

Report of the External Reviewers
GENERAL EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT
GREENSBORO

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This review of the General Education Core (GEC) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) was undertaken as part of the regular review cycle for the program. It followed a more extended review by the General Education Review Taskforce (GERTA), composed primarily of faculty members, which completed its work and presented it to the campus in the spring of 2006.

As external reviewers, we had the advantage of this report, which included good summaries of the various kinds of evidence the taskforce collected. We also received, prior to our visit, a sizeable sample of GEC course syllabi representing the different categories of courses, along with a variety of other material relating to the general education program. While on campus September 7-8, we had the opportunity to hold discussions with Provost Edward Uprichard, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education Kathleen Rountree, many administrators and faculty members, and a group of about 15 students. All were quite forthcoming in expressing their ideas and opinions.

In writing this report, we will assume that readers are familiar with the GEC. For those who are not, an outline of it can be found on pp. 49-51 of the 2005-2006 *Undergraduate Bulletin*. These pages state the learning goals of the program and the kinds and numbers of courses students must complete to fulfill these general education requirements.

The General Education Review Taskforce, whose report we find perceptive and largely on target, notes that the stated goals of the GEC “seem to be appropriate but may not be expressed in a clear manner” and “do not line up clearly with course requirements.” The result is a program whose purposes both students and faculty have trouble understanding and whose success in accomplishing its goals are difficult to demonstrate.

The many people with whom we talked generally agree with those conclusions, as do we. The goals, while broadly reflective of contemporary understandings of the purposes of general education, are too sketchily articulated and provide scant guidance to faculty in designing courses to meet the requirement. They are not stated in language that students are likely to understand nor is there apparently any effort to provide students with a rationale that would make the GEC appear to them something more than so many requirements to be checked off. None of the bright and articulate students with whom we talked could recall a single instance in which anyone had explained to them the purposes of a general education requirement or the rationale that underlies the GEC as a whole. As far as we could determine, UNCG has no written material, other than what appears in the catalogue, which discusses the purposes of the GEC and its individual requirements.

Bluntly stated, the GEC lacks both clear intentionality and coherence. It is simply the sum of its parts. Students meet the requirement by choosing from what GERTA terms a “smorgasbord of courses within various categories.” Student choices are often determined by when the courses meet or how many “markers” a single course carries. They often end up in courses that are intended more for majors in the field than for general education or, conversely, courses that are too elementary for them. Having no

sense of purpose to direct their course choices, they often settle for anything that is logistically feasible in terms of the rest of their schedule.

To the degree that they give much thought to it, both students and faculty members see the purpose of the “Knowledge and Understanding” portion of the GEC, which makes up the bulk of the program, as “broadening” their education. Faculty members quite specifically understand these requirements, which are generically called distribution requirements, as providing exposure to some material from a variety of domains of knowledge. What the educational result of such exposure might be seems never to have been discussed.

The “exposure” rationale is at best a weak justification for a general education requirement. It focuses this element of the general education program entirely on disciplinary content as opposed to fostering development of analytic, critical and synthesizing skills. Students emerge with smatterings of a variety of kinds of subject matter knowledge, most of which they quickly forget without having an idea of how they might use the residue.

A much better rationale is to understand the distribution requirements in epistemological terms, as providing students with knowledge of the “ways of knowing” characteristic of the major domains of knowledge into which the college curriculum is generally divided: science, social science, arts, humanities. Through the distribution courses students then get a sense of the modes of inquiry, standards for establishing fact and justifying opinion, ways of representing the world, etc. that constitute the “ground rules” that govern these domains. They learn about the strengths of each way of knowing and its limitations. They emerge with a sense of knowledge and opinion as situated and

contingent. Specific awareness of how these ways of knowing operate, gives students basic tools for asking productive questions, thinking analytically, and dealing with complex issues and problems. That kind of learning can be assessed and made open to objective judgment, if not with pencil and paper examinations, then by looking at the kinds of work students are producing at the end of their college careers.

