processes used in the review, the emerging issues, and the Committee’s recommendations for improvement.

**The Committee’s work.** To arrive at its analysis and recommendations, the Committee used several sources of information. It began by looking at the UM-Flint General Education reform of 2008-2009 and the rationales that led to the development of FYE courses. It examined syllabi for past and existing FYE courses. Members talked with administrators who previously oversaw the UNV 100 course, asking them about their experience and for their recommendations. The
Committee examined existing FYE documents and relevant assessment data, including student evaluations of the FYE courses conducted between Fall 2014 and Fall 2016. The Committee examined courses offered in about twenty selected other first-year programs, both through materials from the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) and through college and university websites. It considered the experience of Committee members with long records of teaching FYE courses and participating in FYE faculty group meetings. Members were also familiar with the literature on the transition into post-secondary learning, student academic success, and the liberal arts and sciences. The Committee met twenty times from June 2016 to July 2017 to compile and review information, discuss the FYE, draft materials, and write this report. It engaged in these activities to build upon and continue the important process of GE reform in which the larger campus community participated eight years ago.

**Two major concerns.** In reviewing the FYE, two strong overarching concerns emerged: (1) the “hyper-variability” of courses and (2) the lack of consistent integration of the FYE into the University of Michigan-Flint’s General Education Program. The originally proposed broad scope of the FYE and its lack of administrative resources and faculty leadership appeared closely related to both problems. Concerns about institutional consistency and accountability, educational value, and the nature of the course drove the discussion and recommendations.

**Hyper-variability.** The Committee noted that UNV 100 courses vary greatly in their key objectives, balance of course activities and course design, and relationship to general education, which is understood as a developmental sequence of courses mainly in the liberal arts and sciences. Syllabi vary along several dimensions: (1) whether courses are textbook-driven (resembling standard introductory courses in the field) or structured in a more naturalistic and multi-disciplinary way through an interesting question and different types of materials; (2) whether courses primarily focus on how to be a successful college student and the services available at UM-Flint or embed skill development in an interesting and challenging substantive question; (3) whether courses are almost entirely devoted to observing or experiencing the community (performing and visual arts, schools, neighborhoods) or involve
classroom-based activities and more traditional reading/critical thinking/writing; (4) whether courses focus on the local, national or global levels and/or on connections among these; and (5) whether courses prominently include “research,” defined variously as training in library use, discernment about types and qualities of information, or actual production of knowledge through assembly and evaluation of information and ideas. Administrators and FYE-participating faculty noted that there was no FYE course, just a collection of courses under the umbrella label, UNV 100. A list of syllabi examined and more detail on variability are included as Appendix A.

The wide variability along multiple course dimensions is likely driven by several factors. The original FYE design included an extremely broad and diverse list of FYE objectives. It was not feasible for instructors to pursue this list comprehensively and meaningfully within a single course. To better understand this limitation, we conducted a review of similar courses offered at other institutions. We identified courses ranging from 1-credit courses that introduced students to campus resources to 2- or 3-credit courses that focused on study and academic strategies, to 3-credit courses that were thematic first-year seminars. No single course was designed to combine interdisciplinary academic work focused on a theme, community engagement and civic learning, a wide range of study and learning skills, a research project, and introduction to university resources in the way the UM-Flint FYE came to be understood. Another factor driving variability is that few faculty and administrative resources have been devoted to overseeing consistency. In addition, administrators noted that generating enough sections took precedence over adherence to certain shared guiding purposes and principles and course design elements.

“The need for staffing on terms faculty were willing to accept resulted in sacrificing consistency and standardization. We tried to issue guiding principles, but those did not make a difference to the coherence and standardization of the program. We didn’t really have an FYE course, just lots of different courses under the umbrella of UNV 100.” –Academic administrator
Wide variation in the type and nature of the course has serious negative consequences. First, great variability in key elements suggests the course is not sufficiently standardized to conform to stated objectives and is not serving a consistent function with respect to general education. Offering the course under a single catalog number is misleading. At a time that the university and many accrediting bodies emphasize set learning outcomes for similarly numbered courses, UNV 100 fails to support adherence to standardized outcomes. Meaningful assessment becomes difficult or impossible. Second, great variability is confusing to students and inevitably gives rise to student complaints. Some students declare courses with serious reading and writing demands “unfair,” while others note that they learned nothing and that the course was just a university scheme to take their money through empty and irrelevant credit hours. A more standardized and educationally sound approach to this course might mitigate this problem.

“When you hear that students in the other UNV classes just have to do a paper or two to pass with an A, while we are reading two books, have three exams, a huge course project that we have to present, and other projects, I think it is not fair to make it worth the same credit. If you are going to make a course required that has multiple sections, regulate them instead of letting them be inconsistent for the same credit.” –Student comment on FYE evaluation form

“I wish the course was more streamlined for all courses. For other sections they had a more relaxed easier course than some that were more rigorous like my own. I wish there was a standard amongst all because the variety really creates room for discrepancies.”—Student comment on FYE evaluation form

Problematic relationship to General Education. Not all FYE courses contain significant elements developing university-level reading, writing and critical thinking skills or content that prepare students to meet challenges of further courses within or outside their majors. The FYE is the foundational course in General Education, a program that is meant to shape the skills, dispositions and knowledge of all our students. Therefore, the FYE should support the skills that will begin to transform students into university-level learners and support their moving both up (through levels of courses) and around (to topics and majors) the academic curriculum. The wide scope of the original FYE objectives and lack of structure and oversight mean that
instructors focus on different objectives. Some instructors focus more on civic engagement or learning strategies, providing less emphasis on reading, critical thinking, and writing.

