

## REPORT OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE

April 2, 2004

The following report of the General Education Committee was adopted unanimously at its meeting on March 29, 2004.

The General Education Committee report builds on the earlier work of the Honors University Task Force, which identified three priorities for improving undergraduate education: greater emphasis on writing, focus on the first year experience, and revision of general education. More immediately, it responds to the Provost's "Proposal to Reform General Education" (November 11, 2003), which asked for a thorough review of the present General Education program and for a set of proposals consistent with the standards of intellectual soundness, simplicity, and affordability. In developing its response, the Committee has been mindful of the national dialogue regarding the role of undergraduate general education in research universities. One influential statement, "Students in the Balance," summarizes the principal goals of general education in such institutions in the following terms:

- "the groundwork for a thoughtful, reflective life of the mind";
- "a vehicle for academic exploration" (among the majors available in a research university);
- the acquisition of "skills and attributes that define a well-educated person."( p. 2)

The Committee agrees with the Provost that the General Education program must receive periodic and ongoing review. Equally important, its goals and rationale deserve careful and clear articulation so that students, faculty, and the public understand its role. (We take note, for instance, that the UMBC catalog makes virtually no statement about the rationale for the current GFR requirements.) It is essential that General Education be understood as a positive feature of the undergraduate experience, complementing the major. Moreover, its requirements must be simple and as clear as possible for students and advisors.

In considering the Provost's proposals, the Committee reached the conclusion that general education requirements ought to be considered as a "constitution," a basic framework within which a number of significant and targeted curricular initiatives may be developed to enrich and enhance the total undergraduate program. It therefore recommends that concepts like those embodied in the "thematic integration" proposal might more appropriately be addressed as enhancements to the General Education program rather than mandated requirements.

### 1. RATIONALE AND CRITERIA

It is imperative that the goals and rationale for UMBC's General Education program be clearly stated, communicated in official publications like the catalog. Equally important, clearer and more systematic criteria for the approval of General Education courses must be developed as a basis for decisions about the eligibility of courses in the various categories. The Provost has also recommended that a statement about the way in which approved courses address the criteria for General Education be included in course syllabi.

#### **Recommendation:**

**Develop a statement of the nature and goals of the UMBC General Education Program and**

**revised and expanded criteria for General Education Courses.**

## **2. DISTRIBUTION AND COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS**

UMBC's distribution categories have a long history in the life of the institution, reflecting the major areas of academic focus in the liberal arts offerings of a research university. That tradition may be so long established that its assumptions are taken for granted, but in its essential form it precedes COMAR or MHEC regulations, rather than derives from them. The committee affirms the value of the four broad distribution categories—Arts and Humanities, Social Science, Mathematics/Science, and Language/Culture—and believes they are consistent with the broad goals stated above. It notes that in important ways UMBC General Education requirements go beyond the mandated minimum to represent a distinctive statement about the nature of our General Education program.

The Committee accepts the Provost's proposal that courses approved for General Education credit should introduce students to a relevant mode of inquiry and address one or more identified competencies (and/or skills). Competencies (like those articulated in the recent MHEC/Middle States guidelines—see 6b, below) and modes of inquiry would need to be identified in consultation with departments within each of the distribution categories to determine a fundamental and systematic set.

The Committee does identify writing as a competency requiring special and enhanced attention beyond English Composition in a second required writing course which could be fulfilled by a designated Writing Intensive (WI) distribution, major, or elective course. For typical students, this would not represent an additional course requirement, but a competency to be fulfilled. Criteria for a Writing Intensive course would be defined, in consultation with the Provost's Writing Board and others, as appropriate. The Committee also believes that information literacy should be identified as a competency (for now it should be included as one of several; a goal might be an eventual specific information literacy requirement).

In the Arts and Humanities and Social Science categories, the committee recommends a change in the requirement that the three courses be in at least two categories (rather than the present 2 +1) to permit greater breadth, when desired, and to make the requirement more flexible.

### **Recommendations:**

- a) Retain the 3 course requirements in Arts and Humanities and Social Science (courses must be in “at least two categories” rather than the present 2 + 1 requirement).**
- b) Retain the requirement for one Mathematics course and two Science courses (one with a laboratory).**
- c) Retain the current requirement for English Composition and enhance it with a second advanced Writing Intensive course (designated WI; see #4 below for further considerations).**
- d) Identify criteria for all distribution courses, including selected competencies and/or modes of inquiry.**

## **3. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

In the UMBC GFR system, Language and Culture function as one of the distribution areas, but in terms of MHEC guidelines this category constitutes a graduation rather than a distribution requirement. It is the contention of this Committee that the identification of language and culture represents a significant statement about our concept of the goals of General Education and a major institutional resource and curricular commitment. Yet, it is one whose goals have not been clearly articulated, nor has the relation of Language and Culture courses been explained. Essentially, the goals have been 1) in the case of Language, to teach skills that an educated person may need in the modern world, 2) in the case of both, to provide insight into other language-based cultures, and 3) in the case of both, to provide an understanding of the cultural issues that will face students in a global context. While both Language and Culture courses may serve similar intellectual purposes, their content and approach are not synonymous. Moreover, we are concerned that Culture courses not appear simply as contingent, but represent a value in their own right. Finally, we believe that the present contingency relationship makes this category the least simple and the most confusing for students and advisors alike.

