Toward Improving General Education that is Transferable within 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

1 The essence of this purpose statement was formulated by the OUS Provosts Council, Fall 2004.
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 incompatibilities among variant curricula. The frustration of students and taxpayers, when faced with seemingly arbitrary transferability decisions, 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 that the transferability of lower division General Education throughout the state could be improved through a collaboratively-developed framework 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 institutions’ General Education curricula. Both faculty and students would benefit from such a framework. By adhering to general principles rather than a rigid template, faculty would have the freedom to design General Education courses that take advantage of their individual expertise and that reflect significant new insights. Students would benefit from faculty innovation in the classroom, while retaining assurance of the transferability of their coursework.

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 a whole, but they will 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:

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

We expect that your work will proceed in two stages:

**Stage 1 (Feb. 9-10): Identify the broad outcomes desired from coursework in your area.** These are the habits of mind, skills, or kinds of understanding that a successful student should acquire, and be able to apply, as a result of taking courses in your area.

**Stage 2: Identify general criteria that courses in your area should meet in order to promote the desired outcomes for students.** These are the characteristics of courses that, in your view, make them effective in promoting the outcomes identified in Stage 1. This work will happen over the following few months. We expect that your Stage 1 work 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.

**Expanding the Discussion:** After the initial work on February 9th, discussion of outcome-based General Education will be broadened to include all interested faculty members. Specifically, draft outcomes and criteria will be circulated for faculty consideration at all Oregon community colleges, public universities, and participating independent institutions. We expect that local campus discussions will generate suggestions for improvement, much as discussion of the OTM did during AY2004/05. JBAC will then be responsible for collecting these ideas and using them to refine the statements of outcomes and criteria.
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 as they improve existing General Education courses and design 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, and it should facilitate review of the AA/OT. 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 undergraduate students throughout Oregon.

We don’t have to start from scratch
The statements of General Education outcomes and criteria that we hope to develop through this process are not fundamentally different from the descriptions currently in use by many individual Oregon colleges and universities. 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.

You may also enjoy reading the enclosed chapter from Frank H.T. Rhodes’ book, The Creation of the Future: The Role of the American University. Part way through the chapter, Rhodes says:

The greatest privilege a faculty member can have is to design and support a curriculum. All the riches of human experience are there. All the teeming problems and the noisy issues of our society are there. All our capacity and all our hopes for the well-being of our planet and our people rest there.