

20 November 2008

To: Linda Tate and Rod Buxton  
From: Dean Saitta  
Re: Gen Ed Review Discussion in Senate  
Cc: Faculty Senate Executive Committee

Hi Linda, Rod. Here are some thoughts about Gen Ed review inspired by the Committee's posted Portfolio minutes and materials. I admire and appreciate the hard work that has gone into the review and the level of detail reported in the minutes.

I think it's important that those of us dedicated to teaching Gen Ed at the university have complete confidence that the curriculum review gives adequate consideration to the following arguments and evidence:

- **The VVMG Learning Goal developed by the UPAC Mission and Goals Task Force** (which I co-chaired with Jo Calhoun). As you know, this goal says that "*We will provide an outstanding educational experience that empowers students to integrate and apply knowledge from across the disciplines and imagine new possibilities for themselves, their communities, and the world.*" This language was developed by a representative cross-section of faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees, and unanimously ratified by the entire membership of UPAC. It is one of the few statements in an otherwise boilerplate VVMG that offers some genuine intentionality to what we do. I suppose this statement can be interpreted in multiple ways, but for those of us involved in VVMG brainstorming it is clearly intended to emphasize interdisciplinary and engaged learning that serves our public good vision. The task force was concerned that students be educated for democratic life and global citizenship, come to value knowledge as both a personal and public good, and have the capacity to apply what they learn "at the kitchen table, in the workplace, and on the street."

This has an number of implications for the kind of Gen Ed experience we provide. One is that we do more, rather than less, interdisciplinary (and intercultural) work. Another is that we get science and professional school faculty much more involved in the interdisciplinary piece of Gen Ed. A third is that the educational experience be future-oriented. Mechanisms such as senior capstones have their place as a way to bring closure to an academic career, but Gen Ed is a different critter. It can do useful service if it remains a bit more open-ended and complementary to (rather than closely integrated with) the major. We often talk about our wish to graduate intellectually curious, life-long learners. Managing too much for coherence and closure can work at cross-purposes to fulfilling that wish...to say nothing of sapping joy from the job.

- **The research completed by the UPAC Environmental Scanning Task Force.** This independent UPAC task force prepared a substantial document surveying the world of work and addressing some of the same realities captured by the famous "A Vision of Students Today" YouTube video. Namely, that our students will increasingly be taking jobs that didn't exist when they entered college, and that they'll make multiple career

changes over the course of their lives. The scanning document was very explicit about endorsing interdisciplinary teaching and learning as the best way to prepare students for these workplace changes and challenges, and also for the collaborative work (e.g., research and teaching teams that crosscut established disciplines) that is beginning to drive intellectual life. The implications of the environmental scan for Gen Ed seem pretty clear: we need to provide as many opportunities and contexts for interdisciplinary and applied work as possible.

- **The nature of General Education at institutions that have an urban context and civic mission.** The presentation of comparative institutional data in the April 4 minutes suggests that interdisciplinary Gen Ed is rare at selected institutions. However, it's my impression that interdisciplinarity is alive and well at schools that are committed to doing what we're committed to doing. For example, Portland State University is deeply committed to serving its city, and is also a national leader in sustainability studies. Their Gen Ed program is interdisciplinary, and also delivered over the course of 4 years. Last week I spoke at length with a peer at Portland State who is collaborating with us on our new FIPSE curriculum development grant dedicated to studying urban transformations in Europe and the USA. Given the common interests of PSU and DU in public service, sustainability studies, and collaborative research (all of which require strong interdisciplinary and, increasingly, intercultural sensibilities) my colleague found it very puzzling that we're even *thinking* about tinkering with our Gen Ed program. It's also striking to me that Temple University is institutionalizing its commitment to serving the public good with a new Gen Ed program that, like ours, is thematic and interdisciplinary in nature, even including a theme on "The Philadelphia Experience." Of the institutions listed in the April 4 minutes, three are most often mentioned as peers: U of Southern California, Southern Methodist U, and Syracuse University. Two of these have interdisciplinary Gen Ed programs. Thus, 4 out of 5 schools that overlap with us in character and/or mission have interdisciplinary cores. So, it's of great concern to me that we're moving to shrink and possibly eliminate that which is thriving, and expanding, elsewhere.
- **The opinions and experiences of faculty who have taught in the Core.** The April 4 minutes indicate that a meeting with Core faculty was in the Review Committee's plans, but it's not clear that this has happened. Since everyday assertions about the current Core's viability are typically anecdote and/or agenda-driven, we should at least give those who teach the curriculum an opportunity to compare and synthesize their anecdotes and impressions about how well things are working.
- **The student evaluation data.** As I wrote to Linda last summer, the comparatives posted on WebCentral indicate that Core courses are consistently rated higher—sometimes significantly so—than the divisional Foundations courses. This goes for all evaluation categories, including the "challenging course" category. Give this, it seems that we have some considerable, leveragable strengths in teaching interdisciplinary courses at DU. It also seems that Core is the wrong target for those looking to find insoluble problems in the current structure.

