

# GEC Report and Recommendations

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May 13, 1999

The following report summarizes the conclusions and recommendations of the General Education Committee on the most important issues on its agenda for the second semester of 1998 - 1999. The report is prepared to inform next year's GEC in particular and the larger college community in general of conclusions reached as well as issues to be resolved. More details of actions taken can be found in the minutes for the year's meetings that are posted on the website for the committee.

### 1. The reconsideration of the second requirement in Integrative Studies.

By the action of the Faculty in May, 1997, this year's General Education Committee was charged with "further consideration of the implementation of the Interdisciplinary Studies requirement in the Integrative Studies portion of the General Education Curriculum" (green sheet, GEC 97-2). In the original conception of the general education curriculum there was a combined integrative studies objective: the first part embodied in the integrative study to be achieved in meeting the requirement for Ethics and Normative Perspectives and the second part to be embodied in a requirement for interdisciplinary study. The implementation of this second part was delayed by action of the Faculty.

The committee devoted time at several meetings in the second semester of 1999 to this reconsideration (see Minutes for March 4, March 11, and April 15). On the basis of this reconsideration the committee recommends that the implementation of a requirement for interdisciplinary study be further delayed until a comprehensive assessment of the existing general education curriculum is accomplished. Such an assessment should be completed prior to the North Central re-accreditation visit in 2002. The conclusions of the committee can be summarized as follows:

- a. There are not sufficient resources to staff the team-taught courses that are a central part of the original plan for how this requirement would be met. There are also constraints on resources and scheduling that inhibit the number of "linked courses" that might be developed to meet this requirement. The committee, however, strongly recommends that attention be given to creating such linked courses in whatever way we can.
- b. The Committee is reluctant to propose yet another addition to what is widely perceived to be a long list of general education requirements.
- c. The exceptional success at St. Olaf in developing interdisciplinary courses and interdisciplinary programs (and the establishment now of a distinct Faculty of Interdisciplinary and General Studies) ensures that a very high percentage of our students undertake interdisciplinary study, without there having to be a requirement. To put it another way, the objective of having students engage in interdisciplinary study is being widely accomplished through pervasive attention to such study throughout our curriculum. In recent years between 20% and 25% of graduating seniors have had a major and/or a concentration in an interdisciplinary program, and in a typical year there are close to 1000 students enrolled in courses that are explicitly labeled as interdisciplinary.
- d. The philosophy of "interdisciplinarity" is proving to be a significant underlying principle in the General Education Curriculum as a whole, most evident in the degree to which many requirements are no longer the domain of a particular department or discipline. Thus, in fulfilling most of their requirements, students are immersed in an implicitly interdisciplinary approach to general education.

- e. The large enrollments in international programs continue to send students into off-campus courses that are often entirely or at least partially interdisciplinary.
- f. Interdisciplinarity and integrative learning are occurring with great success in "general education clusters" such as the Great Conversation and in the newly formed Asian Conversations. The General Education Committee strongly supports the creation of new and varied general education clusters in order to extend this proven means of achieving the objectives of interdisciplinary and integrative learning.
- g. The establishment of the new Center for Integrative Studies provides a locus of and an advocate for integrative learning. GEC believes that the new Center will have a significant influence in extending even further our commitments to such learning, and it anticipates a close working relationship with the new Center and its Director in pursuing these objectives.

## 2. The Oral Communication Requirement (ORC)

In keeping with the working paper developed by last year's GEC on "Monitoring the General Education Curriculum" and with the refinements made in that by this year's committee, we focused particular attention on the progress the college is making in implementing the ORC requirement. The committee met with Jo Beld (Project Director for the FIPSE grant to support implementation of "Oral Communication Across the Curriculum") and also studied several reports prepared or submitted by her as well as enrollment data provided by the Registrar's office. (See in particular the committee Minutes for March 18, 1999). The Committee arrived at the following conclusions:

- a. As reported by Jo Beld (reports to Dean's Council and GEC dated 12/4/98 on "Inability to meet student demand for ORC courses" and 2/22/99 on "ORC Faculty Development Project Update"), there are serious concerns that we are not preparing sufficient numbers of faculty to teach ORC courses, that we will thus not be offering enough courses to meet the demand, and that the reductions in FTE in the Communication/Theater Department will lead to even fewer ORC offerings. However, the Committee is not able to draw a clear conclusion at this time as to the full impact of this potential problem. The data supplied by the Registrar's office suggest that the graduating class of '00 will have adequate opportunities to complete their ORC requirements, but that we can be less certain for the class of '01.
- b. The Committee recommends that immediately in the fall of 1999 the GEC give priority to revising the description and the guidelines for the ORC requirement to make it easier for faculty to incorporate components of oral communication into their courses (and thereby to elicit more faculty involvement in implementing the requirement). Such revision might include removing the suggestions that an ORC course should provide instruction in oral communication equivalent to a 1/4 credit course and adding a clarification that attention may be given primarily to "communicating to learn" rather than "learning to communicate."
- c. In collaboration with Jo Beld, next year's GEC should assess the degree of faculty commitment to teaching ORC courses and then prepare recommendations concerning what additional incentives and resources might be required to support and encourage that faculty commitment.