“\textit{This entire class was a complete waste of my time and money. . . The general how to succeed in college presentations could have been presented in a single presentation during orientation for incoming students. An entire semester of this first year experience is unnecessary. I do not feel as though this class has prepared me for semesters to come at all.}” -- Student comment on FYE evaluation form

The Committee sees the FYE as a critical foundation for further learning in a wide range of courses and a key element of successful student retention and integration into the academic environment at the University of Michigan-Flint. It is essential that all sections of the course share key elements reflecting these purposes. \textit{In particular, as Arum and Roska stated, reading comprehension, critical thinking and writing skills, and related dispositions are vitally important to students’ educational persistence and success regardless of major and in relation to further general education. Boosting basic university-level skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking among incoming students is critical to a successful transition from K-12 to university-level study} (2011). In addition, general education involves broad content exposure. UNV 100 is an opportunity to illustrate and introduce university-level content. With rich content, students ascribe value to their learning experience and develop a meaningful, integrated idea of general education as a transformational experience, deepening and broadening their understanding and capacities (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado and Gurin, 2002; Bain 2004).
General recommendations and structure of the report. To emphasize the academic place of the FYE, we suggest renaming the course First-Year Seminar to distinguish it from the vitally important First-Year Experience, a broader label for a variety of first-year experiences that go beyond the academic. We suggest that other important courses, such as introductions to specific disciplines, community-based explorations, and service learning, be offered outside the UNV 100 designation. While the FYS should also integrate students into the general university environment, it should do so by encouraging participation in on-campus co-curricular programs and use of services that complement the class’s academic objectives and themes.

We suggest that the First-Year Seminar become more standardized in certain key elements, while maintaining instructor autonomy in many critical aspects of course design. Specifically, we propose that all FYS instructors adhere to FYS purposes, general course design elements, key learning objectives and outcomes, general assessment procedures, and learning environment characteristics. However, the individual FYE instructor continues to generate an overall significant question that breaks disciplinary boundaries and opens rich areas for exploration (the course theme), creates the course architecture, selects course materials, decides upon teaching methods, and develops specific assessment assignments. Instructors should be committed to participating in the First-Year Seminar viewed as a critical institutional curricular program.

To unify and strengthen the FYS program as stated above, the Committee generated purposes, standards, and procedures to guide development and implementation of the FYS. We have therefore made explicit key course purposes, learning objectives and outcomes, elements of course design, learning environment characteristics, faculty qualifications, and assessment practices. In the latter part of the report, we discuss administrative arrangements and procedures that are likely to achieve these course-level and programmatic results. In general, we emphasize the importance of consistency and tight links to the General Education Program and consistency among the various elements (purposes, learning objectives and outcomes, course design, learning environment, faculty qualifications, assessment practices) of the FYS.
**purposes and learning outcomes**

In view of the broad scope of the original purposes of the FYE program, the variability of FYE courses, and the lack of course alignment with General Education, the FYE Review Committee began by generating a renewed list of purposes, mirroring documents that had previously existed and intending to align various sections of the course. These broader purposes informed recommendations for course design, learning outcomes, learning environment, faculty participation, program implementation, management and assessment. The full version of the Committee’s recommended guidelines is attached as Appendix B.

Critical themes underlying the recommended purposes are: (1) The FYS must be envisaged as a fundamental and foundational part of the academic General Education program at UM-Flint; (2) The FYS is a critical effort to integrate students into the academic learning environment of the university, imparting its general expectations and developing basic academic and learning skills; (3) The FYS requires intentional and purposeful pedagogy aligned with its educational purposes; and (4) The FYS cannot and should not aim to be everything to all people and accomplish widely disparate goals but to focus on key agreed and achievable objectives.

We clarify the purpose of the FYS as follows:

The main purpose of the First-Year Seminar at the University of Michigan-Flint is to provide all first-year students with a 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.
In accordance with these purposes, we propose a set of learning outcomes that simplify and focus the previous list of FYE outcomes. These learning outcomes are allied with but also in some cases differentiated from more general GE learning outcomes.

We focus primarily on academic outcomes that support students’ success and integration into the academic sphere of the university. As an academic first-year seminar, the FYS serves to model intellectual discourse, introduce college-level scholarship, and facilitate academic engagement (Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner, 2013). Academic motivation and success are a critical part of student retention: “Clearly the most important condition that fosters student retention is learning. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are institutions that are successful in retaining their students” (Tinto, 1999, p.5). Retention and graduation are important outcomes the FYS seeks to support, as are a range of cognitive, socio-cognitive and democratic sensibilities. Among the success-related sensibilities Hurtado (2003) has identified are analytic problem-solving, attributional complexity, perspective-taking, and pluralistic orientation. FYS learning outcomes address the need to strengthen reading and writing as students move into course work beyond their first semester in a variety of disciplines and practice areas, while also helping them integrate into higher education and learning at UM-Flint specifically.

We also encourage course attention to co-curricular events and resources which enrich learning and help students integrate into the university as a social environment. Exposure to a diversity of perspectives across a variety of settings--both academic and social--is essential to student learning and to the development of understanding across difference (Hurtado, Dey, Gurin & Gurin, 2003). Active co-curricular participation strengthens students’ sense that they are active agents in the classroom and facilitates integration into the campus environment (Astin, 1997).