Since I've come this far let me go a bit farther and propose an alternative model for Gen Ed that I believe better respects our institutional VVMG and can easily accommodate our Undergraduate Learning Outcomes. I think of this as a Renewal model as opposed to the Reform model(s) that

the Review Committee seems to be favoring. It starts with the principle that to be generally (liberally) educated is to be able to hold one's own in complex conversations about topics that "Know No Limits"—to invoke the slogan on the banner that we routinely attach every fall to the façade of Sturm Hall, but whose meaning and implications we've never really discussed. The elements of a renewed Gen Ed curriculum to match our VVMG and AHSS rhetoric are the following:

- **Maintain our division of General Education** into front end Foundations and back end Core. However, I would (1) drop the label "University Requirements", (2) re-name the whole thing *Core*, and (3) re-label the course categories *Foundations* and *Conversancies*. The term "conversancy" is inspired by Rudolf Weingartner's book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means*. For Weingartner, "conversancy with an area or field of knowledge implies a perspective sufficiently broad so as to enable a student to see the field's relations to other worlds." In this view the "pedagogic road to conversancy" isn't best served by courses that are rooted in disciplines or "pieces of academic fields" but rather by those courses that address much bigger topics, issues, and problems.
- **Preserve a three course Core Conversancy requirement**. I don't understand how a single "Advanced Seminar" that may or may not be interdisciplinary (as proposed by the AHSS reform model) can serve the UPAC Learning goal, the cultivation of conversancy in Weingartner's sense, or the best interests of students who will, more often than not, have to hunt, gather, negotiate, and invent careers for themselves. I can't think of anyone on our VVMG Task Force who would agree that one course makes for critical mass, even one that's taught to a faculty member's "passion." At the advanced end of the curriculum we should provide multiple opportunities for students to bring Foundational Core knowledge, accumulating disciplinary expertise, and their own maturing intellect to bear on a distinctive set of intellectual challenges. Working with majors and interested others to integrate knowledge across disciplines within a departmental course is one thing. Asking students to navigate and negotiate disciplinary differences among themselves in a set of distinctive, high-end conversancy courses where the playing field is level for everyone strikes me as quite another, and one that offers greater long-range benefits.
- **Incentivize science and professional school faculty to offer Core Conversancy courses**. Like others on the Review Committee, I'm not convinced that anything would be lost by adopting a 2+1 model of Core science education. I taught for several years in the third quarter of a NATS Foundations sequence. In my experience this quarter is as much a course "about" science as it is a course "in" science—and that's not a bad thing. No one ever said that the former is better than the latter, only that both can serve the cause of producing scientific literacy. In the 2+1 model you could still establish prerequisites, offer labs, and employ graduate teaching assistants. A fresh third quarter context in which students from different two-course NATS sequences come together to consider a topic of compelling scientific interest might even recharge their interest in science. It might broaden and deepen their understanding of what it means to do science. It seems to me that this model is worth a shot, especially given the relatively low student evaluations of NATS courses. NSM faculty liberated by the 2+1 model to participate in the *Conversancies* curriculum would significantly relieve the course burden on AHSS faculty. And the burden would be further relieved with faculty participation from the professional schools. We often talk about how our unique institutional configuration can

benefit our undergraduates, especially if we're concerned to model the application of knowledge to real world problems. It's time to stop talking about it and get on with doing it. It seems that all we need is the administrative will.

- **Re-theme the Core Conversancy courses**, if there's faculty consensus that we should. Personally, I believe that Identity, Community, and Change/Continuity still have, and always will have, traction as touchstone themes for Gen Ed. Especially on a campus devoted to internationalization and intercultural literacy, and especially given what we might expect in a post-2008 Election world. Themes are themes. They prescribe or preclude very little (if anything) about the philosophy, pedagogy, and content of a course. Their success as touchstones for creating and evolving a curriculum depends on what you do with them. As indicated by the student evaluation data, Core instructors are doing quite well with them. But I could be easily persuaded to adopt another bunch of themes. There are plenty to choose from given the interests that exist on campus, including some clear and compelling favorites (e.g., sustainability).
- **Don't sweat linking Gen Ed to the Major**. Gen Ed plays a crucial role in creating curious, life-long learners. I believe this begins by graduating students who are fundamentally insecure about what they know, rather than ones who are confident that they've connected, or been shown how to connect, "the dots." Gen Ed and the majors are already inevitably linked. The disciplines constrain and shape, through the Foundations courses, what happens in the Conversancies. A robust, interdisciplinary Conversancies curriculum feeds back into the disciplines by helping students recognize how their "depth" training can be enriched by what they learn in the Conversancies. Alternatively, it's just as likely that the Conversancies will teach students something about how their depth training is limited. That is, the Conversancies test what's being learned in the disciplines and a major's ability to contribute to broader conversations about complex topics. I think that *this* is the academic context in which higher-order, sophisticated critical and reflective thought is best cultivated. I see our better students mapping on to the current Core in precisely this way, and our departmental capstone course continues the conversation by comparing the merits and limitations of different ways of knowing, including anthropological. Of far greater concern than the connection between majors and Gen Ed is the connection among and between Foundations courses and Conversancies courses. And this is where a single Gen Ed oversight committee with comprehensive purview would come in handy.

The AACU calls for faculty to create more "intentionality" in Gen Ed curricula and better "mutuality" between Gen Ed, the majors, and professional programs. I believe that my fellow Mission and Goals task forcers would agree that the intentionality, mutuality, and complementarity described above nicely supports our institutional vision and the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students.

Apologies if this windy rumination has tried your patience. Thanks for listening. And all best for the discussion in the Senate.