

Counter-Proposal for General Education Reform

Published by Dean Saitta March 3rd, 2009 in *Faculty Forum*, Home.

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An alternative set of ideas for structuring General Education at DU—framed as a “Counter-Proposal for General Education Reform”—has been approved by the Faculty Senate Executive Committee for distribution to the full Senate. The Forum editor has granted this space to better justify the counter-proposal’s existence.

The counter proposal is offered as a constructive response to the Gen Ed Review Committee’s call for questions, concerns, and feedback. Every key idea in the proposal and in this Forum post was shared with Review Committee members either in the fall of 2008 or before the counter proposal was distributed to the Senate. The counter proposal is intended to promote faculty conversation about this vitally important piece of the undergraduate experience. It respects the Review Committee’s work, as well as the work that previous faculty committees have invested in re-imagining the undergraduate experience at DU.

The specific reasons for offering a counter proposal are detailed in the document. The primary motivating belief is that the Review Committee’s proposal for change (especially at the high end of the curriculum) will not serve the best interests of our students. In 2006–07 a Mission and Goals Task Force convened by the University Planning Advisory Council (UPAC) produced new university goals around Learning, Scholarship, and Community engagement. The Learning Goal is arguably the only one of these that embodies true intentionality about where we should go as a community of teachers and learners. It highlights the ability of students to integrate knowledge across established disciplines so as to better address the complex problems of 21st

century life, and better cope with a rapidly changing and highly volatile 21st century job market. The goal was endorsed by a representative cross-section of faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees committed to putting student interests above the interests of divisions, departments, and programs. The Review Committee's proposal is inconsistent with the letter and the spirit of this Learning Goal. It does not consider UPAC white papers relevant to curriculum review generated by the Environmental Scanning Task Force. It also runs counter to the recommendations that many higher ed professional organizations are making about what Gen Ed should accomplish given the world that our students are entering.

Specific features of the Committee proposal invite debate, beginning with the packaging of the lower end Gen Ed requirements as a "matrix." There is a continuum of overlapping variation in ways of knowing that threads its way through the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics and engineering. Thus, the categories of "Scientific" and "Analytical" do not work as shorthand for describing the rich and varied approaches to knowing that simultaneously divide and unite these domains of inquiry. All such binaries misinform rather than enlighten. Nor is it wise to partition the Gen Ed curriculum into "Natural and Physical World" and "Society and Culture", even as an organizing convenience. Scholars and "third culture" public intellectuals are today integrating timelines of natural and cultural history, not segregating them. Moreover, the university has embraced sustainability as an institutional priority. This concept depends on an unified, seamless view of the relationship between Nature and Culture, not a bifurcated, compartmentalized one. The structure and language of a common curriculum should harmonize with our vision, values, mission, and goals.

The Review Committee proposal significantly reduces the high-end ("Core") piece of Gen Ed from three interdisciplinary courses to a single "Advanced Seminar." The Advanced Seminar doesn't have to be interdisciplinary but must

be writing-intensive. In spring 2008 the Review Committee identified a discussion with Core faculty as one of its agenda priorities. The subsequent failure to convene such a meeting is curious given that Core is the most distinctive, and most distinctively integrative, component of the existing Gen Ed program. It enjoys better student evaluations, on average, than other components of the program. It appears that the elimination of Core-as-we-know-it was a foregone conclusion in the review process. Nothing in the unit-level discussions would have changed that, but something in a separate conversation with Core faculty might have. If a curriculum is facing elimination it would seem appropriate to debrief the faculty who invested significant time and energy in creating and teaching it. Minimally, if a single Advanced Seminar is to be the new mandate then faculty should have maximum freedom to structure it in whatever way suits their pedagogical purposes.

The Review Committee proposal continues the year-long NATS Foundations courses, a “non-negotiable” requirement that for years has significantly constrained Gen Ed review. It creates a new Language requirement for exceptionally skilled students who would otherwise place out of the existing language requirement. As noted, the committee proposal mandates a writing-intensive Advanced Seminar that may or may not be interdisciplinary. By reducing Gen Ed requirements the proposal frees up credit hours that only larger and more powerful departments could likely exploit for enriching their major requirements. The committee proposal thus serves specific divisional, disciplinary, and programmatic interests rather than the broader cause of educating students for an increasingly interdependent, intercultural, and interdisciplinary world. Alternatively, the counter proposal appeals to academic cosmopolitanism rather than territorialism. It preserves the requirement for substantive interdisciplinary work at the high end of Gen Ed. It does so in a way that offers new possibilities for reinforcing our commitment to intercultural literacy beyond the language experience. The counter-proposal also reinforces our commitment to scientific literacy by preserving a required year of science

for non-majors. It is actually friendlier to the sciences in that it creates an opportunity for non-majors to take more than three quarters of Gen Ed science.

The professional literature establishes that good General Education reform begins with the educational challenges of a changing world rather than the particular interests and ambitions of divisions, departments, and programs. It offers multiple opportunities for collective faculty discussion and debate about curriculum goals and content. It allows for substantive re-workings of a plan rather than minor or cosmetic changes. It involves conversations with administrators about resources and expectations for supporting the curriculum—expectations that were not met after the last Gen Ed re-design here at DU. We owe it to our students to carefully consider these challenges and expectations, and to take whatever time is necessary to produce a curriculum that is right for the times in which we live.