The following course learning outcomes can be assessed by various course-level as well as more general instruments:

1. Understand the purposes of higher education
   a. Demonstrate an understanding of the meaning, purpose and value of a university education
b. Understand the nature and purposes of general (liberal) education and UM-Flint’s General Education Program

2. Develop productive intellectual habits and learning competencies
   a. Demonstrate active reading practices, reading persistence, and reading comprehension
   b. Exhibit information literacy, i.e. the ability to identify types and categories of information and to select, access and critically evaluate information from a variety of sources
   c. Produce competent writing

3. Develop a constructive attitude towards learning challenges
   a. Demonstrate academic engagement through regular attendance and participation in course activities
   b. Understand constructive feedback on academic work and use it to develop skills and strengthen performance
   c. Reflect on their own learning processes

4. Develop an integrative understanding of the course theme
   a. Understand and apply concepts, arguments and information in the thematic area of the course
   b. Demonstrate complex thinking through logical integration of ideas and information

5. Integrate into the University of Michigan-Flint environment
   a. Identify or access university-based co-curricular programs and events that promote academic and personal development
   b. Identify or access university services that support academic and personal development

Course design, learning environment, and faculty

The learning outcomes identified above suggest the key elements of all courses and a necessary attention to the developmental stage of students with respect to general skills and dispositions on the one hand and specific content on the other. In accordance with the purposes of the FYS and its course and learning outcomes guidelines, we reaffirm some of the existing learning environment guidelines and recommend some changes. In addition, we recommend FYS faculty demonstrate certain competencies and capacities related to the re-envisioned program. Because of the increased emphasis on reading and writing in the FYS, consistent consultation and cooperation with the UM-Flint English Department and its First-Year Writing Program will
be vital. The FYS is intended to complement and not supplant existing reading and writing courses.

**Course design.** As noted earlier, course design and its relationship to the General Education program have varied widely, including courses that are introductions to disciplines, primarily observational courses, service learning courses, mainly skill-development courses, and thematic explorations. Research shows that embedding skill and disposition development in meaningful course content results in learning gains (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado and Gurin, 2002) and that interesting content motivates learning (Bain, 2004). Faculty modelling and students collectively engaging in substantive inquiry assist student engagement and development. Courses with considerable reading and writing are essential to university-level skill development and engage students more (Light, 2001). In view of the importance of reading and writing and the way in which learning and thinking occur through language, we suggest collaboration between the FYS program and the English Department’s First-Year Writing Program.

To overcome the wide variability in course design and reaffirm the FYS’s relationship to academic inquiry and skills, we recommend that FYS courses engage students in big and important questions and genuine, sustained inquiry while developing higher education skills and dispositions. We aim to develop a commitment to learning rooted in curiosity about content and confidence regarding skills. The FYS program should offer a variety of courses anchored in different primary content areas but oriented toward big and interesting ideas crossing artificial boundaries between areas of inquiry. Anchoring courses in primary content

"The most valuable aspect of this course is how my instructor stressed the importance of using our minds. When I say this I mean [the instructor] made students realize that we no longer have to regurgitate information that is found in a textbook, but we must now use critical thinking skills to display how we truly feel about certain topics. My instructor did a phenomenal job at preparing me for a higher education and I now understand why this course is required at this university." –Student comment on FYE evaluation form

areas in which instructors have broad scope and depth, appropriate skills and agility, and confidence and motivation has the potential to lead to more interesting, engaging, and
challenging courses. The courses should not resemble standard introductory courses in disciplines or be textbook-driven.

Appended to the report (in Appendix C) are examples of first-year courses from other institutions that seem to ask an overall significant question that breaks disciplinary boundaries and opens rich areas for exploration. Included among such courses at other institutions are “Chance” (which examines the role of chance in our lives and how we use probability and statistics); “The Local Watershed”; “Heroes: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Deeds” (a course that looks at the “hero” in literature, popular culture, politics, and society); “Malcolm X and Martin Luther King” (their lives, important texts, impacts); “African-American Detective Fiction”; “Civil Disobedience”; and many others.

In addition, the visibility of FYE course design to students has been variable. FYE syllabi and student surveys suggest that not all FYE faculty present comprehensive course syllabi. Some faculty present partial syllabi, complemented by online or other short documents, so that the student is unable to see the course as a whole through the syllabus. Some syllabi set out
classroom management matters, basic grading policies and rough course schedules, but do little to conceptually frame the course.

We recommend that instructors develop and present comprehensive syllabi. A full syllabus emphasizes the point that there are integrated intellectual purposes at the heart of university courses. It can also serve as an important practical reference throughout the semester, helping students gauge the volume of work and think about pacing their study. A full syllabus will strengthen intentional teaching and learning and make clear the respective responsibilities of instructors and students. Syllabi may include summaries of key university policies (e.g. expected regular attendance, academic integrity) that send consistent core messages to students about the academic and general university environment.

Learning environment. In reviewing the way in which courses are being delivered, we noted a wide variety of instructor-student arrangements, including courses in which two or more instructors were team teaching to fifty or more students. In our view, this works against the close and consistent faculty-student relationship that the literature identifies as critical to learning progress, especially at early stages (Kuh et al., 2006). It also complicates instructor accountability for learning outcomes. It creates additional burdens on instructors to engage in extensive coordination and administrative work rather than in direct pedagogy.

