

University General Education Committee Minutes

22 October 2021 at 2:00 p.m. via Zoom

In Attendance: Lando Carter (presiding), Leon Alligood, Janet Colson, Warner Cribb, Rebecca Fischer, Sydney Fischer, Mark Frame, Keith Gamble, Terry Goodin, Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, Sungyoon Lee, Scott McDaniel, Nicolas Morgan, Keely O'Brien, Ryan Otter, Deana Raffo, Amy Sayward, Laura White, Virginia Hemby-Grubb, and Rachel Kirk.

Non-Voting Members: Susan Myers-Shirk, Katie Brackett, Chris Brewer, Nita Brooks, David Carleton, Christabel Devadoss, Brian Frank, Jeff Gibson, Kate Holt, Kristen West, and Beth Wright.

Introduction

Lando Carter, committee chair, opened the meeting, explaining that our process—including today's activity—is moving us closer to the point of decision-making.

Susan Myers-Shirk then provided a report on her meeting with the provost, which provided him with an update on the committee's process and presented the committee's questions to him. Despite declining general education enrollments, the provost responded that capping enrollment and ensuring full-time faculty teaching in a first-year seminar, providing support for general education assessment (such as the True Blue Core Institute), and funding faculty learning communities, seed grants to departments, and badging/certificate software was not unreasonable. The provost's recommendation was that the multipurpose True Blue Core Institute should be recommended as part of the curriculum change and could be an important way to sustain the changes imagined for the redesign.

Some general discussion of the purpose and process of general education redesign followed among members of the committee, with general agreement on providing a redesigned program that will be engaging for students and faculty and be sustainably robust. Myers-Shirk then talked about the process moving forward of examining and discussing one model at a time as its path toward decision-making on redesign. As part of that process, she introduced the "keep, tweak, toss" exercise for Model 3, which has the outcomes tightly matched in the Foundations (math, written & unwritten communication) and Disciplinary Knowledge categories (meets SACS requirements) but leaves the Explorations category rather open to provide students with choices that meet 3 SACS categories and 2 outcomes. This model also provides for a First-Year Seminar (FYS) and Pathways across the categories; it is also relatively transfer-friendly (with the possible exception of transferring an MTSU FYS back to a community college). After this short introduction, those present in the meeting moved into breakout rooms to discuss and bring back the key points of its discussion for a discussion among the committee as a whole.

First-Year Seminars

When the small groups returned to the committee as a whole, Carter identified that some groups saw the FYS as something to keep but others thought that the Center as a tweak to keep it organized and on-point might be needed.

Another group commented that juggling/creating both the FYS and Pathways seemed like a lot; perhaps a focus on one or the other might be more productive. Brian Frank added that neither contribute to specific learning outcomes, but both are interesting and meet our values. Amy Sayward added that both components help with integrative thinking—thinking about how the courses across the general education curriculum help to build skills and provide room for intellectual exploration, which seems to be limited by new federal student financial aid guidelines. Keith Gamble also added that Pathways and FYS excite and engage students, but most importantly, by helping students see the connections, the general education program outcomes are better achieved, which is the primary goal. An institute would be the natural place to provide the administrative infrastructure to ensure that connections are built within the curriculum.

Sydney Fischer asked from the student perspective how best to explain the FYS to students so that they can truly understand what it is and how it can benefit them, even independent of their academic advisors. Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand said that her small group had focused on the staffing challenges of a FYS, especially with a requirement of full-time faculty teaching such courses; this could mean that some departments would choose not to offer FYSs. However, she concluded that this was a “tweak” and not a “toss” due to the pedagogical value of the FYS. Warner Cribb offered that the College of Basic & Applied Sciences (CBAS) already has a FYS taught to majors by full-time faculty, so creating a general education FYS could be a challenge.

Deanna Raffo asked whether Pathways, really well done, might at least partially obviate the need for a FYS. Sayward offered that what a FYS could do that moves beyond a Pathway is offer an opportunity for faculty to teach and think and for students to think and learn in a more interdisciplinary way, something that there is no true opportunity to do within the current general education curriculum.

Science within Model 3

Cribb offered a perspective that Fine Arts and Humanities are favored in the Explorations section of Model 3, which also allows students to take less science. Frank noted that this was not a favoring but a compensation for the cutting of the literature requirement. Nicholas Morgan asked from the student perspective how taking one science course (e.g., General Biology I) out of a two-course sequence would work. Myers-Shirk noted that mathematics and natural sciences are counted together in SACS requirements. Cribb and Ryan Otter offered that CBAS will not likely be very receptive to a model that allows students to finish their degree without 2 lab science courses.

Laura White queried whether it might make sense to make the third Explorations course a natural science course. Frank countered that this would make all of the Explorations courses disciplinary.

Carter wound up the discussion and meeting by pointing out that the committee will be doing a similar small-group then large-group discussion of the other models as well. This discussion, therefore, is a preliminary discussion that will help us identify areas in the general education redesign that we will want to think about for all three models.