Therefore the Committee affirms the combined and related goals of Language and Culture courses, but proposes separating them as requirements for greater clarity. Under this proposal the requirement that students meet an established level of competency in Language (through the 201 level) would be retained. When the present system was adopted the MLL Department assured the Senate that the preponderance of students would come in ready to move to the 201 level (or having already met this level of competency). In addition, two Culture courses would be required for the B.A. degree, one for the B.S. and B.S.E. degrees. The one-course reduction for the latter maintains the present policy, due to the heavy credit requirements of these degrees, but permits substitution of a Mathematics or Science course as a substitute if necessary to fulfill the 40-credit minimum for General Education. Our initial review of the revised Language/Culture proposal suggests that the number of courses would be equal to (or less than) the current requirement, but further study would be needed to make sure that the gains in simplification and clarity would not be at the expense of added course demands for more than a few.

The specific purpose of the Culture requirement is to broaden the horizons of students, helping them to understand the global dimensions of life in the 21st century. Therefore, the Committee believes that Culture courses should continue to be designated as generally addressing non-U.S. subject matter, as is currently the case (though there also are presently some exceptions). The Committee received a number of communications from faculty urging a broader definition that might focus upon issues of Cultural Diversity, recognizing the multicultural nature of contemporary American society and the global context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century experience. While the Committee considered alternatives, there was concern that the broadened definition might not assure that students would be exposed to the international dimensions at the core of the requirement.

Under the changed Language/Culture requirement, further Language courses beyond the 201 level could carry Culture designation when they involve substantial emphasis on cultural dimensions.

The Committee believes that Culture course offerings should be reviewed and considerably enhanced. The current set of Culture courses does not appear to be sufficient either in number or

in breadth. Major regions of the world are under-represented, and there should be more comparative culture courses. There is a need for additional courses which address issues in a global context, recognizing the increasingly transitory nature of borders and the globalization of political, economic, and social institutions. Moreover, there is uneven participation from departments capable of generating courses in this area. We therefore strongly recommend review of Culture course offerings with the goals of curricular expansion and participation by a wider range of departments.

**Recommendations:**

- a) Retain the current Language requirement as through the 201 level;**
- b) Require 2 Culture courses for the B.A. degree, and 1 for the B.S. and B.S.E. degrees;**
- c) Review existing Culture course offerings and develop recommendations for enhancement.**

#### **4. ENHANCING THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

Enhancement initiatives can enrich the “constitution” of the General Education program, whereas substantial mandated changes may involve unrealistic resource commitments and levels, introduce complexity, and reduce flexibility. The program outlined above represents only modest modifications in the present system, but it does make clear that, in order for the General Education program to serve UMBC well, essential elements need to be addressed as priority items. Moreover, additional initiatives to enhance its goals must also be supported. The Committee recommends special enhancement priority and resource support for the following:

##### The Writing Intensive Course

While there is strong campus support for the improvement of writing beyond the single English Composition course as part of the General Education program, implementation presents substantial challenges. Best practices nationally suggest that ideally such courses would focus on content within the context of an academic discipline, involve discussion of writing appropriate to the field, provide for feedback on essay-style writing, and be sufficiently small to permit faculty-student consultation; often such courses are at the upper level. The UMBC Writing Board, established by the Provost as a follow-up to the Honors University Task Force, has recommended such a model as an eventual goal for the campus. Both the Provost and the Committee are mindful that implementation of this model would present substantial resource challenges. Therefore, the Committee, with consultation from the Writing Board, proposes as an interim step the designation of courses meeting criteria as “Writing Intensive,” whether in the major, among the distribution courses, or as an elective. Criteria, to be determined, would include the amount and type of writing required for such course, the provision for feedback and revision, the content focus, and the level of such courses. Following establishment of general criteria, it would be necessary to survey departments to determine the number of courses which already meet these criteria (or with modest alterations might do so) and to calculate the extent to which additional courses would be required. The special resource and curricular requirements of the various departments would need to be taken into account in such consideration. The Provost has requested that this review process occur over the summer so that a specific implementation recommendation could be brought to the Faculty Senate in the Fall semester of this year. The

review process would also involve recommendations on Faculty Development, Learning Resource Center, and other resources required to support the Writing Intensive initiative.

### The First Year Experience

The First Year Seminar and other first year experience bridge programs have been developed at UMBC as a response to a major recommendation of the Honors University Task Force. The Committee believes that these initiatives should be continued and enhanced as a vital part of the General Education program. One goal should be the expansion of the First Year Seminar offerings to make them available to a larger number of entering students. Support to faculty for the development of FYS courses is vital to the success of the program, as is compensation to departments for faculty providing instruction. Special consideration of the interdisciplinary nature of FYS seminars should be given so that they may be assigned General Education credit within distribution categories closest to the focus of the course; typically the seminars also would meet General Education criteria in terms of essential competencies and/or modes of inquiry.