Gearing the distribution requirements to achieve these educational outcomes requires orienting the courses students take accordingly. The rationale and operating mechanisms of the GEC do not provide such direction to instructors. Operationally, as we learned from the chairs of the GEC committees with oversight in the distribution areas, the only requirement is that the course addresses appropriate subject matter. Thus both faculty purposes and student understandings are focused on the subject matter content of the course. In the student experience, these subject matters do not relate to each other or stand in juxtaposition within a larger context.

While calling for “giv[ing] the student enough guidance to understand the objectives of general education,” GERTA recommends no particular guidance to give and does not suggest a framework as comprehensive as the one we just outlined. The taskforce goes on to recommend that “UNCG should continue to deliver GEC curriculum as part of a smorgasbord of courses within the particular categories.” To do so, the members believe, utilizes the faculty’s strength in a wide range of subject matters and expertise.

If that is what UNCG determines to do, there is little more to say. Faculty members will go on offering courses with greater or lesser clarity of goals. Students will continue to wander through their GEC requirements with little sense of purpose and

varying degrees of satisfaction. The political economy of the departments will not be upset.

If, however, the UNCG faculty wants to create a more purposeful and coherent program, we would recommend taking the following steps.

1. At the very least, replace the current course approval structure of ten GEC committees, organized by subject matter, with a single General Education Committee. Such a committee, with perhaps a dozen members representing a range of subject matter fields, would approve all courses proposed for GEC credit and take primary operational and policy oversight for the program.

It does not require specific subject matter expertise to know whether a course is appropriate for general education or not. It does require a deep understanding of general education goals and a serious commitment to them. The departments proposing courses should already have certified the disciplinary competence of the courses. The General Education Committee's task is to decide whether the stated goals of the course and the kinds of tests, papers and other graded work students reflect the purposes of a general education course.

Having a single committee approve all courses will eliminate the cumbersomeness of the current approval process, especially for those courses that are being proposed to satisfy more than one requirement. More importantly, it will signal the fact that general education is about developing general intellectual skills, not about acquaintance with specific subject matters.

The single committee will also have an easier time dealing with interdisciplinary and problem-based courses. Such courses, focusing as they often

- do on different ways of understanding and approaching complex issues, make good general education courses. UNCG honors programs exhibit many outstanding examples of such offerings, but departments seem to encounter more roadblocks or at least confusion in getting interdisciplinary courses approved.
2. Develop a clearer rationale for the program as a whole and for the individual categories of courses. The current rationale is not in and of itself inappropriate, but it is apparently inadequate either to give faculty members guidance in creating courses or students an answer to the question, “Why do I have to take this course?” Part of the problem lies in the mismatch between the rationale and the courses themselves.
 3. Once the rationale is developed, recertify all courses approved for meeting the requirements. Require that departments submitting courses for general education recertification contain careful statements of the ways in which the course meets the goals of the category for which it is being proposed. Ask that examples of examination questions, writing assignments, and other kinds of coursework required of students be submitted along with the syllabus to illustrate how the stated goals are being addressed in the course. Departments should see that all instructors teaching any course for the first time review these materials to enhance their understanding of the purposes of the course and the way those purposes might be achieved.

This recertification will be a massive undertaking. Ideally a general education program would have fewer and more specifically targeted kinds of courses. However, as long as UNCG is committed, as GERTA recommends, to

offering “a smorgasbord of courses” that “utilize [the] faculty’s strengths,” the recertification process is necessary to assure some measure of curricular coherence.

