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MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Elise Jorgens, Provost
Dr. Robert Mignone, Speaker of the Faculty
Dr. George Pothering, Chair
Department of Computer Science

FROM: Dr. Brian R. McGee, Chair

DATE: October 13, 2005

SUBJECT: Revisions to the General Education Curriculum

This memorandum responds to your request, dated September 7, 2005, that each department should provide a written response to three questions you pose regarding the general education curriculum of the College of Charleston. We appreciate the diligence and hard work of the General Education Committee in taking on the difficult task of curricular reform.

We will respond in turn to the three questions you pose. In responding to these questions, we have concentrated on those portions of the general education curriculum to which we bring particular expertise. In completing this exercise we add the perspective of several relative newcomers to the College of Charleston, as most of the department's roster faculty members were hired in the years following the last attempt to reform the general education curriculum in 1998.

Do you believe General Education in its current form at the College is effective in meeting the AAC&U's Learning Outcomes? If not, please identify ways in which you think General Education could meet these outcomes more effectively

No, we do not. Following our review of the full 2002 AAC&U report (and the summary of the report you provided to us), we will share three specific concerns.

One AAC&U outcome identifies a desire for "strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information skills— achieved and demonstrated through learning in a range of fields, settings, and media, and through advanced studies in one or more areas of concentration." We can identify in the current College of Charleston general education curriculum a solid commitment to analytical skills, a

less solid but still substantial commitment to quantitative skills, and a sporadic commitment to information skills. The commitment to communication skills is in our judgment embarrassingly thin. Concerning written communication, we applaud the work of our colleagues in the Department of English in the ENGL 101 and 102 courses, but no three- or six-hour course requirement should be expected by itself to develop written communication competencies. In our opinion the current curriculum design places our colleagues in English in the untenable position of being asked to “fix” students who come to the college without the necessary college-level writing competences. Not surprisingly, the English faculty are then (quite unfairly) blamed when those same students, sometimes years later, are not fully formed and proficient writers. We believe that emphasis on written communication should be woven through the curriculum in the same way that analytical skills appear to be, and there should be some formal mechanism to assure that all undergraduate students have substantial writing and revision opportunities in other general education courses. The same formal mechanisms ideally should exist to require such opportunities in the student’s major program of study as well, given the AAC&U emphasis on these outcomes as ideally transcending the boundary between general education and undergraduate major.

The communication discipline is in part the product of an ancient research and teaching tradition in speech and orality, and we are compelled to note another serious deficiency in the current general education curriculum. While written communication at least receives substantive curricular attention at the College of Charleston, oral communication is almost ignored in the 1998 goals-and-objectives document, other than the desire that students be able to “communicate statistical conclusions orally and in writing” and that students be able to speak the spoken languages they study. There are no required general education courses designed to provide systematic and substantive instruction in oral communication. Further, there is no formal mechanism guaranteeing that students will have significant speaking opportunities (with feedback on oral performance) in their general education and/or major courses. The combination of oral communication instruction *and* opportunities for further development of those oral communication competencies in other general education courses ideally would be features of a revised general education curriculum.

A second AAC&U outcome emphasizes concepts and modes of inquiry in the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. Where the humanities and social sciences are concerned, the current general education curriculum provides an oddly inconsistent approach to the identification of suitable courses in those distributions. As members of your committee are aware, humanities courses presently are identified on a course-by-course basis, while social science courses are assumed to be the products of a limited number of disciplines. Beyond the obvious inconsistency of this approach, we believe the distinction between the humanities and social sciences is not so tidy or easily made. Humanists have been known to teach in political science and psychology departments, for example; social scientists have worked in English departments. Our own department employs both humanists and social scientists, as our discipline for decades has straddled the humanities-social sciences distinction.

At a minimum, we would recommend that all courses fulfilling general education requirements be individually approved as having the appropriate content. Doing so would bring some measure of consistency to the design and implementation of the general education curriculum. Doing so also would expand the possibilities for course offerings in the social sciences, as many courses taught in the School of Education and the School of Business and Economics, for example, are presently excluded from the general education curriculum despite their self-evident grounding in social-scientific research traditions.

A third AAC&U objective addresses “forms of learning that connect knowledge, skills, values, and public action.” At many universities such forms of learning include service learning, internships, and

other forms of experiential education. We applaud the support given at the College of Charleston to service-learning courses and internship programs, but we also note that experiential education is not integrated into or required in the general education experience of College of Charleston students. This seems a deficiency of our current general education curriculum.

Do you believe General Education in its current form helps students to succeed in coursework in your department's major or minor? Are there ways a Gen Ed curriculum could enhance your students' work in the major so that they meet these AAC&U Learning Outcomes more effectively?

Yes, we do. We applaud the many challenging and well-designed courses taught by our faculty colleagues in the general education curriculum. The courses our majors take in mathematics, the sciences, English, sociology, political science, philosophy, the arts, foreign languages and a host of other disciplines contribute substantially to their intellectual development in a host of ways. We are sure that the current general education curriculum does help our COMM majors succeed as majors and as college graduates. *The question is whether or not that curriculum could be improved.* We would certainly appreciate any changes to the general education curriculum that would enhance the critical thinking, writing, speaking, and research competencies of our students, given the centrality of these competencies to success in the COMM major.

We accept the AAC&U conclusion that faculty and courses in the undergraduate major share the responsibility for general education outcomes with general education faculty and courses. We are open to consideration of changes in the COMM major that would complement reforms in the general education curriculum.

In light of these Learning Outcomes, we ask that you revisit the "Goals and Objectives for Disciplinary Requirements in Current General Education Curriculum" and describe any changes or revisions you think would improve/enhance General Education at the College. We invite your department to give particular attention to the goals and objectives for any Gen Ed courses you currently provide.

We already have hinted at how the general education curriculum might be revised at the College of Charleston, with the understanding that your committee has decided to recommend the retention of the distribution model. To be clear, we suggest consideration of the following reforms to general education:

- Written communication should be integrated in a systematic way in general education and/or major courses other than ENGL-prefix courses, perhaps with students completing multiple writing-intensive courses.
- Oral communication proficiency should be developed in required coursework addressing this subject. The only successful model for such proficiency development with which we are familiar is a speaking-intensive course delivered by communication faculty.
- Oral communication should be integrated in a systematic way in general education and/or major courses other than COMM-prefix courses, perhaps with students completing multiple speaking-intensive courses.
- Courses meeting social-science requirements in the general education curriculum should be approved on a course-by-course basis, rather than being accepted as such because of their affiliation with specific departments.

- Demonstrating the connection between theory and practice could and should be a feature of the College of Charleston experience and would be consistent with the AAC&U objectives. Requiring the completion of some experiential education coursework for all students, whether in general education courses or in the major, certainly is achievable.

We recognize that practical problems would exist in implementing any of these five suggestions. However, we prefer in dealing with such a crucial topic to argue from principle, rather than letting arguments from tradition or expediency too quickly or easily determine the future of general education at the College of Charleston.

The Department of Communication offers four courses approved for humanities credit in the general education curriculum. We believe those courses help students to “demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skill in the multiple ways of knowing and methods of inquiry appropriate to the humanities disciplines,” as described in the 1998 goals-and-objectives document.

Based on our review of the AAC&U objectives, we urge a substantial and sweeping reform of the general education curriculum. Such reforms are needed to meet the ambitious goals of this institution for excellence in undergraduate education. We thank the committee for taking up this important and difficult task, and we offer to assist in any way we can with the discussion and implementation of general education reform.