“I’ve taught the FYE as both a single instructor and as a team-teacher. Although I enjoyed the team-teaching dynamic, it was immediately clear to me that I wasn’t able to foster the relationship with my students in a 50-student class that I was able to in a 25-student class. The smaller classes allowed me to create more meaningful relationships with students and provide more in-depth feedback to ultimately aid their success. The smaller class size is much more familiar for incoming students and ultimately more suitable for a class whose goal is to help students integrate into college.” –FYE Instructor
In the past one of the reasons for multiple instructors was to ensure “interdisciplinarity.” However, the idea of interdisciplinarity often proceeds from the assumption that students are already trained in the traditional, bounded disciplines and are being moved beyond what they have already learned. A second reason given for multiple instructors was that such a teaching arrangement would help students understand multiple perspectives by watching instructors interact and approach questions differently, even disagree. However, what often happened in larger courses was a rotation of faculty or sharing of faculty responsibilities. It is entirely possible for faculty themselves to have cross-disciplinary knowledge and sensitivity, to present different points of view, and to encourage the expression of multiple points of view among students. Multi-perspective courses might also, for example, include guest lectures or visits to community sites or other classrooms. Rather than looking to different points of view being embodied in different instructors, a more fruitful approach is to select faculty who can structure multi-perspective courses. As students enter the university and begin to master curriculum and grow academically in close partnership with instructors, the FYE can play an important part in demonstrating the learning relationship with faculty. An important element of the academic transition from high school to university is understanding the different role of faculty and new possibilities for positive student-faculty relationships in higher education, a critical element of student success (Kuh et al., 2016).

“**My relationship with my instructor is what I value the most. I would go into [the instructor’s] office hours and talk . . . about any help I needed on my work. [The instructor] is so educated in the course that I admire [the instructor] and I have learned a lot in the class by developing a relationship with [the instructor].”**—Student comment on FYE evaluation

Small, single-instructor class size also makes peers more visible to, and places them in more direct relationship to, each other. (We note that small continuous peer groups can be created in larger team-taught courses, but we note that overall small class size also creates a peer group). The literature also emphasizes the importance of peer relationships in learning (Astin, 1997; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012). Peer facilitators should be available to all FYS instructors.
We note that our recommendations incorporate many previous recommendations regarding the FYE learning environment. We recommend small class size with a single instructor and a faculty-student ratio no greater than 1:20-25 (Light, 2001). Due to the increased emphasis on reading and writing, an ideal class size would be twenty or fewer students. This smaller class size is recommended by the largest professional organization representing two- and four-year writing instructors (the Conference on College Composition and Communication, part of the National Council of Teachers of English), on the grounds that it allows instructors to provide timely and meaningful feedback for student learning. Research suggests that students make most progress when they are faced with clear and high expectations with adequate constructive feedback and support (Tinto, 2012). In addition, we recommend course expectations that regard both the classroom and independent learning practices as vital.

We suggest use of a range of appropriate course pedagogies that challenge students and stimulate active engagement with course material. We recommend classroom cultures of integrity, civility, and respect that build community and peer interaction.

“Working with a smaller group of students allowed for the development of close peer relationships. As a peer facilitator, I witnessed relationships flourish that otherwise may not have in different contexts. Without the small group sizes, I’m not sure honest, open dialogue would have been possible. . . In fact, I am still in contact with peer facilitators I had when I took the course, as well as students I had in my group when I facilitated. It is a unique, positive experience . . . to watch their journeys unfold and knowledge evolve . . .” – FYE peer facilitator

“Requiring students to engage in critical thinking and self-examination on a societal and ethical level is a fantastic idea for incoming college students. . . The emphasis on group exercises and a semester-long project also seemed like a good decision, regardless of people’s reluctance.” – Student comment on FYE evaluation

“What was most valuable was the teacher allowing open discussions during lectures and keeping the students involved. [The instructor] kept a positive attitude and didn’t let tension build up so everyone was able to chime in when they felt to.”—Student comment on FYE evaluation
**FYS faculty.** As we propose to re-envision the FYS as a curricular program with specific goals, it seems appropriate to identify faculty commitments and abilities that will contribute to the specific curriculum and program. The FYS will benefit from faculty who are invested in building basic university-level skills through broad and interesting question-driven courses and who demonstrate certain competencies and capacities related to the FYS. These competencies and capacities may be based on prior experience and/or development through program resources. Use of committed and able faculty will ensure that courses conform to the broad curricular vision and that student learning is focused on stated curricular objectives. A restructured FYS program has the potential to attract faculty who have the skills and availability to participate. Teaching the FYS and in the General Education program may more generally also be an attractive institutional recruiting point for prospective faculty in several disciplinary areas.

We recommend that in view of the revised academic and General Education purposes of the program, FYS courses be developed and taught by UM-Flint faculty. Interested faculty should not be excluded by rank or unit, and we support developmental opportunities for faculty interested in but not prepared to participate in the FYS curricular program.