4. Under any circumstances, do a thorough job of training advisors to explain the rationale for the GEC. Both they and the faculty members who teach the GEC courses, whether full time or part-time or graduate assistants, must be able to explain course purposes to students. Furthermore, part-time instructors or those full time faculty members who “inherit” a course are reported to have little inkling of what the original intention of the course may have been and how it relates to GEC purposes. We found such understanding generally thin, even among members of GEC course approval committees.
5. Unless the current GEC is replaced with a more targeted program, stop calling it a “core.” A core program is one in which students all take the same courses. The GEC is about as far from a core program as one can get.
6. Consider creating a number of courses that are taught in common by groups of faculty members. Individual instructors’ syllabi for such courses might be quite different, but the sections of the courses would have common purposes. In meeting periodically to discuss the courses, instructors would be continually directed to their common purposes and would learn from each other. Current practices, which emphasize “single owner” courses, do little to encourage conversation, focus on goals, or promote innovation.

UNCG can carry out all of these recommendations within the current curriculum structure and without major disruption of departmental economies. All they require is a

will to pay careful attention to program purposes and curricular coherence. We must point out, however, that coherence and matching of courses to purposes are more difficult to achieve within the current program structure than they might be with a different general education concept. If the faculty is willing to consider major changes in general education, we would recommend James Madison University, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) or Portland State University as examples of institutions similar to UNCG that have tighter and more fully rationalized programs that work quite well. They also have strong assessment programs that provide useful information to the faculty about ways in which programs can be improved to achieve better student outcomes.

Indeed, many regional state universities are turning their attention to creating more purposeful and coherent general education programs, creating a variety of promising, practical models. Conferences and institutes devoted to discussing and developing undergraduate education initiatives offer good opportunities to learn about these models. The several programs run annually by the Association of American Colleges and Universities are good places to begin.

In any rethinking of general education, UNCG faculty members should try to design the program as part of a total undergraduate experience, with the major programs attending to systematic development of the skills and awarenesses on which general education focuses: communication, analytic reasoning, dealing with unstructured problems. A notable strength of the current GEC is the continuation of some elements of general education into the major. Writing intensive courses in the major are specifically required, while speech and global awareness requirements are often fulfilled through the

major. Although students sometimes claim to be confused by courses that serve multiple purposes, they do not in reality seem to be so. Their problems are more logistical than conceptual and are not a reason to abandon the strategy of giving courses “markers.” Duke University has an even more elaborate system of designating courses for satisfying multiple goals. Some of the material Duke gives to students to explain the program should be of interest to UNCG.

A danger of the UNCG structure, which we did not have time to investigate, is a lack of comprehensiveness and developmental continuity from lower level to higher level courses. Students may not be exposed to a full range of writing and speaking skills as they move from course to course but may rather be engaging in the same kinds of work and at the same level repeatedly. The kinds of written and oral communication experience students should have and the level of proficiency they should achieve need to be more carefully defined. Student outcomes in both written and oral communication can readily be assessed. Washington State University has a particularly good program of assessment of written communication which might be instructive for UNCG.

In revisiting the GEC, the UNCG faculty should be careful to preserve the strengths of the current program, of which spreading written and oral communication across the curriculum is one. The strong emphasis on global awareness is another, with the employment of the “marker” strategy valuable as a means of integrating these studies with other curricular elements. Some of the most imaginative course designs we found among the two dozen or so given us to review were in the global awareness courses, notable for their interdisciplinary thrust and their focus on controversial issues and complex problems.

More than anything else, UNCG needs to do some careful definition of the purposes of undergraduate education at the university and to articulate those statements of purpose in ways that give guidance to faculty members in their instruction and students in designing their programs and understanding the rationale of what is required of them. The second step is to specify what student knowledge, skills and understandings will be outward signs of their having achieved these purposes. Specification of these signs then becomes the basis of an assessment program that corresponds to what the faculty believes is important in students' education. The third step is to consider what instructional strategies will lead to the kinds of outcomes the faculty desires. Only as a fourth step in the process does the design of the curriculum and of individual courses emerge.

