

FINAL REPORT from the General Education Task Force
August 23, 2004

Responding to a charge from Provost and Dean of the College Jim May (see Appendix A), we offer the following report on the general education curriculum of St. Olaf College (hereafter “GE”).

We affirm the underlying philosophy, content, and structure of the present curriculum. As a community, we have reason for considerable pride in our GE. It was designed through an effective, open process involving the entire faculty. It has been implemented through creative course designs developed by individuals and departments and reviewed by a conscientious general education committee. Despite a perception that GE is large and hard to complete, we have found that it is not particularly large compared to curricula of many other institutions, nor do many students have much difficulty completing its requirements. Viewed from the perspective of national conversations about general education, it appears St. Olaf was and remains in the vanguard of trends towards the integration of disciplines, co-curricular experiences, and multi-cultural learning.

Changes at the college, in the world, and in national discussions about the liberal arts warrant a careful review of GE. But, acknowledging the strengths of our GE, we do not recommend dramatic changes. Rather, we recommend efforts at consolidating the significant strengths of our GE, rendering them explicit, and working to improve and broaden understanding of them.

We do recommend that guidelines for certain requirements be further reviewed and, while we offer some suggestions, we recommend that proposals for specific changes should emerge through the structure of existing faculty curriculum committees. We also recommend adding a new dimension to campus discussions of GE: namely, a more explicit focus on student learning goals implied in each requirement (in addition to the current focus on prescriptions concerning the content of courses that fulfill the requirements).

Sections in this report describe:

- I. The work completed by the task force
- II. Proposals for recognizing, consolidating, and communicating the strengths of GE
- III. Recommendations regarding GE content
- IV. Recommendations regarding GE assessment and evaluation
- V. Recommendations regarding process and timetable
- VI. Appendices

Finally, while this report is presented to the Provost and Dean of the College, we recommend that it be shared with the faculty of the college, including the leadership and faculty curriculum committees, and we urge that faculty curriculum committees respond to proposals included in the report.

I. The Work Completed by the Task Force

The GE Task Force was constituted in January 2004 and included the following members: Jo Beld, Social Sciences representative; David Booth, Humanities representative; Gerald Hoekstra, Fine Arts representative; Phyllis Larson, Interdisciplinary and General Studies representative; Charles Umbanhowar, Natural Sciences and Mathematics representative; Mary Cisar, Registrar (convener); Solveig Zempel, Associate Dean of IGS. We met for one hour weekly between January and May 2004 and met for six additional, longer, meetings between June and August 2004. Two additional faculty members attended the summer meetings: Susan Bauer, Fine Arts, and Arnie Ostebee, Natural Sciences and Mathematics and Assistant Provost. Minutes of the Task Force are included in the Appendix.

Individual task force members traveled to two relevant conferences during the period of the group's existence. Jo Beld, accompanied by Paddy Dale, Director of Government and Foundation Relations, attended a conference of the American Association of Colleges and Universities entitled "General Education and Assessment: Generating Commitment, Value, and Evidence" (Long Beach, California, March 4-6, 2004) and a team of five St. Olaf faculty (Solveig Zempel, Mary Cisar, Phyllis Larson, Arnie Ostebee, Susan Bauer) attended the 2004 American Association of Colleges and Universities Institute on General Education at Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island, May 21-26, 2004. Copies of reports from both conferences are included in the Appendix.

During the eight months of its existence, the General Education Task Force

1. Reviewed historical documents concerning the current GE curriculum (see Appendix G)
2. Examined a 2002 consultant's study of our curriculum relative to other GE curricula nationally (see Appendix H)
3. Catalogued the existing evaluation and assessment materials relative to our curriculum (see Appendix K);
4. Gathered feedback from most departments regarding the faculty's perceived strengths and weaknesses of the GE curriculum in terms of its learning goals, its implementation, and its impact on resources (see Appendix I)
5. Held a conversation with the leadership group (see summary in Appendix J)
6. Discussed the issue of the cost of GE (see Appendix L)
7. Began considering the alignment of our curriculum with the college's mission statement both as a whole and attribute by attribute
8. Identified student learning outcomes for each GE attribute as implied by its current description, guidelines, and comments (see Appendix M)
9. Identified strengths and weaknesses in the definitions of current general education attributes (see Sections II and III of this report and Appendix B, Task Force Minutes)
10. Identified more generally the areas of strength of our current general education curriculum and areas of concern that transcend individual attributes (see Sections II, III, and IV below and Appendix B, Task Force Minutes)
11. Completed its final report

II. Proposals for Recognizing, Consolidating, and Communicating the Strengths of GE

The task force affirms the validity of the current St. Olaf College general education curriculum as a sound and flexible foundation for our students' education. It offers a multidisciplinary, multicultural exploration of human knowledge and experience in the context of traditional disciplines. It emphasizes development of basic skills, offers opportunities for integrative study, and blends innovation with tradition.

