



May 3, 2011

TO: Committee on General Education (COGE)

FROM: General Education Task Force: Wendy Becker, Teresa Coffman, Stephanie Costa, David Espinosa, Rudolf Kraus, Maureen Newman, Maureen Reddy (chair), Earl Simson, Julie Urda

RE: Revised General Education Program

We are pleased to present you with our recommendations for a new General Education Program at Rhode Island College. The proposed program is substantially different from our current GenEd, which has been in place with minor revisions for almost two decades. Our proposal is the culmination of a long process involving extensive work from the summer of 2010 through mid-April 2011; the impetus to revise GenEd came first from Vision 2015, which includes that revision among its goals. A brief summary of our process:

- July 2010: VPAA Ron Pitt sent four faculty members to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) seminar on general education in Philadelphia. In addition to attending sessions, this group worked with an AAC&U-assigned consultant to develop a plan for GenEd revision.
- August 2010: Acting on the recommendations in the plan developed at AAC&U, VPAA Pitt formed a General Education Task Force (GETF) with representatives from each school to accomplish that revision proposal and present it to COGE.
- September-November 2010: At weekly meetings, GETF worked to develop outcomes. We reviewed the plan written at AAC&U and studied numerous documents, including general education programs at peer institutions, Vision 2015, and materials published by AAC&U. We worked with suggestions sent to us in response to our emailed call to faculty on September 19. Throughout this process, we kept in mind NEASC standard 4.15, which says that the general education program must be "coherent and substantive" and embody "the institution's definition of an educated person and prepare students for the world in which they will live." We used as a guide the "essential learning outcomes" promulgated by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP) through AAC&U. Our understanding of RIC's definition of an educated person derived in part from the college's vision statement, which says, "Our students will graduate ready to serve the community using the latest technology and best practices and to become leaders in myriad

sectors of society such as the sciences, the arts, the helping professions, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions." We also had many wide-ranging conversations about what college should do for students, which we agree is not merely prepare them for employment, but also for a broader, more interesting life than what they might have without attending college.

- November 2010: GETF held three open faculty meetings to discuss the draft outcomes. We also invited comments by email.
- December 2010-March 2011: GETF reviewed all suggestions on outcomes and revised them accordingly. We then began work on developing a structure to achieve the outcomes. Throughout this process, we kept in mind NEASC standard 4.15, which says that the general education program must be "coherent and substantive" and embody "the institution's definition of an educated person and prepare students for the world in which they will live."
- March-April 2011: GETF held three open faculty meetings to discuss the revised outcomes and draft structure and also invited comments by email.
- April 2011: GETF reviewed all suggestions and revised the proposed structure in response; we also made minor changes to several of the outcomes. We worked on an assessment plan as well. **Please note: we will have recommendations for assessment to COGE the week of May 1.**

Although we hope that the majority of RIC faculty will be excited by the possibilities the proposed new GenEd program presents, we also assume that some faculty will be unhappy with our recommendations and that many faculty will have questions. We therefore want to explain the thinking behind the proposal.

Vision 2015 recommends that RIC explore making all general education courses four credits; therefore the GETF did so, reaching the conclusion that four credit courses allow students to explore a subject in more depth and to devote more time to each course than do three credit courses. We find this depth and breadth desirable in introductory courses--as are most in GenEd--because these courses introduce students to new subjects and to college-level approaches to subjects they have already encountered in secondary school, requiring them to devote considerable time and effort to the work for each course in order to achieve a desirable proficiency level in the subject. A full-time course load is 12 credits, but students actually must take and pass at least fifteen credits per term to stay on a four-year graduation trajectory. With courses in GenEd at four credit hours each, students will need just three courses to be full time, four to stay on a four-year plan. With student attention less fragmented among courses, faculty can reasonably expect more commitment to each course from students who are taking four instead of five courses per term. Given nationwide reports and expectations for number of courses per term, we also expect this move to four credits to improve retention and degree attainment.

The four credit recommendation is not an unmixed good, however. Given the limits imposed by NEASC requirements on the one hand and our own professional programs' credit hour requirements on the other, we have both no fewer than and very few more than 40 credits possible for general education requirements with the exception of courses

that count both in general education and in a particular major, such as our recommendation for a writing in the major course. NEASC says that accredited institutions must ensure that "all undergraduate students complete at least the equivalent of forty semester hours" in a program of general education (standard 4.17). We are severely constrained by the size of professional programs at RIC, which require as many as 85 credits; the largest of these programs leaves only 35 credits outside the major before students go above the 120 credits required for graduation. With four credit courses, our Gen Ed program cannot go much beyond ten required courses, whereas mixing in some three credit courses would allow a larger total number of courses within the 40 +/- credit hours. On balance, however, we decided that the advantages to students offered by four credit courses outweighed those offered by a mixture of four and three credit courses and therefore our proposal incorporates the four credit hours per course requirement.