We recommend that FYS faculty have a strong commitment to liberal arts teaching and learning and to General Education as a broad, sequential student academic development program. We recommend that faculty have the desire and ability to incorporate significant reading and writing in their courses. More specifically, we recommend that FYS faculty are able to:

- articulate a broad, interesting and significant question that can unify an FYE course and its thematic explorations, an overarching question that makes the course more than a set of disconnected explorations.
- demonstrate a broad and deep genuine interest in the question, other questions it generates, various existing discussions, and examples or applications surrounding the question
- reach beyond standard introductory disciplinary approaches to the question and engage in intentional course development, using multiple approaches to explore the question’s implications and applications, mining the theme and related resources to develop student curiosities, skills, and competencies (Light, 2001).
FYS Program: Process and Structure

Creating constructive and adequate processes for implementation is critical to establishing the FYS as part of General Education. Among the important elements for effective and sustainable curricular reform are leadership, time frames, use of data (including for assessment purposes), appropriate engagement of key constituents, and attention to the faculty governance processes (Gano-Phillips and Barnett, 2010). Therefore, we propose a number of structural and process elements to support the implementation of an FYS Program that aligns with the content of the General Education reform process that began in 2008-2009.

Several elements of the processes and structures related to FYE courses have resulted in the lack of a coherent program that is tightly tied to key purposes, learning environments, course design, and learning outcomes, as the Committee outlines above. Among the difficulties are individual course approval by shifting membership on the GECC, limited, opt-in development opportunities, and very few resources designated for administrative oversight. Moreover, following GECC course approval, instructors and course design have changed without further GECC review or input. FYE meetings have not been required, and attendance has been inconsistent. Program assessment has been minimal. These circumstances have led to both hyper-variability among courses and detachment from the General Education Program understood as an academic developmental sequence. Although instructors and administrators have made efforts to coordinate, monitor, improve, and align FYE courses, without a cohesive plan outlining structure, policy, and procedures and adequate resources to implement and maintain this plan, efforts have been and will continue to be unsuccessful.

We suggest that an FYS program (similar to other academic programs) be established in Academic Affairs (under the Provost’s Office) with an appointed Director and Advisory Board. This program unit, rather than the GECC, would exercise oversight of FYS courses and their integration into students’ broader first-year curriculum and experiences at the University of
Michigan-Flint. This change would recognize the GECC’s general oversight of General Education but remove micro-management of FYS courses from the GECC and replace the fractionally dedicated administrator with a full-time director. At the same time, it would be useful if the FYS Program Director retained ex-officio membership of the GECC, maintaining a tight connection between the FYS and other elements of General Education. The charge of this program unit would be to: (1) Clarify and operationalize the stated purposes of the FYS program; (2) Support and train faculty; (3) Examine and approve course proposals; (4) Evaluate courses, using student evaluations, observations, course-level assessments, and other sources; and (5) Assess the overall program and engage in overall program improvement and planning. We recommend additional support for faculty FYS course development and redesign overseen within the FYS program as part of the larger Academic Affairs curriculum initiative.

We recommend the creation of a faculty FYS Director position. The Director would work collaboratively with a faculty Advisory Board and the Office of the Provost. The Director would

- Articulate and disseminate to faculty, students, and academic administrators the purposes of the FYE program
- Manage and administer operation of the FYE program, including
  - Course development and approval processes
  - Faculty recruitment, development, and ongoing evaluation
  - Production and dissemination of clear and up-to-date descriptions of course sections (for use by students, faculty, and staff)
  - Collaboration with the Student Success Center, including orientation staff and advisors
  - Provision of improved guidance and authentic choice for students regarding FYS selection and enrollment
  - Collaboration with other programs, including the English Department’s First-Year Writing Program, in which most students will be simultaneously enrolled for skill-building
  - Long-term planning
  - Student learning and program assessment with the goal of ongoing improvement
  - Liaison with the GECC (either the Director or an Advisory Board member would serve as an ex-officio member)
  - Program reporting to other governance bodies and university units
Examination of future directions and opportunities such as online FYS, transfer student FYS, and high school-level FYS (similar to DEEP)

We recommended that the Director should possess the following qualifications:

- Full-time, long-term faculty status, preferably with tenure
- Experience teaching an FYE
- Deep and broad commitment to and knowledge of liberal arts and learning
- Academic administrative experience, e.g. service as department chair, chair of major committee, director experience, etc. (preferred)

We recommend that the Director receive course release and a summer stipend. It is likely that the amount of initial background work required to restructure the program would have to be done intensively over a spring-summer.

The FYS Advisory Board should comprise faculty committed to and teaching in, or with knowledge of, the developing FYS program. It should be selected by the Provost in consultation with the new director and other relevant committees.

It is critical that the FYS Director and the FYS Program receive adequate administrative support. The program should be housed in adequate office space, preferably in an area connected to the purposes of the FYS, such as the Thompson Library.

Assessment and Program Review

Current components of FYE assessment include General Education Learning Outcomes (GELO) assessments and a survey of FYE students. There has been no thorough FYE assessment (apart from a limited exercise in 2014) since 2009, when the General Education program began. A review of past FYE assessment practices reveals that assessment of the FYS can be strengthened, especially with a restructured FYS and a Director in place. Strengthening assessment and program evaluation would (1) provide faculty with useful data that inform curricular and pedagogical practices and (2) more tightly couple individual course outcomes with the goals of the FYS program. Progress in
these areas will complement suggested reforms to the GE rubrics (also under review at this time) and help prepare the institution for the re-accreditation process which will occur in AY 2019-20.