We identified a number of strengths of the St. Olaf curriculum. These strengths became more apparent when task force members met with colleagues from other institutions across the country at the general education conferences cited above. Some are stated explicitly in our documents, others are not but are merely implied. We think it would be valuable to articulate each of the following principles more clearly in the college's documents.

1. The understanding that general education occurs across all four years of college, not just in the first two
2. An intentional overlap between general education and major studies
3. The concept that requirements are owned by the college as a whole and can be offered across the curriculum, rather than being "owned" by disciplines or departments
4. The multi-disciplinary character of many GE courses
5. The opportunity afforded by GE to foster "integration" within students, not simply within courses
6. The understanding that GE is a result of the student's total experience over four years and that the curricular dimension is supplemented by co-curricular activities, residential life, and other experiences at the college

The task force believes that we must devote more attention to continuing education and discussion within the St. Olaf community regarding the purposes and goals of our GE curriculum. In many quarters there seems to be a lack of support, personal investment in, and even understanding of what we are trying to achieve. We must find ways to build a better understanding of the St. Olaf general education among faculty (veteran and new), students, and staff. For faculty, continuing attention must be paid to such matters as the role of advising, the importance of faculty training to be advisors, and place of advising in faculty orientation, mentoring, and reward systems; for students, what to expect from advising, how to build intentionality, coherence, and logical sequencing and continuity into their selection of GE courses, and how to articulate the purposes of their GE education to others; and for staff, on the ways the offices of Admissions, Advancement, Media Relations, and other areas talk about the education we offer to students.

We also need to find more constructive language for speaking about GE. We need to overcome the perception of a dichotomy between "general education" and "majors" and the notion that GE requirements are a series of obstacles to overcome (too often faculty and students alike speak of "getting rid of GE requirements"). We must develop ways of speaking about our curriculum that focus on expectations, competencies, and learning

outcomes and that transcend course boundaries and open up the conversation to co-curricular experiences of students.

Our specific recommendations are:

- A. *Develop campus-wide educational efforts with the aim of building a better understanding of the GE curriculum.*

These might include faculty development sessions for new faculty, “continuing education” on the GE curriculum for returning faculty, and improved advising for students that considers the distinctive aims, content, and pedagogy of the St. Olaf GE. Some faculty development is already provided through CILA programs for new faculty; it would be helpful to expand this and to provide additional opportunities. This will be even more important as faculty turnover becomes more extensive over the next several years. For students this might include sessions during Week One, new materials to include in the admissions process, and new training for JCs and peer advisers. Finally, for staff it might include workshops to explain the GE and provide useful tips for talking about it with students.

- B. *Improve and update the catalog copy on GE before the publication of the next catalog two years from now.*

Some of these improvements cannot be undertaken until the working groups recommended below and CEPC have completed their work, so catalog revision will of necessity be an iterative process. The catalog revisions should include the statements of desired student learning outcomes for each requirement.

III. Recommendations Regarding GE Content

In consideration of changes in the college, changes in the world, and new understandings of the relationship between the disciplines and liberal education, as well as ten years of experience with the GE, the task force makes the following recommendations regarding specific requirements of the GE and its overall scope and balance:

- A. *That the following GE requirements be carefully reexamined in light of the questions raised.*

MAR: Should the “mathematical reasoning” requirement be retained or should it be replaced with a quantitative literacy requirement? Could mathematical study occur more broadly across the curriculum?

PHA: Should this be a curricular requirement, or is it more appropriate to provide opportunities for physical well-being more broadly within the overall experience of a residential liberal arts education?

MCS-G and MCS-D: The terms with which we describe these requirements (“Western” and “non-Western”) obfuscate crucial issues. Would a term like “intercultural” be more useful since it focuses on interrelationships between cultures? Should the requirement be broadened to include other kinds of categories

(urban/suburban/rural or class)? What about some that are now included, such as gender studies? Should MCS courses challenge students' beliefs about their own and others' cultures and their understanding of themselves in relation to other cultures?

