Toward Improving Transferability of Lower Division General Education in Oregon

A Common Understanding of the Purpose of General Education
The education of undergraduate students is an essential activity of all Oregon colleges and universities. While undergraduate education needs to provide discipline-specific knowledge and skills through concentrated work in an academic major, it must also help students develop the habits of mind that lead to thoughtful and productive global citizenship. All parts of a well-designed education encourage these habits, but an effective General Education curriculum has this as its explicit goal. To this end, it seeks to promote

- The capacity for analytical thinking and problem solving
- The ability to communicate effectively, including listening, observing, speaking, and writing
- An understanding of the natural world and the role of humans in it
- An appreciation of the arts and humanities and the richness of human experience and expression
- An awareness of multiple perspectives and the importance of diversity
- A sense of societal responsibility, community service and global citizenship
- The ability to develop a sense of direction, with the self-discipline needed for the ethical pursuit of a purposeful life

What is the problem?
Although colleges and universities in Oregon embrace the value of General Education, most have developed their own unique philosophies and curricula that support these ideals. These varied curricula are a valuable resource for Oregon students, and their individuality must be preserved. Unfortunately, the underlying mechanics that shape them are complicated sets of course and credit specifications. Although educators understand that these specifications do not represent the essence of General Education, the public does not, and emphasis on the details often reduces this coursework to a mere check-list of requirements. Descriptions confined to credit hours, or other quantitative measures of General Education, fail to communicate the opportunities for delight and discovery represented by this rich curriculum.
Additionally, for students transferring among community colleges and universities, lower division General Education coursework may have to be repeated, and credits "lost", because of small incompatibilities among variant curricula. The frustration of students and taxpayers, when faced with seemingly arbitrary transferability decisions based on mechanics, is understandable.

**What can be done about it?**

As educators, we must take responsibility for improving matters. While General Education curricula depend on course and credit requirements to shape the intellectual experiences we desire for students, we know that a variety of structures can promote the qualities we're after. Thinking through the genetic underpinnings of cancer promotes analytical thinking, but so does dissecting the religious and cultural influences in 7th century Spain. The JBAC believes the transferability of lower division General Education throughout the state could be improved through a collaboratively developed framework for transferable lower-division General Education that is based on commonly agreed-upon learning outcomes and course criteria. Not only would this model improve the transferability of coursework among community colleges and universities, it could strengthen the statewide commitment to General Education without compromising the uniqueness of individual college’s General Education curricula.

This is why you are invited to a meeting on February 9-10, 2006. You have been identified as an excellent faculty member with a record of commitment to General Education, and we invite you to work with ~10 other Oregon community college and university faculty in your disciplinary area to describe the General Education outcomes you desire for students when you teach in that area. These outcomes may resemble the ones for General Education as whole, but they may likely include some ideas that are specific to your area. We would also like you to define the characteristics of courses that you think are effective in promoting those outcomes.

Because General Education is broad and varied, we have simplified the task at hand by focusing on the 6 General Education areas currently represented in the AA/OT and OTM. We recognize that AA/OT and OTM revision may alter these areas in the future, but for now, they create a well-defined place to begin. The six areas are:

- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Mathematics
- Arts and Letters
- Social Sciences
- Science/Math/Computer Science

We imagine your work proceeding in 2 stages:
Stage 1: Identify the broad outcomes desired from coursework in your area. This work will take place on Feb. 9.

Stage 2: Describe general criteria that courses in your area should meet in order to promote the desired outcomes for students. This work will happen over the following few months. We expect that your work in Stage 1 on Feb. 9-10 will clarify how you wish to go about formulating course criteria. We encourage you and your group to rely on your own inclinations and good judgment. We will happily assist with logistics, but do not want to prescribe your approach.

**Anticipated Results**

**Short-term:** A clear statement of the intended learning outcomes of a General Education curriculum, regardless of its particular design, will help all of us communicate the key role of General Education – to students, parents, and Oregon citizens.

The definition of criteria for effective General Education courses will be immediately helpful to faculty in improving existing General Education courses and in designing new ones.

**Long-term:** We anticipate that the criteria for effective General Education courses will form the basis of a new, faculty-led procedure for making thoughtful decisions about the inclusion of specific courses in widely transferable degrees or modules. At present, such decisions can appear arbitrary because they are made according to local campus guidelines that are not widely-known. It would be preferable for faculty groups with broad membership (public universities, community colleges and participating private schools) to make these decisions based on congruence with generally agreed-upon criteria. In such a system, transferability would not depend primarily on identity of course numbering or content, but on more general characteristics that can be shared by courses on diverse topics. This approach may lead to more consistency and commonality in course content, design, and numbering. Moreover, a tradition of substantive curricular discussions among faculty from diverse institutions is likely to have benefits beyond heightened appreciation of General Education. Such groups, because of their disciplinary expertise and direct classroom experience, are in position to communicate the nature of college-level work in their areas, and improve the quality of the General Education experience for transfer students throughout Oregon.
We don't have to start from scratch
The statements of General Education outcomes and criteria that we hope to develop in our state are not fundamentally different from the descriptions that some individual Oregon schools have already developed for local use. In addition, states such as Colorado and Ohio have developed documents based upon this model. The packet you've received contains these examples. They’re not intended to limit your creativity, but they might be useful as illustrations.

[Jonathan Jacobs is assembling the packet.]