NEASC also insists that the "general education requirement in each undergraduate program ensures adequate breadth for all degree-seeking students by showing a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. General education requirements include offerings that focus on the subject matter and methodologies of these three primary domains of knowledge as well as on their relationships to one another" (standard 4.16). The structure we propose includes required courses in all these areas as well as several opportunities for students to make connections across disciplinary boundaries. That structure is not only horizontal, with introductory courses in multiple areas, but also vertical, with several upper-division courses, including some embedded within majors, in accordance with the LEAP recommendation that the essential learning outcomes "be emphasized across every field of college study" at progressively more demanding levels. As LEAP's *College Learning for the New Global Century* notes, "General education plays a role, but it is not possible to squeeze all these important aims into the general education program alone. The majors must address them as well" (AAC&U Executive Summary, p. 4). The learning outcomes we propose are graduation outcomes, not solely the province of first- or second-year courses. We cannot predict the specific knowledge our students will need to live well in an increasingly complex world. We can, however, predict that they will need to know how to learn, how to make informed judgments, how to understand people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, and how to express their ideas clearly in speech and in writing. They will need opportunities to work toward these goals at many levels of the curriculum, not only in introductory courses. We therefore recommend that each major identify the outcomes students will meet at a greater-than-introductory level by completing that major so that students and advisors can be fully informed and make course choices that allow further development in outcome areas not addressed by the major.

Just as no general education program can satisfactorily accomplish all the learning goals we collectively find desirable, it cannot make up for all of the inadequacies of students' prior educations. Many of our students come to us with serious deficiencies in multiple areas; few come to us with the breadth and depth of learning that faculty would find ideal. Faculty commentary on our proposed program often reflected deep concern about

the implications of such deficiencies and a desire to remedy them through specific required courses. At the open faculty meetings, several people decried our recommendation of just one course each in the natural sciences and mathematics (eliminating the current "additional science or math" category), while others were displeased by the reduction in the social and behavioral sciences category from two courses to one. We also heard from faculty who wanted to see the expansion of existing areas, such as writing, or the addition of new areas, such as physical education/wellness. Putting all of the courses and areas that faculty would like to see in an ideal GenEd program would require a significantly larger program than we could in good conscience recommend, given the size of professional programs. We are sympathetic to these concerns and discussed them seriously and extensively. In the end, we chose to keep our proposal of one course in each of the three areas (natural science, mathematics, social & behavioral sciences) to preserve the breadth of the proposed program and to remain within a reasonable total of credit hours.

We want to address the concerns raised by those in the natural sciences who said that most of our peer institutions require two science courses. In fact, the colleges we surveyed (including all those on the list provided by COGE) that require more than one course in the science and/or math areas in their general education programs have either far larger general education programs than ours or have three credit courses (with one additional credit for labs). We found no GenEd program that requires more than 6-7 credits in the sciences. Faculty from the sciences argued that students need more math and science to be prepared for jobs in the 21st century knowledge economy and even to "make decisions regarding personal and political issues which depend on understanding scientific information," as one writer put it. We entirely agree with these assertions; we do not agree that a second introductory math and/or science course is the best solution to the very real problem of low scientific literacy.

We have found no evidence that taking two disconnected introductory courses makes students more scientifically literate. We are persuaded that the more pedagogically sound approach is to build scientific literacy into the curriculum at a higher than introductory level. The point is not to force students to take additional traditional introductory courses in these areas but to create upper-division courses--in the Connections category, for instance--that engage students and allow them to build on the basic knowledge that they acquire in their introductory course.

We do not think that eliminating one of the other distribution categories and requiring a second math/science (or a second social or behavioral science) would best serve the goals of general education. Instead, we strongly encourage these areas--along with all others on campus--to propose courses in the First Year Seminar and Connections categories. These courses have far greater potential to excite student interest and to inspire them to pursue further education in the sciences, mathematics, or social & behavioral sciences than do traditional introductory courses. Does global warming exist? What would be needed for all the world's people to have access to clean water? What are the elements of wireless communications and the challenges involved in global networks? These are all questions

that would draw students into the science and math areas and that could very easily be the basis of FYS, Connections, or elective courses.