BTS-T: While BTS-T should remain a requirement in Christian theology, should the guidelines be revised to make explicit that courses that address Christian theology in dialogue with other religious traditions and with other dimensions of Christian traditions may fulfill the requirement? Could BTS-T courses be offered more broadly across the college?

NST: What is the rationale for requiring two courses? Should the present requirement of study in two different departments be retained? Should the present requirement that one of the two courses be taken in one of three identified departments be retained? Does the current requirement match the goals and vision of the science faculty? Furthermore, should "science and society" be a required element of NST?

B. That the following GE requirements be considered for modest revision.

WRI: Should we reduce the number of requirements from four to one or two? At the same time should we reinstitute GEC approval and review of WRI courses to ensure consistency in the implementation of the guidelines?

HWC: What is the rationale for requiring two courses?

HBS: What is the rationale for requiring two courses? If so, should we retain the requirement that the two courses be taken in two different departments? Could depth be a valid objective for study in this area, instead of just breadth?

EIN: Is the term "moral reasoning" in the guidelines clear? Should the requirement remain designated as *the* Integrative Studies requirement?

C. That the following GE requirements not be changed at this time.

FOL, ALS-L, ALS-A, BTS-B, ORC, FYW

On the basis of feedback from our colleagues and discussion among task force members, the task force considers these requirements satisfactory as they currently stand.

D. That the number and balance among the GE requirements be reviewed.

A number of faculty members expressed the view that GE as currently formulated is too large. In light of data reviewed, the GE Task Force does not share this view. Nevertheless, as the recommendations above reveal, we do think it worth revisiting the rationale for requiring multiple courses in some areas.

In addition, this may be a good time to consider possible gaps in GE that warrant attention (information literacy, environmental literacy, visual literacy, media literacy,

service learning, and experiential learning have been suggested). These might be remedied by instituting new requirements, by encouraging the faculty to include new elements in existing courses, or by enhancing co-curricular opportunities.

IV. Recommendations for Improving GE Assessment and Evaluation

Since an informed understanding of the effectiveness of GE depends on continuing assessment and evaluation, the task force makes the following recommendations:

A. That each GE requirement include a statement of desired student learning outcomes.

The present curriculum is framed entirely in terms of what a given GE *course* must do. While it has worked well to have parameters for course content and, in some cases, course pedagogy, it is also desirable to state explicitly what students should know and be able to do as a result of completing a given requirement. Not only will this remind faculty and students of the objectives of each requirement, it will also strengthen the College's program of course evaluation and student learning assessment. This recommendation was developed in response to the report from the Director of ARP following participation in a national conference on General Education and Assessment (*see Appendix C*). The GE Task Force has drafted a statement of the student learning outcomes implied by each of the current requirements (*see Appendix M*).

Once the various requirements have been revised, CEPC should review these learning outcomes statements, revise them as needed and present them to the faculty for adoption. ARP should then collaborate with CEPC to prepare feedback forms for the learning objectives associated with each GE attribute, to be made available on the Form Creator website.

B. That departments and programs be asked to evaluate their contributions to the GE curriculum in the course of conducting their self-studies for program review.

There are currently few guidelines or parameters for program review. When the guidelines are drafted, they should include an expectation that departments and programs will consider their contributions to the GE curriculum (where they are offering GE courses, where they are not, and what the optimum mix should be) for the mutual enrichment of the GE curriculum and major studies in the department or program.

It is likely that program review guidelines will be developed collaboratively by Dean's Council, ARP, and IRP, preferably before the next cycle of program reviews begins (most programs to date have undergone at least one review). The Task Force recommends that the guidelines developers consider the findings of this report and reports from the various conferences prepared by Task Force members (*see Appendix C and Appendix D*).

C. That a plan be developed for the regular reporting and consideration of GE-related evaluation and assessment data.

The work of the Task Force has included the preparation of a summary of evaluation and assessment data relevant to the GE curriculum that is already available (*see Appendix K*). The anticipated requirement-specific feedback forms will provide additional data (though perhaps not as systematic, since use by faculty will be voluntary).

CEPC and the Director of ARP should collaborate in developing and implementing this plan.