Similarly, other academic bridge programs should be supported and expanded to foster academic skills and adjustment to the expectations of the UMBC undergraduate experience. In the short term the goal should be to provide all first year students an opportunity to participate; the ultimate goal might be to require participation as part of the General Education experience. These programs, some already in place on a limited basis, include 1-credit “success seminars” attached to sections of existing introductory courses and credit-bearing courses linked to the Living-Learning communities and to the various scholars programs. Expansion of these initiatives would represent a major curricular priority and demand substantial resource allocation.

### Targeted Initiatives to Enhance General Education

The Provost’s proposal for 3 courses in a “Thematic Integration” interdisciplinary cluster, focusing upon issues students will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, drew the most reaction of any element, both positive and negative. Those who were most supportive of the concept believed that the goal of integration could only be fulfilled with the requirement of a core course, ideally at the introductory (though possibly at the capstone) level. However, this model would pose substantial resource challenges; additionally, there were serious concerns about the flexibility and complexity of such a universal requirement. Nevertheless, the Committee does believe that concepts like this should be explored by the General Education Committee as ways to enhance the General Education experience. Ideally, they could be designed in such a way that they fulfill General Education requirements, while affording students an attractive focus for intellectual exploration.

### **Recommendations:**

- a) Establish criteria for an advanced Writing Intensive course, survey existing resources, and report to the Faculty Senate in the Fall semester, 2004, with a recommendation regarding implementation;**
- b) Review the First Year Seminar program, including determination of the support needed for its expansion as a continuing and vital component of UMBC General Education, and consider the role of other academic bridge programs for first year students;**

**c) Review potential enhancement initiatives as part of the ongoing development of the General Education program.**

## **5. IMPLEMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE**

The present GFR program was established by an ad hoc General Education Committee, with ongoing responsibility assigned to the Undergraduate Council. While the UGC has continued to review courses for GFR approval, it has not been within the Council's purview to monitor, evaluate, or direct the General Education program. Moreover, many of the resource aspects of General Education require the involvement of the Provost, Deans, or other members of the administration, as well as department chairs. Therefore, the Committee recommends the establishment of a General Education Committee. The GEC would report to the UGC. It would need to have broad representation from the departments across the University and should include the Provost or the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Education, as well as student members; it also should have a representative from the Academic Planning and Budget Committee. The GEC would be charged to establish criteria for courses meeting General Education requirements, review courses, monitor the General Education program, and make recommendations for its support and enhancement.

As a first step, an Interim General Education Committee should be established, with membership determined by the Provost and the President of the Faculty Senate. The Interim Committee would be charged to review the recommendations of this report and to submit specific proposals to the Faculty Senate by its November, 2004, meeting. Following receipt of the recommendations, a reasonable period for campus-wide consideration should be provided prior to final action by the Faculty Senate during the Spring semester, 2005.

Upon approval of the new program, a regularly-constituted General Education Committee would be established under the Plan of Organization. Implementation of the plan would occur during the academic year 2005-6 in order that the inauguration of the revised General Education program requirements would coincide with the next two-year calendar cycle, beginning in the Fall 2006.

### **Recommendations:**

- a) Establish an Interim General Education Committee to review the recommendations of this report and to make recommendations to the Faculty Senate regarding proposed changes in the Fall semester, 2004, and to continue to develop the program and recommend implementation steps through the 2004-5 academic year;**
- b) Establish a General Education Committee, beginning with implementation of the revised requirements in Fall, 2006, to review, monitor, and support the UMBC General Education program.**

## **6. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

- a) For fulfillment of the General Education requirement, students must complete at least 40 credits, to include:

- 3 courses (9) Arts/Humanities
- 3 courses (9) Social Science
- 2 courses (7 or more) Biological/Physical Science  
(one course with a laboratory component)
- 1 course (4) Mathematics
- 1 course (4) Language at the 201 level
- 2 courses (6) Culture
- 1 course (3) English Composition  
(+ one Writing Intensive course met through distribution, major, or elective)

For the student who comes in ready to take the 201 Language level = c. 42 credits  
(the student who places out of 201 would have only 38 and need to take an additional 2);

For the student who begins at the 102 or 103 Language level = c. 46 credits  
(at present, the student who begins at the 101 level must take three additional Language/Culture distribution area courses);

For the B.S. and B.S.E. degree student, the single Culture course requirement continues the present 1-course reduction due to the heavy credit demands of the degrees; these students may substitute a Mathematics or Science course if necessary to fulfill the 40-credit minimum requirement.

MHEC General Education Requirements for Public Institutions mandate “not less than 40 and not more than 46 semester hours of required core courses,” and in addition permit “up to 8 semester hours in a sixth category that addresses emerging issues that institutions have identified as essential to a full program of general education for their students.”

#### b) Competencies

The MHEC working group on progress reports for Student Learning Outcomes Assessment has recommended focus on “the five competencies identified in Standard 12 of Middle States’ accreditation process: written and oral communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy.”