

PROLOGUE TO “PROPOSAL FOR A NEW GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM AT UMD”

Aware that the campus is about to undertake an in-depth review of the CORE Program, an informal and ad hoc group (hereafter called the Group) of faculty from around the campus (composed of Spencer Benson, Janet Coffey, Denny Gulick, Barbara Jacoby, Sandy Mack, and Eric Zakim) met several times during the period from June 2007 to September 2007. The Group’s goal was to see if it could conjure up a New General Education Program to replace the present CORE Program that, on the one hand, addressed the lofty ideals of an intellectually stimulating general education program, and on the other hand, was at least nominally consistent with the State of Maryland General Education Program requirements (see www.tce.umd.edu/mdgened.html).

TOWARDS A NEW GENERAL EDUCATION (CORE) CURRICULUM

INTRODUCTION

The world has changed in multiple ways since the current CORE curriculum was adopted nearly 20 years ago. Although the need still exists for students to acquire the knowledge that enables them to think critically and to act productively, there is a renewed focus on the need for students to know how to frame and ask meaningful questions, access and analyze information, and draw well-justified, sound conclusions.

Today’s students need to be receptive and adaptable to rapid rates of change that occur in politics, science and technology, and human understanding of the world. Moreover, students need to appreciate the similarities and the differences among different cultures and to act with reverence for life, human rights, and self-determination. Our graduates need to interact with others in an ethical manner, be active participants in our democracy, and be informed responsible global citizens. General Education needs to serve all students by helping them put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that are necessary to make informed judgments regarding information and the conduct of their personal, professional, and civic lives. Most importantly, the students need to become effective life-long learners.

All too often current CORE courses are introductory large-lecture format overviews to a discipline that enroll students who view the courses as mere requirements “to get out of the way.” Our campus needs to think of General Education courses not as a means for some students to take the first steps in their majors while others just look on, but rather as an opportunity for faculty to create wider understanding of their disciplines and the roles in human existence. Indeed, faculty should view General Education courses as a means to connect students to the vast network of learning and ways of understanding that define the world. Faculty are passionate believers in the power and beauty of their disciplines, and General Education courses in these disciplines need to provide opportunities for the faculty to engage and connect students to the big and thought-provoking ideas and questions that define their disciplines. The World Courses and Marquee Courses have been moving the campus in this direction. In this vein, the present proposal intends to liberate faculty from the

thought of teaching CORE “service courses,” and to empower them to enrich undergraduate education in active, challenging, and creative ways.

FOUR DEFINING GOALS OF THE NEW GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM:

1. *To ensure that UMD students develop intellectual awareness and appreciation of knowledge beyond their majors.*

Comment: This 1st goal is the keystone of the new General Education curriculum. The important component is not the course content but rather the nature of the course. Such courses need to engage and excite the students. They need to be taught by our best teachers, who need to be recognized and promoted as representing one of the core intellectual values of the university. Teaching a General Education course needs to be viewed as an honor rather than a chore. If we give our best minds the challenge of lighting an intellectual fire among the students in their classes, then the perception of General Education courses might improve dramatically.

2. *To ensure that all UMD students share at least one overlapping academic intellectual experience that builds community and connections among all members of the university, e.g., students-faculty-staff.*

Comment: This 2nd goal would represent an opportunity to connect the work of student affairs to the academic side of campus. The first year book project represents one type of such an initiative, but more and different types are needed.

3. *To ensure that UMD students have, or acquire, basic competencies in the following areas: communication (both written and oral), quantitative literacy, and technological literacy.*

Comment: The 3rd goal would be accomplished, at a minimum, by the Fundamental Studies requirements in English and mathematics, as well as UNIV100. Also, this goal represents an opportunity to connect these three common requirements within a single General Education requirement, and can involve only minor changes to existing pedagogy or course structure.

4. *To ensure that UMD students have, or acquire, a deep understanding of the subject matter within their major, including applications and synthesis.*

Comment: The 4th goal would be attained through a departmental or program capstone course.

STRUCTURE OF THE NEW GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM:

In preparing the outline below for a New General Education Curriculum, the Group has been mindful of the State of Maryland General Education Program requirements, with a range of 40-46 credits and including courses in English Composition, Mathematics, Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Biological and Physical Sciences, and (optional) Interdisciplinary and Emerging Issues. See www.tce.umd.edu/mdgened.html .

FUNDAMENTAL STUDIES: This would continue to consist of components in English composition and mathematics. The Group feels that there should be writing, quantitative

literacy and presentations (oral, written and digital) embedded in courses across the curriculum, and in particular in all new General Education courses. The Group also feels that the mathematics component should be broadened since quantitative literacy is needed in all disciplines.

ADVANCED STUDIES: The Group would change this component, deleting the present requirement and replacing it with a Capstone course (or experience) for each student in his or her major. The Capstone was one of the many pillars of the Pease Report that led to the present CORE program twenty years ago. For financial and administrative reasons it was not adopted formally. The Group feels that the conditions for a universal Capstone are much more favorable at the present time, and that it is unlikely that it would present a financial burden on the various departments on the campus.

DISTRIBUTIVE STUDIES: This is the part of the General Education program at UMD where the Group envisions a major change in the perception of CORE courses. The proposed areas (or categories) of Distributive Studies are as follows:

A. Informed Member of Society: Courses in this category would address how the individual fits into and engages within society, and would contain at least one component involving issues related to civic engagement, ethical reasoning, the environment, and/or historical explorations.

B. World Cultural and Historical Landscape: Courses in this category would contain at least one component involving historical or global perspectives, non-US cultures, world histories and/or world languages.

C. Aesthetics of Life: Courses in this category would contain at least one component involving experiencing life and creativity, mainly through literature, the arts, and performance.

D. Issues in Science and Engineering: Courses in this category would focus on real world problems in science and/or engineering, and address issues relating to understanding the world we live in. (The new Marquee courses would fit into this category.)

Comment: We reiterate the view of the Group that General Education courses should engage students with the important/big questions in the disciplines, foster critical thinking, and where possible involve issues related to: current topics, interacting with others in an ethical manner, participating actively in our democracy, and being responsible global citizens.