V. Recommendations Regarding Process and Timetable

The work of the 2004 General Education Task Force officially concludes with this report. In it we present specific recommendations for completing the work that remains to be done in order to realize the potential of the current curriculum. The task force recommends that further work proceed through existing faculty structures rather than by means of a new task force. In particular we recommend the following:

- A. That the Dean of the College immediately distribute the current report to all faculty and that discussion of the report become part of the Faculty Leadership Group meeting of September 1, 2004.*
- B. That any proposals for change in GE should come from CEPC, since CEPC is responsible for recommending major curriculum changes to the faculty. The task force recommends that early in the fall of 2004-2005 CEPC constitute small work groups representing a broad cross-section of faculty stakeholders and, possibly, student representatives, each charged with one of the recommendations of the General Education Task Force and receiving a firm deadline. Some work groups will consider specific general education attributes and their associated learning outcomes, while one will look at the larger issues presented above. CEPC should review and edit, as needed, the learning outcomes statements for all of the requirements. These should then go through normal procedures for dissemination through the whole faculty.*
- C. That ARP and CEPC collaborate to determine when periodic assessment reports should be produced, by whom, and to whom they should be disseminated (e.g., CEPC, GEC, Dean's Council, others).*
- D. That CEPC receive the reports of the work groups when their tasks are complete, deliberate, and prepare recommendations to go before the faculty as a whole.*
- E. That the next round of department/program review guidelines, which will likely be developed by the Dean's Council in consultation with other entities, include examination of the alignment of general education and majors offered through each department or program.*

The task force recommends the following timetable:

August 23, 2004: General Education Task Force report sent to Dean of the College and distributed to the faculty

September 1, 2004: Discussion of the report at the Faculty Leadership Group Opening Meeting

Academic Year 2004-2005:

- **September:** CEPC constitutes work groups to pick up on the work of the task force.
- **Throughout fall semester:** continuation of conversation about general education broadly among the faculty through various types of public forums sponsored by existing entities (e.g., CEPC, Associate Deans, Academic Advising Center, CILA, ACM First Year Experience group, others).
- **Throughout fall and spring semesters:** CEPC work groups focus on specific aspects of the curriculum and specific issues raised by the task force report, with possibility of response and feedback from the faculty as a whole via forums, meetings, and so forth; begin to implement task force recommendations concerning faculty, staff, student education about the curriculum.

Academic Year 2005-2006:

- **Fall semester:** Proposals for revision to Curriculum and Educational Policies Committee (CEPC) as appropriate, and then to the faculty.
- **Spring semester:** Revision of catalog and other public statements regarding general education.
- **Throughout fall and spring semesters:** continued intentional training of faculty, staff, students to promote new understanding of liberal education at St. Olaf College;
- **Summer 2006:** Publication of 2006-2008 catalog and other documents (paper and web-based) relating to general education at St. Olaf College.

VI. APPENDICES

All items are available in paper copies in a notebook in the Dean's Office. Most are also available on-line through links in this report at

<http://www.stolaf.edu/committees/genedtaskforce/index.html>.

- A. Charge of the Task Force
- B. Task Force Minutes
- C. Jo Beld, Report on the conference on "General Education and Assessment: Generating Commitment, Value, and Evidence" (American Association of Colleges and Universities, Long Beach, California, March 4-6, 2004)
- D. Mary Cisar et al., Report on the 2004 American Association of Colleges and Universities Institute on General Education (Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island, May 21-26, 2004) and useful materials
- E. St. Olaf Academic Catalog, sections on General Education (see Index)
- F. NCA Self Study chapters on Diversity, Cross-Cultural Learning, and Program Mix and Quality
- G. Founding documents of the St. Olaf College General Education Curriculum
 - 1. Curriculum outline
 - 2. Summary of GE requirements
 - 3. Report and Recommendations (GEC 1999)
 - 4. Student Survey Regarding General Education (2002)
 - 5. GEC Summary of Survey of Department Chairs (March, 1999)
 - 6. "General Education, the Faculty, and the College Council" 2002-2003
 - 7. May 2004 student reports on the curriculum (Swett and Niermann, '04)
- H. J. Scott Lee, "An Institutional Profile and Comparative Analysis of Saint Olaf College General Education Requirements to Peer Institutions: Based on the Association for Core Texts and Courses' *Trends in the Liberal Arts Core* National Database"
- I. Departmental responses to current general education curriculum and summary
- J. Leadership Group meeting follow-up conversation regarding general education curriculum, March 11, 2004
- K. GE data prepared by IRP and the Office of the Registrar based on an analysis of all student degree audits of the Class of 2004
- L. Comment regarding "cost of GE"
- M. Draft statements of student learning outcomes associated with each GE requirement