We also heard from people who noted that the second language outcome had no home in the distribution requirements, which would effectively reduce many students' elective options by pushing them to take a language course as their elective, thereby effectively foreclosing the possibility of trying out another field or taking a second science or history or mathematics course; that would be especially true for students in professional programs with high credit-hour requirements in the major. After much debate, we determined that preserving student choice in the elective category was crucial to the fundamental principles of our proposal. We have therefore added an eleventh requirement, bringing the total general education credits to 44. We have listed that total as 40-44 because some significant proportion of students will enter the college at the Novice-High second language level requirement and will therefore place out of the 100-level course that meets that goal.

From the beginning of this process, the GETF goal has been a general education program that excites students' interest in learning and in the possibilities of many different fields and that also inspires faculty to create innovative courses that draw on the most current thinking in their fields. We hope departments and programs will seize this moment to have discussions about not only their own participation in general education, but also about the relationship of general education to their majors and to students' lives beyond college. What courses in the major develop the areas of expertise delineated in the outcomes list? What do we hope our students take away from their introduction to our fields? How can we contribute to teaching students the habits of mind that will enable them to continue to learn throughout their lifetimes? We also hope that the faculty conversation about student learning and the aims of general education begun in our open meetings continues throughout the coming years. We want a general education program that evolves across time in response to assessment data and faculty recommendations. What we propose, then, is a starting point, not a program we expect to see enshrined for decades to come.

General Education Program Revision

The General Education Program provides both a foundation for deeper study in a wide range of academic disciplines and numerous occasions to develop the skills and habits of mind necessary for full participation in an increasingly complex world. The structure we propose is both horizontal (foundational courses) and vertical (upper-division courses that afford students the opportunity to further develop in their majors skills acquired in foundational courses and also to make connections across disciplinary boundaries). We want our students to develop the capacity to learn not only in their undergraduate courses but also for the rest of their lives; we believe that goal requires introducing them to many different kinds of knowledge and offering many occasions for relating the knowledge they acquire. One key goal is to engage students fully in their own educations; we therefore propose as much choice and flexibility as possible in course selection and, crucially, a first year seminar meant to excite student interest in college-level learning and to introduce the habits of inquiry essential to the academic enterprise. We also propose an integrated course that emphasizes comparative perspectives on particular topics or ideas; ideally, this course would be team-taught and interdisciplinary.

New General Education Structure

Overview

10-11 courses in GenEd plus one in major

Core courses (3)

Writing in the discipline (included in major requirements)

Distribution requirements (7-8)

Thirteen outcomes

Details

Core courses (3 courses)

First-year seminar (FYS) - *offered on a wide variety of topics rooted in various disciplines, each section of the FYS will be discussion-based, focused on developing critical thinking and include multiple opportunities throughout the semester for students to receive writing instruction and to practice forms of writing appropriate to the discipline. Students will be able to choose a seminar based on their interest in the topic. All FYS courses will be offered under one course number (e.g., FYS 100), with each topic a different section. In advance of registration each term, the college will prepare a listing of specific topics with brief (100 word) descriptions to be posted online so that students can make informed choices. COGE will develop more detailed guidelines for FYS; all FYS section topics must be approved by COGE. Half of first year students will take FYS in the fall, half in the spring. Will not be offered in the summer or in early spring sessions. Required in freshman year. 4 credits. Capped at 20 students. Note: students who enter the college as transfers are **not** first year students and will be exempted from this requirement.*

First-year writing (FYW) - *an introduction to college-level writing in which students develop the writing skills required for success in college courses. Required in freshman year. Successful completion of the course (a final grade of C or better) will meet the college's writing requirement. 4 credits. Capped at 20 students.*

Connections (C) - *an upper-level course that emphasizes comparative perspectives--such as across disciplines, across time, across cultures--on a particular topic or idea. Courses proposed for this requirement must include further development of at least three of the outcomes on the GenEd Outcomes list. GETF strongly recommends that as many as possible of these courses be team taught and interdisciplinary. Connections will be a category, not a course (akin to our current cores 3 and 4); that is, departments will propose courses for this category, with courses carrying the departmental designation (e.g., BIOL or ENGL) and a shared number (e.g., 26x). Connections courses may require specific GenEd categories be completed as prerequisites in addition to the FYS and FYW and total credit prerequisites. 4 credits. Capped at 30 students. **Required after FYS and FYW and at least 45 credits total.***

Writing in the discipline (one or more courses)

Writing in the discipline - each department should identify the course at the sophomore level or above in which students learn to write for that discipline. This may be a new course or an existing course; writing instruction need not be the sole content of the course but writing instruction must be a portion of the course's requirements. This course must be required in the major and is not included in the 40 credit hours of GenEd courses. COGE will maintain a list of these courses.

