

GE Task Force Report Appendix A

Charge of the GE Task Force

DATE: January 5, 2004
TO: St. Olaf Faculty
FROM: James May
RE: GE Task Force

Dear Colleagues,

Before heading off to Greece later today, I wanted to get this message out to you.

At the December faculty meeting, I announced my intention to form a small but representative Task Force on General Education. I am happy to announce that the following colleagues have consented to serve in this capacity:

Jo Beld (Social and Applied Sciences)
David Booth (Humanities)
Mary Cisar (College Registrar)
Gerald Hoekstra (Fine Arts)
Phyllis Larson (Interdisciplinary and General Studies)
Charles Umbanhowar Jr. (Natural Sciences and Mathematics)
Solveig Zemple (AD for Interdisciplinary and General Studies; Dean's Council Liaison).

It is important to note that, while each of the individuals above has a particular affiliation, he or she also has been chosen for current or previous experience in dealing with General Education or one of the College's standing curriculum committees. Hence, we have people who are current or past members of CEPC, GEC, IDOCS, who are working with ARP, were members of the original Curriculum Construction Committee, etc.

The idea for a review (and a task force) for General Education is not a new one: this was one of the original initiatives suggested for the first draft of the Strategic Plan; it was an important element in one of the chapters that I authored for the North Central Report, "Program Mix and Quality"; and it was deemed the top priority for our work this year by the Faculty Leadership Group at its first meeting. Thus, serious discussion about this topic (and some research; recall the Scott Lee visit/report done in December of 2002) has been occurring for some time.

Let me repeat here a guiding principle for the task force that I have stated several times in public: I do not intend the work of the task force to supercede or bypass in any way the work and jurisdiction of the regularly elected curriculum committees of the college. Rather, their recommendations will be routed through the appropriate committees, which in turn can propose any changes to the full faculty.

The purpose of the task force, as I see it, is to take a very close look at our current General Education curriculum from an academic point of view. In that regard, the chief question to ask is whether or not (after more than a decade of implementation) our GE program is fulfilling its purpose in providing a foundation for our students to achieve our goals as set out by our Mission Statement. No one to whom I have spoken is eager for a full-scale demolition and reconstruction of the GE program. Rather, most people believe that the outline of our program is sound; that the details may need some revision and re-alignment; that certain changes might make for a smoother and more efficient functioning of the academic program as a whole. While the cost of the GE program is not a primary motivation for undertaking this study, we cannot afford to be so naive as to offer carte blanche to this round of educational reform.

In my NCA chapter on "Program Mix and Quality" I posed several questions concerning GE; these might help the task force to frame its deliberations. They include the following:

- Are the current GE requirements still valid?
- How do we determine whether the GE curriculum is accomplishing the objectives of our mission?

- Is the GE program of the proper size and scope in order to fulfill our mission?
- Is it difficult for students to complete GE requirements?
- Are GE courses chosen merely to check off a requirement?
- How do GE courses interact with courses that are required for the major?
- Should the alternate methods of pursuing General Education at St. Olaf be expanded?

These, of course, are only suggestions. Undoubtedly, scores of other questions will occur to the task force in the course of their work.

The target date for completion of the task force's deliberations is September 1, 2004. This timeline is, of course, ambitious; but I hasten to add that it isn't chiseled in stone. Once we get started, we will see how the work progresses.

I will request the task force to keep the full faculty apprised of its progress; and I encourage all of you to make your thoughts about General Education known to your representatives on the task force. Please join me in thanking our colleagues who have consented carry out this important work on behalf of the College.