Until now the FYE has been assessed as part of General Education, primarily through GELO review. Because the current FYE is “intended to introduce students to the goals and expected outcomes of the General Education program at the beginning of their career” (Barnes, 2011, p. 2), rather than the realization of the GELOs, these data are of little value for FYE assessment. GELOs set aspirational goals for the full span of a student’s undergraduate studies and encompass the entire scope of the GE curriculum rather than identifying a specific set of learning outcomes for the FYE itself.

In addition, methodological issues have hampered the larger assessment effort, which involves a large number of learning outcomes to be assessed, combined with an incremental approach (assessing only one GELO per year), voluntary faculty participation that has been less than robust, and an insubstantial feedback loop. The annual survey of FYE students is not a direct assessment mechanism, and it elicits poor response rates (e.g., in Spring 2017 only 33/143 or 23% of the surveys were returned). In 2014 Associate Dean Barnes led a GE assessment project, which examined GELO assessments from 2011-14, as well as student and faculty surveys. The review contained some interesting analyses and culminated in a 2015 faculty forum, but its findings were not broadly shared and did not result in assessment changes.

Given the absence of adequate data or analyses to effectively assess the success or failure of the FYE program during the last eight years, the Committee recommends that the following broad principles be adopted with the next iteration of the program:

- The FYS should be assessed for its intended outcomes as a program with some learning goals that are distinct from the GE curriculum as a whole. This would mean directly assessing the learning goals articulated in the earlier pages of this document, such as “Demonstrate an understanding of the meaning, purpose and value of a university education, including general (liberal) education.”
• The FYS should be assessed for its alignment with the larger GE curriculum. This may mean selecting GELOs that genuinely help map the progress that students make within the FYS in relation to the goals of the larger GE program or assessing a newly added General Education Learning Outcome.

• Assessment should be mandatory and required for each course on a two-year cycle. Courses should be assessed on all key learning outcomes every two years.

• Well planned and regularly executed feedback loops should be built into the assessment cycle, so that faculty, administrators, and students can access data for the purposes of continuous improvement.

• Multi-method (both direct and indirect) assessment should continue and be routinized.

The appointment of an FYS Faculty Director will make it practical to build a robust and consistent practice of program review. The Director should have responsibility for overseeing the following processes:

• Multi-method assessment of the FYS on a two-year cycle with regular feedback to stakeholders.

• Collection of data on the FYS learning environment and program feedback regarding the learning environment.

• Collection of data on faculty classroom effectiveness and program engagement, with the FYS Director evaluating and fine-tuning developmental opportunities and mentoring mechanisms for program faculty.

• Analysis of assessment outcomes and processes in the FYS program review, ensuring ongoing improvement of the program.

**Transition Plan**

Because we recommend a significant restructuring of the program, we suggest the following transition plan.

**Fall 2017.** The FYE Review Committee presents its report to GECC. The Committee and GECC disseminate the report and meet with units, particularly CAS, which has the closest and most extensive relationship to offering FYS and General Education courses. Faculty governance bodies discuss and adopt recommendations. Status quo with respect to FYS offerings continues.
**Winter 2018.** The Provost’s Office and GECC establish the FYS Program and appoint a Director and an Advisory Board. The Director and Advisory Board develop detailed documents and procedures to guide the program. The Director and Advisory Board engage in outreach and development of detailed documents and procedures, issue a call for application/resubmission of new and existing FYS’s, and seek funding/resources for those engaging in development/re-development of courses. Status quo of FYS offerings continues through the year.

**Spring-Summer 2018.** The FYS Director and Advisory Board continue to engage in outreach and development of detailed documents and procedures, and re-issue a call for application/resubmission of new and existing FYS’s. The Director consults with related programs. The Director and Advisory Board examine existing courses and new submissions and offer faculty support sessions. New course approval process begins.

**Fall 2018.** New sections that adhere to new standards and procedures are added to the FYS course list. The FYS Director and Advisory Board continue to solicit faculty submissions and work with faculty revising already-existing courses.

**Winter 2019.** New sections that adhere to new standards and procedures are added to the FYS course list. The Director and Advisory Board continue to solicit faculty submissions and work with faculty revising already-existing courses.

**Spring-Summer 2019.** The FYS Director and Advisory Board examine and approve FYS courses, ensuring that in the 2019-2020 academic year all FYS sections meet the new guidelines and the program is fully staffed according to purposes, principles and other standards. The Director and Advisory board develop assessment measures, including procedures for program review, tools to assess learning outcomes, and other measures of evaluation for ongoing improvement.
References


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Appendix A

FYE Syllabi Review

Syllabi received

I Am UM-Flint (Moss and Waters, 2014)
So U Want to Change the World (Womack and Hixson, 2015)
Prove It! Standards of Evidence in a Digital Age (Wiess and Boggs, 2015)
Intergroup Dialogue (Wrobel, 2016; Heinze, Stein 2015)
Tales from the Dark Side (Ganguly 2015)
Engaging with After School Programs (McLeman 2016, 2013)
Philosophy, God and the Scientific Revolution (Artis, nd)
Let’s Talk About Sex and HIV (Sanders 2015)
Let’s Go Arts (Jones 2016)
Sites and Sounds of Africa (Emenyonu 2016, 2015, 2011)
Food and Hunger (U.S.) (Kahn, 2016)
Personal Finance (Stephens 2015)

Missing syllabi

Science, Education and Society (Cossaboom)
Social and Cultural History of Food (Gemeda)

Incomplete Syllabi

Media Mix
Examination of the syllabi revealed that:

- Syllabi have limitations in relationship to revealing the culture of the classroom and the actual pedagogy
- Syllabi vary in several respects and in their degree of emphasis on various goals/outcomes, most notably in the following areas:

1) Textbook driven or non-textbook driven. Textbook driven courses seem to resemble introductory courses in a field.
2) Unifying complex question-driven (in-depth exploration of common content) or skill-based course with individual student applications of skills (to disparate materials).
3) Extensive explicit instruction about how to be a successful college student (with books about this) and orientation to services at UM-Flint or modelling and teaching pro-learning behaviors through more intensive content and thematic exploration
4) Emphasis on service learning and community observation or focus on classroom-based texts and traditional reading/critical thinking/writing
5) Emphasis on intellectual and critical thinking standards in reading, discussion, and writing (including detailed feedback) or basic engagement with issues or practices
6) Emphasis on the local, national or global and on connections among these levels
7) Single instructor or multiple instructors/peer facilitators
8) Comprehensive or partial course information in syllabus (degree of detail and completeness in main syllabus)
Appendix B

First Year Seminar Guidelines

Purposes

The main purpose of the First-Year Experience course at the University of Michigan-Flint is to provide all first-year students with a 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 FYE 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.

More specifically, the purposes of the FYS are to

1) **Promote an appreciation of the purposes of higher education.** The FYE provides opportunities for students to understand and appreciate the value of a university experience. Through rich thematic exploration and intensive learning support, it demonstrates how higher education allows students to transform their capacities to understand themselves and others and to approach learning with more competence and intentionality. FYE courses encourage students to become deep learners and competent critics who desire to understand meanings of texts, implications and applications of arguments, alternative perspectives, and the use of evidence.

2) **Develop intellectual habits and competencies.** Through engagement with substantial content, guided and mentored by faculty who are experts in their fields and accomplished readers, critical thinkers, and writers, students in the FYE practice foundational intellectual and practical competencies. FYE courses allow students to develop competencies in reading, critical thinking, writing, oral communication, and active engagement and learning. They become aware of the importance of thinking about their own mastery of the material and the perspectives, skills, and knowledge of those who have produced the material they encounter. Through practice, they internalize key learning habits and intellectual and critical thinking standards.

3) **Encourage a constructive attitude toward intellectual challenges.** By providing first-year students multiple opportunities to face and respond to intellectual challenges in a safe and supportive environment, the FYE encourages a constructive attitude towards
learning challenges. It helps students to think about approaching big questions, following their curiosities, refining unstructured problems, learning new material, improving skills, and making use of their own mistakes and failures in to press forward. In the process, it builds students’ capacities for sustained reading and thinking.

4) **Foster integration into the university environment, especially but not only the academic environment.** The FYE integrates students into academic support services, co-curricular activities, student services, and community engagement activities, as appropriate, given course themes and structures.

**Learning Environment**

To accomplish these goals, the FYE emphasizes a learning environment that features the following:

1) **Committed instructional faculty who can accurately assess students’ academic development as they enter the university and are able to move them forward along the developmental continuum through the use of rich thematic content and engaged learning.**

2) **Small class size with a faculty-student ratio no greater than 1:25.** Students have the opportunity to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with the course instructor, as well as with a peer group.

3) **Expectations of class attendance and independent work outside the classroom.** FYE instructors inform students that regular attendance in all courses at the University is required and necessary for academic success. In addition, they emphasize the importance of developing habits of focused and undistracted intellectual work and study outside the classroom.

4) **Appropriate and effective classroom and course pedagogy.** Faculty seek to develop and maintain positive course learning environments that engage students in a variety of ways and help students actively produce ideas and insights. Rather than teaching through traditional textbooks and closed-ended testing instructors help students actively engage with a variety of rich course materials and with one another through a range of methods and techniques.

5) **Classroom cultures of integrity, civility and mutual respect.** FYE courses provide students with opportunities to understand and practice behaviors which support their inquiry and learning and that of other students within an atmosphere of mutual respect, attentive listening and careful speaking. Students learn to respect disagreement, different cultural experiences and backgrounds, and the importance of multiple
perspectives. Students practice academic integrity. At UM-Flint, academic integrity is defined as honesty and respect for the ideas of others; UM-Flint prohibits plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, aiding and abetting dishonesty, and falsifying records.

6) Emphasis on the class as a learning community. Faculty seek to develop a sense of community in the classroom. Faculty show how learning is relational and collective and how discussion among students, involving respectful and careful listening as well as speaking, advances learning. Faculty also encourage students to find communities of discussion outside the classroom and to see themselves as part of the community of learners across the university.

Learning outcomes

The following course learning outcomes can be assessed by various course-level as well as more general instruments:

1) Understand the purposes of higher education
   a) Demonstrate an understanding of the meaning, purpose and value of a university education
   b) Understand the nature and purposes of general (liberal) education and UM-Flint’s General Education Program

2) Develop productive intellectual habits and learning competencies
   a) Demonstrate active reading practices, reading persistence, and reading comprehension
   b) Exhibit information literacy, i.e. the ability to identify types and categories of information and to select, access and critically evaluate information from a variety of sources
   c) Produce competent writing

3) Develop a constructive attitude towards learning challenges
   a) Demonstrate academic engagement through regular attendance and participation in course activities
   b) Understand constructive feedback on academic work and use it to develop skills and strengthen performance
   c) Reflect on their own learning processes

4) Develop an integrative understanding of the course theme
   a) Understand and apply concepts, arguments and information in the thematic area of the course
b) Demonstrate complex thinking through logical integration of ideas and information

5) Integrate into the University of Michigan-Flint environment
   a) Identify or access university-based co-curricular programs and events that promote academic and personal development
   b) Identify or access university services that support academic and personal development

Faculty

(1) FYS faculty have a strong commitment to liberal arts teaching and learning and to General Education as a broad, sequential student academic development program. Faculty are able to assess students’ academic development as they enter the university and are able to move them forward along the developmental continuum. While working at the fundamental level of General Education, FYS faculty are also active at higher levels of university teaching and learning.