Distribution requirements (7-8 courses)

Students will be required to take at least one course in each of the following areas. These courses should emphasize the unique ways of thinking and methods of inquiry in the discipline so that students are exposed to the knowledge, perspectives, and methods of different disciplines. Courses proposed for the General Education program must address at least two of the outcomes on the GenEd Outcomes list.

Natural Science (lab required)

Social and Behavioral Sciences

Mathematics

History

Literature

Second language*

Arts--Visual and Performing

Elective--students will take one elective course from either (1) one of the areas listed above or (2) the list of open electives COGE will develop, which may include areas/disciplines not on the list of seven.

*Students who enter the college having met the second language outcome via tests approved by the Modern Languages department will have met this requirement.

Outcomes

No single introductory course can fully meet any outcome. Instead, every course should introduce or develop particular outcomes.

Students will...

- demonstrate through performance, creation, or analysis an ability to interpret and explain the arts from personal, aesthetic, cultural, and historical perspectives. (*Arts*)
- gain knowledge of social and political systems and of how civic engagement can change the environment in which we live. (*Civic Knowledge*)
- learn to interact appropriately as part of a team to design and implement a strategy to achieve a team goal and to evaluate the process. (*Collaborative Work*)
- be able to analyze and interpret information from multiple perspectives, question assumptions and conclusions, and understand the impact of biases, including their own, on thinking and learning. (*Critical and Creative Thinking*)
- demonstrate an understanding of their own ethical values, other ethical traditions from diverse places and times, and the process of determining ethical practice. (*Ethics*)
- analyze and understand the social, historical, political, religious, economic, and cultural conditions that shape individuals, groups, and nations and the relationships among them across time. (*Global Understanding*)
- use technologies to process and communicate information and will be able to adapt to and use emerging technologies in their discipline(s). (*Information Technology*)
- learn to speak in a clearly expressed, purposeful, and carefully organized way that engages and connects with their audience. (*Oral Communication*)
- demonstrate the ability to: (1) interpret and evaluate numerical and visual statistics; (2) develop models that can be solved by appropriate mathematical methods; and (3) create arguments supported by quantitative evidence and communicate them in writing and through numerical and visual displays of data including words, tables, graphs, and equations. (*Quantitative Literacy*)
- demonstrate the ability to access, understand, evaluate, and ethically use information to address a wide range of goals or problems. (*Research Fluency*)
- achieve scientific literacy by studying the natural world; understand how scientific knowledge is uncovered through experimentation and testing of hypotheses; be familiar with how data is analyzed, scientific models are made, theories are generated, and practical scientific problems are approached and solved; have the capacity to be informed about scientific matters as they pertain to living in this complex world; be able to communicate scientific knowledge through speaking and writing. (*Scientific Literacy*)
- communicate in and understand a language other than English, both spoken and written, at a Novice-High proficiency level, while striving to meet ACTFL's five goals for foreign language proficiency: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities [see ACTFL proficiency guidelines]. (*Second Language*)

- understand the different purposes of writing and employ the conventions of writing in their major fields. Students will produce writing that is well organized, supported by evidence, demonstrates correct usage of grammar and terminology, and is appropriate to the academic context. (*Written Communication*)

Assessment

Assessment is not the same as certifying students; that is, the focus of assessment is properly on improving the program, not on certifying that each student is proficient in each area assessed. Our recommendations are focused on assessments that could be put into place in the first year of the new GenEd program and could be used to improve the program in its first few years; we believe that additional assessments could and should be added in succeeding years.

We recommend assessment at four points that seem to us logical places to collect data:

- (1) First Year Writing (outcome: written communication)
- (2) First Year Seminar (outcomes: critical thinking plus two others)
- (3) "Connections" course (outcomes vary depending upon subject)
- (4) Writing in the disciplines course (outcome: written communication)

We also recommend that departments participating in the GenEd program through distribution requirements develop assessments of their own courses in relation to the outcomes each is meant to focus upon. The aggregate data for each of these courses should be reported to COGE annually. Each course proposed for General Education should be accompanied by a sample syllabus; that sample syllabus should attach a table of specifications for each course that lays out the objectives for each course and that identifies how those objectives are assessed in the course (homework assignment, exam, paper, exercise, presentation, etc.). The data from those assessments would be reported to COGE at the end of each term, simplifying assessment for departments and COGE.

Members of the GenEd Task Force want to stress that we believe it would be impossible--and not even desirable--to have assessments in place for every outcome before the new GenEd program begins. We suggest starting with a few outcomes in a limited number of courses and adding to the assessment plan each year.