

16 August 2008

Hi Linda—

I hope you are having a great summer! I've read the Gen Ed Review committee's meeting minutes for May 9, and wanted to offer a few comments before I head for London on September 1.

1. It is troubling that a case against Core is being made by faculty having no direct experience teaching in the program or any substantive analysis to support their assertion that Core is "not working." The student evaluation data that's publicly available on WebCentral (and that I've briefly summarized in two *Faculty Forum* posts) indicate that Core courses are routinely rated higher—sometimes significantly so—than the Divisional Foundations courses. I think this fact should be recognized, as these are the only comparative data that we currently have to assess what's working in Gen Ed. While I don't believe that students necessarily have the historical or contextual perspective to know what's in their best long-term educational interest (we faculty need to take responsibility for that), I *do* trust that students are capable of identifying courses that are challenging and educational. And Core courses, on average, appear to be doing much better than other Gen Ed courses on both counts.

2. The committee might get a better perspective on how well Core works by speaking with faculty who actually teach the curriculum. The committee might arrange a meeting with Core faculty to solicit their views about successes and problems, and whether the faculty believe that they have "ownership" of Core. For example, I teach three different Core courses: one on my own, one with a colleague in AHUM, and one in study abroad. I believe that student and self-evaluation of these courses indicate that they "work." The courses speak explicitly to current Core themes, and I'm convinced that they accomplish their educational objectives. My involvement in Core has produced a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and even pride in what we are doing here at DU with respect to General Education. I could easily revise my Core courses to emphasize whatever themes our faculty believe would best resonate with students given changing times (a flexibility that is built into the current Core model). Many others teaching in Core might feel the same way.

3. It's clear that "modern knowledge", as implied by Chuck Wilson, is complex and voluminous. It's clear that new academic disciplines are forming in the spaces between old ones. It's clear that today's students will make multiple career changes in their lives, including taking jobs that don't yet exist. It's clear that student success will depend on their ability to think integratively across knowledge domains, and to apply what they learn in the disciplines to issues of a much more general, interdisciplinary nature. It's certainly the case that Gen Ed is a collective undertaking where one part has implications for all of the others. Given all this, *everything* in the current Gen Ed curriculum should be "negotiable". The claim that a full year of foundational science is "non-negotiable" and the *only* way to build scientific literacy for non-majors has always suffered from a lack of theoretical and empirical support. It seems to me that the most convincing arguments being made today about science education for non-majors have almost nothing to do with time and everything to do with quality. Top science educators writing in *The Chronicle*, *New York Times*, and elsewhere have argued that teaching *about* science can

be just as, and even more effective for building literacy as teaching *in* science. There are multiple models of science education out there. Some of these would fit nicely with our current structure of Gen Ed, better serve the interdisciplinary purpose of Core, and relieve the course load burden for faculty in AHSS.

4. I'm not seeing the Gen Ed model that's "emergent" from the feedback reported in the May 9 meeting minutes. I'm also not seeing anything in the various Gen Ed programs celebrated by AACU that's all that compelling. Alternatively, when I describe our current Gen Ed curriculum to colleagues at other institutions they are intrigued and wish they could do what we've been doing here. This includes extending Gen Ed over 3-4 years and incorporating a high end, thematic, and explicitly interdisciplinary piece. They also envy our potential, such as the potential to include professional school faculty into the curriculum. *Our current Core is a solid performer.* We should use it as a touchstone for nurturing and evolving the entire Gen Ed curriculum, including the relationship with the majors (which I don't believe needs to be as strong or direct as some others think). I think we already have a "DU Plan" in place...which is why suggestions that we retreat to some sort of "cafeteria" plan, resurrect "Core substitution lists", or reassert the priority of the major are depressing and, I think, fundamentally misguided given the current realities of intellectual life.

5. I appreciate the comments of the Writing Program faculty. Many of them are right on target, especially the suggestion that we create a General Education Review or Oversight Committee. The current Core Curriculum Committee could easily be transformed into such an entity. The Core Committee has frustrated many faculty, but its existence could very well be part of the reason why Core courses are evaluated more highly than Foundations courses. I've been frustrated by the Core Committee on more than one occasion myself. However, at the end of the day I value colleagues looking at my course proposals and offering commentary. I trust individual faculty, but I trust conversation more. A Gen Ed Review Committee could sponsor new conversations within the Divisions about how their Foundations curricula might be improved and better integrated horizontally (the *real* problem with our Gen Ed curriculum, as I see it). It could sponsor new conversations between Foundations and Core faculty about how the entire curriculum might be better integrated vertically. It could encourage better conversations between faculty and students about why Gen Ed matters. When we created the current Core it was hoped that these kinds of conversations within and across Divisions and disciplines—the kinds of conversations that Chuck Wilson alluded to in his comments—would take place. But we currently lack an agent to make that happen. And we need one.

There's much more to say about what an alternative Gen Ed model that builds on our strengths and capitalizes on our unique institutional structure would look like, but I'll leave it there. Many thanks for your good service to this Committee and good luck! Cheers,

Dean