Rationale: The FYS course is part of a sequence of General Education courses and a gateway to higher level curriculum. Faculty must understand students’ prior educational and learning experiences in order to assess how to engage students and move them forward. Faculty also teaching at more advanced levels can judge what is important to advancing through these sequences and can, in course design, take into account linkages between FYS and more advanced-level learning. They may also have broader knowledge of and enriched understandings of written and other sources available to explore the course theme. This characteristic is related to all Learning Outcomes, especially Learning Outcome 1.

(2) Faculty have the desire and ability to incorporate significant reading and writing in their courses.

Rationale: Learning outcomes focus on active reading, reading persistence, and high-level reading comprehension and production of competent writing. Faculty who themselves are excellent, confident and eager readers and writers and regularly embed significant reading and writing in courses are more likely to effectively incorporate good teaching practices relevant to reading and writing in FYS courses.
34

(3) Faculty are able to

- Articulate a broad, interesting and significant question that can unify an FYS course and its thematic explorations. This becomes the overarching question that makes the course more than a set of disconnected explorations.
- Demonstrate a broad and deep genuine interest in the question, other questions it generates, and various existing discussions and examples or applications surrounding the question.
- Reach beyond standard introductory disciplinary approaches to the question and engage in intentional course development, using multiple approaches, exploring the question’s implications and applications, mining the theme and related resources to develop student curiosities, skills, and competencies.

Rationale: The FYS is designed to embed skill development in rich thematic content and to open up questions beyond narrowly structured and “dry” teaching and learning or traditional textbook-driven introductions to fields or topics. The FYS course uses materials and approaches typically not found in other course offerings in departments. Realizing this purpose requires intentional course development driven by instructor curiosity, agility, openness, and commitment to good academic pedagogical practices.
Appendix C

Sample FYS Courses at Other Institutions

Albion First-Year Seminar Descriptions:

Chance

What is the role of chance in our lives? This course will focus on serious applications of probability and statistics for the educated citizen. No previous knowledge is assumed. Concepts in both areas will be developed to the extent necessary to understand the applications. Examples include medicine, which will be drawn from diverse fields. Examples include medicine (How do we decide between competing treatments for diseases?), sports, weather, gambling, law, politics (polls), and pattern detection. We will use experiments, computer simulations, and statistical software to illustrate and examine the theoretical concepts.

Heroes: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Deeds

We examine the concept of the hero from the larger than life personalities who have shaped our world to the ordinary people who do extraordinary things. This course will examine “the hero” in literature, history, popular culture, politics and society. We focus on people who when faced with injustice rejected unfairness, refused inequality and resisted the inhumane. We will consider how heroes are made through social habit, situational awareness, and positive deviancy: great men and women of history, human rights advocates, whistleblowers, Holocaust rescuers, social entrepreneurs.

The Natural History of Love

We will explore the nature and function of from the perspectives of evolutionary biology, ornithology, brain science, anthropology, psychology, mythology and the arts. What is love, and why do we love? We break through obscuring jargon, silos and silence, by considering the breeding biology of birds, examining how modern sciences of neurobiology, anthropology and psychology characterize human love. Do people and birds pick mates in similar ways? Does love, in its expansive sense, relate to the human subconscious as revealed by comparative mythology? We will test our biological model of love against meditations on love in drama and music.
Other Titles of First Year Seminars offered at Albion: History of Albion; Teaching and Nature; The Horse in Western Culture; Fly Me to the Moon; Hawaii and the Himalayas; Imperial Vienna; Gender, Race, Class and Food; Searching for Truth in the Information and Internet Age; Games in Society; Tolkien: Literary and Ecological Analysis; “Grit” in American popular culture; The Musical “Rent;” Science, Truth and Other Enigmas; Narratives of Everyday Life in Sound and Stories; The Holocaust.

Other Titles of First Year Seminars from Various Institutions:

Making Sense of Science; The Local Watershed; Biodiversity; Heating Up the Planet; The Mind and the Brain; Changing Our Minds (individually and collectively); Staying Sane in a Crazy World (how people cope with global disasters); Personal Identity (philosophy, psychology, biology); Disasters (natural and human-made); What is Mathematics and Why Won’t It Go Away?; The Literature of Atlantic Slavery; African-American Detective Fiction; Coming of Age in African Literature; Seeing War and Peace through Religious Traditions; What is Art?; Art and Social Change; Understanding the World through Place Names; Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; Black Autobiography; Athletics, Identity and Culture; “Freedom” in U.S. Political Thought and History; The First Amendment; Civil Disobedience; Human Rights and Human Wrongs (International Human Rights); “Sin” in America; Social Justice in the U.S. (Social Change in the U.S.).