

**Date:** October 13, 2005

**To:** Elise Jorgens, Bob Mignone and the General Education Committee

**From:** Department of Political Science

**Re:** September 7<sup>th</sup> Request for Input on Reform of the General Education Curriculum

***Do you believe General Education in its current form at the College is effective in meeting the AAC&U's Learning Outcomes?***

*General Education at the College has many deficiencies, including:*

- Too often, students report that the coursework duplicates material they were supposed to have learned in high school. We have the sense that students treat general education courses (particularly in the first semester) as if it was high school and therefore the level of effort is quite low (in part because it is our perception that in many departments, the level of expectation and challenge is quite low). We have the sense that students treat general education like a punch-card—something to do quickly and something to “get out of the way” and that it fails to promote an academically serious campus climate.
- Too often, general education courses seem focused on preparing students for advanced coursework in a major field of study. Whether these courses focus on “foundational content” or “skill building” this is *not* the same as cultivating a liberally educated person.

The goal of a liberal education has to include all 5 of the AAC&U goals. In our current program, most of the focus is on goal 1 (communication, and information skills). Goal #2 (conceptual knowledge engaging learners in concepts and models of inquiry that are basic to the natural sciences, humanities, and arts) is often not met either because: (a) the account of models of inquiry is restricted to a particular field of study or (b) because modes of inquiry are not adequately discussed, in favor of incorporating more content so the student’s knowledge base in a particular field is expanded. Goal 3 (intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills achieved and demonstrated in a variety of collaborative contexts) is actually two goals: intercultural understanding and collaborative learning practices which are not necessarily connected. Moreover, the distributional requirement does little to ensure “intercultural knowledge. Goal 4 (a proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices) is not explicit enough in Gen Ed requirements. Finally, the first part of goal 5 (habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another) seems to require a far more explicit interdisciplinary requirement and the second part (which requires that these skills be “achieved and demonstrated through advanced research”) isn’t appropriate for general education but instead relates to advanced learning within a discipline.

- The distributional requirements can be met with such a broad array of courses, few of which are designed with the goals of a liberal education in mind. Often they serve as introductions to a field of study, or they can be quite specialized and narrow in focus. While we have not explicitly designed our 100 level courses as Gen Ed. Classes (we are not a service Department and we have a growing number of majors) these 100 level POLS classes (American Government, Contemporary Political Issues, World Politics, and World Regional Geography) are often taken by students as General Education Social Science courses and they are likely to achieve at least three if not four of the stated goals (skill acquisition, inquiry practice, intercultural knowledge, responsibility/social action). The fact is, however, that students can take *any* Political Science course and have it count towards their General Education requirement, whether or not it serves the goals of a liberal education.

- It is possible for students to complete the General Education requirements without encountering a course that focuses on the non-Western world. This is simply wrong, any serious attempt to provide a liberal education has to remedy this in some way.

**2) Do you believe General Education in its current form helps students to succeed in coursework in your department's major or minor?**

- The question focuses the intention of General Education directly onto the wishes of Departments, which denies part of the value of General Education itself: a place to awaken curiosity in a variety of disciplines in order to achieve a broad based knowledge concerning differing modes of inquiry prior to (or in conjunction with) specialized study. We could certainly imagine a General Education program that would be particularly useful and helpful to Political Science students. But such a program would not necessarily be a true General Education program. Instead, what we would hope for would be that connections between disciplines could be made in a direct and enriching way.

**3). . . . “describe any changes or revisions you think would improve/enhance General Education at the College”....AND from 1B).” If [General Education in its current form is ineffective in meeting the AAC&U's Learning Outcomes] please identify ways in which you think General Education could meet these outcomes more effectively.**

- First, we believe that the decision to stick with the distributional model forecloses many of the most attractive options for reinvigorating general education, and disregards a considerable amount of faculty input and participation since the mid-1990's. Study that is truly interdisciplinary and learning experiences deliberately designed to meet the goals of General Education are extremely difficult to bring about so long as General Education is a menu of courses that primarily serve the needs and interests of particular Departments.
- That said, we do support a number of more incremental, but nonetheless important changes, including:
  - 1) We strongly support a requirement that students complete at least three hours of coursework with a non-Western orientation. This could be stipulated as part of the Humanities or Social Sciences requirements, or added as separate stand-alone 3 hour requirement (accomplished by increasing the total hours required in general education or by reducing the humanities requirement from 12 to 9 hours).
  - 2) We support a substantive, meaningful, academically grounded freshman seminar experience. If such an experience cannot be provided with new courses, we recommend that the Committee explore ways to work with Departments to modify existing 100 level courses to serve the purposes of a freshman seminar.
  - 3) We support integrative writing assignments that cut across multiple disciplines and would recommend that the Committee review previous and existing models for doing this.
  - 4) We strongly support integrating the College's efforts to promote academic honesty and sanction violators of the honor code into the general education experience.