

“Making Sense of Curricular Models for General Education”
More GERA Homework, this piece by Larry Grabau
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Introduction:

Curricular models for general education have been presented as polar opposites between a plodding, traditional distribution march and an exciting, innovative, outcomes-based symphony. As a reform-minded committee, we tend to support the symphony, both because it sounds more sophisticated and because it makes more sense to work toward learning outcomes than to simply teach our chosen disciplines and hope that our students somehow make the necessary connections. Of course, a curricular model could have include distributive elements as well as elements based on intended learning outcomes; while this compromise may seem unsavory, it may also be the sort of realistic step forward that we may be able to achieve. Still, before descending into that purgatory, I'd like to further muddy the waters.

As the revised ERC report aptly notes, the simple word “skills” can mean many different things to university faculty. Yet another framework for general education is to make its exclusive focus on the development of useful skills, almost vocational in its application. That could be described as what ERC terms “essential skills”, and could even be seen as limited to that list. In other words, a utilitarian perspective could actually throw out everything EXCEPT “essential skills”, and make the entire focus of the general education program on making sure that every one of our graduates had developed each one of the listed essential skills.

On the other hand, Brown University gives students incredible latitude in developing their own general studies programs—yes, they must be approved, but since guidelines on what might be acceptable are not published, students obviously are permitted to construct a “program” which makes sense to them (and which they can justify to the institution).

Here's my point: while we debate the relative merits of a distribution model, an outcomes-based model, and a hybrid distribution-outcomes model, there are actually two other potential models out there: skills-based, and student-selected. At this point in time, it seems like we are drifting toward a hybrid model, as a result of intense conversations on “essential skills” from our college forums. The ultimate balance between “essential skills” and the remaining, more broadly stated curricular objectives may depend on the political pressure brought to bear through the rest of the development of UK's new general education curriculum. The reason I bring up the other models is to indicate that we may have some things to learn from these two “outliers” in terms of:

- 1) identifiable relevance, and
- 2) student empowerment, investment through choice.

Incorporating some insights from the outliers might help us to develop more robust mechanisms to accomplish the curricular objectives as currently formulated in the ERC report:

Mechanisms:

Most discussions of general education focus on which courses we will use to meet our goals; after all, courses, especially the three credit lecture course, are pretty much the coin of the realm in terms of US undergraduate education at research-extensive universities. Unfortunately, that mindset may constrain what we can do to work with our students toward their own learning. Perhaps the deepest innovations will need to be in terms of re-conceptualizing how our students will achieve the goals we end up setting for them. In the following paragraphs, I work through some possible mechanisms to approach the current ERC curricular objectives:

- ⇒ **Experiential learning.** This could involve service learning, especially across cultures. Since we are so big on study abroad for all our future students, might we consider the experience of studying abroad itself to provide more transformative power than even a well-designed and facilitated cross-cultural course here on campus? In other words, the cross-cultural immersion experience could count for the 4th curriculum objective even without a specific course designed to communicate such insights.
- ⇒ **Amalgam versus modularized.** Under the current “essential skills” section, ERC lists practical understandings of economics, statistics, and math as essential. Presumably, we could develop a single course which addressed the identified essential elements of those three quantitative disciplines. On the other hand, modular one-credit courses might be more workable, since many students would be taking additional courses in one or more of the identified disciplines, and may not need to take all of the above courses. In addition, some students would be fully capable of demonstrating their knowledge in one or more of these areas in a challenge exam, and some students would be well-served, in my opinion, by making available electronic learning formats (e.g., web-based modules in the above disciplines).
- ⇒ **Embedded in major.** For example, the capstone requirement would be integrated into individual majors. In fact, several very good UK examples of how this might be done already exist (especially in the College of Agriculture).
- ⇒ **Integrative/reflective.** The Senior Discovery Seminar Program could create an opportunity for many faculty to develop interesting inquiry learning courses, especially over topics which could successfully bring together students from many different majors. Students could then choose which seminar to take based on their own interests.
- ⇒ **Menu opportunities.** For the ecosystems understandings in the essential skills category, this could be achieved by a fair number of different types of courses. This might be a place where rigorously reviewed courses could be provided as a menu available to students. If some majors felt that they absolutely had to have one of those courses, they could encourage their students to make that choice.
- ⇒ **Partnerships.** It truly sounds like we will need to bring back the oral communications requirement, perhaps in concert with a new emphasis on media communications. Maybe a shared instructional mechanism could work; for example, with one credit of COM 199 for the content piece and two credits in the major for practice of these essential communications skills.
- ⇒ **Multidisciplinary perspectives.** It is difficult indeed to imagine accomplishing curricular objective two in a single course; doing this right would seem to require a deep treatment of multiple perspectives along with some work at facilitating students’ recognition of the tensions among such perspectives. In my opinion, this is the most difficult aspect of the current proposal, and would require duets (or even trios) of courses co-developed by collaborating faculty. Maybe this is where Arts and Sciences could “major”, since we may be stepping away from the traditional distributional configuration of six hours in

humanities, six hours in social sciences, and six hours in natural sciences. One way to see this is that teams of A&S faculty from each of the three “pillars” above get together and come up with new sequences of inter-connected courses—note that it may be good to have such teams include more than one representative of each pillar, in order to make the new sequence more sustainable.

Reasons for Hope:

As Aragorn said to the young boy in Helm’s Deep (LORT), when the soldiers were telling him that they would all die that night: “There is always hope.” Of course, we usually do better in developing postures of hopefulness (that is, eagerly anticipating good outcomes) when we have some concrete evidence on which to base that posture. Hence, here are three lines of such evidence:

- ⇒ Writing Program. UK’s Writing Program, under the remarkable leadership of Janet Eldred, has devised a program which actually has enhanced the quality of writing instruction campus-wide, in spite of severe resource limitations in the Department of English. Moving to a four-credit version of ENG 104 for all students (except for exceptional writers) freed up many teaching resources previously consumed by ENG 101 and 102. While many believed that most students would be forever taking their 200-level graduation writing requirement through the several available ENG 2xx course offerings, programs began immediately stepping up to develop “W” courses embedded in their own programs. In fact, Nursing and Natural Resources had courses approved by October of 2005 (after a May 2005 solicitation), and several other programs have followed suit. It seems that writing within the major is considered a high value by several undergraduate programs. (To be fair, this probably won’t be happening with some of the biggest undergraduate programs; for example, biology or psychology.)
- ⇒ Discovery Seminar Program. With truly modest funding support for faculty who develop courses, this has developed into an exciting, positive program, and could be grown in two directions: 1) making more such seminars available to first-year students, and 2) establishing the Senior DSP mentioned in the current ERC report. Yes, this will require an investment by the institution; as ERC says, we aren’t going to get anywhere by asking faculty to do more with less any longer.
- ⇒ Honors Program enhancement. With a more substantial investment than the current first-year DSP, this program has successfully developed sequences of courses which look at related topics from very different perspectives. For example, the new World Food Issues track starts with a humanities course on the history of food and society, then moves to a social sciences course on why we eat what we eat, and tackles environmental protection versus food production in a natural sciences course. Other tracks have taken their own approaches to building a “package” of views around important topics (ask Bill and Jane for their details). My point is that such courses (toward the difficult second objective) can be developed if faculty teams are granted time and provided with appropriate encouragement to do so.