## 3. The Requirement in Ethical Issues and Normative Perspectives (EIN)

Another aspect of monitoring the GE curriculum has been some discussion of the EIN requirement. The Committee met with Ed Langerak (Project Director for the grant to support implementation of the EIN requirement). Following is a summary of issues and concerns taken up by the Committee:

- a. Next year ('99 - '00) we will be offering a rather low number of EIN courses relative to the number of students who have to take them. We are scheduled to offer 26 or 27 EIN courses next year, compared to 28 this year and 35 the year before. Ed Langerak feels that the ideal number should be 30 to 32 offerings each year. Despite the low number for next year, it appears that next year's seniors will not have difficulty fulfilling the requirement. However, in

the year after there will be a serious need to ensure that we have more offerings.

- b. There is a concern as well that the number set for optimum size of each class (maximum of 20 students) is difficult to maintain in the face of enrollment pressures. There are, however, many faculty teaching EIN courses who are willing and able to accommodate more than 20 students in their sections.
- c. Ed Langerak noted with satisfaction that most of the EIN courses are doing a good job in achieving the objectives of the requirement. He has instituted the use of two different questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of each course. There are also lunch meetings for instructors and other kinds of informal discussion that help maintain a sense of how the courses are working and how the instructors are doing.
- d. The Committee noted a concern that the prerequisite for EIN courses (completion of the theological studies requirement) is not always enforced. The committee affirmed its position that this prerequisite should be firmly enforced, with the provision always that "permission of the instructor" would exist. The Registrar discussed the ways in which the on-line registration software can help enforce this provision. The committee recommends also that the College Catalogue attach this prerequisite to each courses that satisfies EIN.

#### 4. The Writing Requirements

A further objective in monitoring was to give some attention to issues in the implementation of the GE writing requirements, especially those for Writing in Context (WRI) and Writing in the Major. The Committee met with Jim Heynen (current Director of College Writing) and Mark Allister (who will return next year to the position of Director of College Writing) to consider issues and problems. (See in particular the committee Minutes for May 6, 1999). They identified problems especially with the fact that WRI courses are simply "instructor designated," requiring no approval or scrutiny by the Director of Writing and providing little opportunity for individual WRI faculty to receive clarification or instruction about expectations and standards for their teaching of writing. They expressed concern as well that the college has made very little progress in implementing the GE objective of Writing in the Major.

The committee voiced its desire to see more careful oversight of the writing requirements and to develop a plan for assessment of these requirements. The Committee passes on these recommendations to next year's GEC:

- a. GEC should undertake a review of the policy of "instructor designation" for WRI courses and consider whether such designations should be approved first by the Director of College Writing.
- b. GEC should explicitly support the Director of Writing in his efforts to monitor and supervise the implementing of the writing requirements.
- c. GEC should work with the Director of Writing to make greater progress in implementing the Writing in the Major requirement.
- d. GEC should develop an assessment plan for the writing requirements that would include a review of how well existing courses are continuing to meet the objectives of the requirement.

#### 5. Surveys of faculty and student opinion on the General Education Curriculum

GEC conducted a survey of student and faculty opinion concerning the GE curriculum (survey completed in the summer of 1998) and a survey of department chairs concerning the impact of the curriculum on departmental and program staffing and offerings (survey completed in March, 1999). The results of these surveys have been shared with the Chair of CEPC and are posted on the web for public inspection.

Next year's GEC will continue to use these surveys in its discussions of monitoring and in its work as it develops plans for the assessment of the GE curriculum. The Committee would call attention to these particular conclusions:

- a. There is support -- almost surprisingly strong -- among faculty and students for the general education curriculum, though there remains some ambivalence as well.
- b. In overwhelming numbers the students say that the general education curriculum as a whole has enhanced their understanding of the liberal arts and has stimulated their interest in taking more courses in new fields.
- c. Students, however, say that the choice of a particular course is often motivated by whether it meets more than one GE requirement (49% say "often a factor" and 31% say "sometimes a factor"). But 75% of those students also say that they choose a course because it is highly recommended by other students.
- d. Faculty speak positively of the experience of offering a course with GE attributes especially because it gives them the opportunity to develop new courses and pedagogies and because it brings them into new fields of study.
- e. Departments note the pressure on staffing (and on maintaining offerings for their majors) that comes from commitments to the GE curriculum.
- f. The Religion Department notes a particular difficulty for them with their resources being inordinately consumed by the demands of the two religion GE requirements. They suggest that a study be done of ways to broaden the guidelines for the theology requirement to allow for more integration of theology with other methods of study and other aspects of Christianity.
- g. The Mathematics department requests that there be close consultation with their department in the process of approving courses for the Mathematical Reasoning requirement (MAR).