Clarification of goals will provide a basis for assessment that is integral to the instructional program. Fears of assessment in the form of standardized national examinations will become a reality only if faculty members either resist doing anything or lack the imagination to create something better. There are enough examples of viable assessment regimes based on the work that students actually do in their courses (aka course-embedded assessments) to demonstrate that systematic assessment can be academically appropriate. These assessment methods should also be reassuring in that they have as their purpose improving the instructional program rather than passing judgment on either students or instructors.

Getting to the point of actually carrying out an academically useful assessment program requires that administrators stop trying to protect faculty members from participating in the process by assembling what institutionally available data they can without bothering the teachers. Faculty members need to be the principal agents in the

design and to see it as part of their normal responsibilities to carry it out. But first everyone needs to realize that the push for student outcomes assessment is not going to go away. Having accepted that, institutions need to see that assessment is done their way and not in a way that is politically dictated.

The result of thinking through the undergraduate curriculum from goals to outcomes that indicate achievement of those goals to instructional processes that lead to those outcomes to curriculum that structures the process may lead right back to the general education program UNCG has now. But at least everyone will know what the undergraduate program is expected to accomplish, why those goals matter, and how requirements are to relate to goals. Just to make those relationships clear and real will be a considerable improvement over current conditions.

SOME ADDITIONAL POINTS

Our conversations with students and faculty members surfaced some additional ideas that are rather more specific and logistical than the more general and conceptual discussion that constitutes the body of this report. Others seemed basic but we did not have time to explore them sufficiently to make a firm statement. Because several of both kinds of points came up repeatedly, we include them here, in no particular order, for your consideration.

1. A large portion of the faculty does not seem to care about general education. Many GEC courses are taught by graduate students and part time instructors. Many faculty members seem to consider teaching GEC courses a hardship. The faculty, including some members of GEC committees, does not appear to feel much ownership of the program.
2. Non-majors taking major courses for GEC credit feel like second-class citizens.
3. Many students are fulfilling GEC requirements during the summer at other institutions.
4. The Math 112 course, which is taken to fulfill the requirement by many students who have no use for mathematics in their majors, seems unclear in its purposes. Offering it on-line diminishes the course in the eyes of students. We had insufficient time to investigate the nature of the mathematics requirement but it was clear from conversations with students that it needs a better definition of purposes.
5. Students in some programs with extensive requirements have trouble fitting in all their GEC requirements in 122 hours. These students would like to see more courses with multiple markers so that they could satisfy more requirements within a single course. The frequency with which we heard about this practical problem illustrates the extent to which negotiating the GEC has become a question of logistics for students rather than a matter of their appropriate education.
6. Some GEC courses do not seem to good students like real college courses because they require no analysis or critical thinking.
7. According to the "Curriculum Guide," all course syllabi are to specify the goals of the course. Some syllabi we saw do not do so.

8. Students are unclear why some courses that require a lot of writing do not carry the “WI” marker. We understand that some of these courses enroll more than the 25 students that are the upper limit for “WI” courses or do not require extensive revision, another requirement for “WI” courses. The faculty may want to revisit this issue or at least explain the situation to students more clearly.
9. The rationale for the College of Arts and Sciences language requirement needs to be explained to students constantly.
10. Part-time instructors and TA’s need a better understanding of the place of the courses they teach in the GEC program and of course purposes. Some may also need regular reminders of the importance of the courses they are teaching to their students’ undergraduate education.

GENERAL EDUCATION REVIEW OUTSIDE CONSULTANTS: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Carol A. Hurney, PhD

Dr. Hurney is an Associate Professor of Biology at James Madison University where she has been teaching General Education courses for majors and non-majors for the past 8 years. During her tenure at JMU, Dr. Hurney has been involved in various aspects of the General Education Program including objective design, assessment, academic program review and various scholarly presentations on the use of a Virtual Textbook in her non-majors course. In 2005, Dr. Hurney was honored as the Distinguished Teacher in General Education.

Dr Hurney is also the Co-Coordinator for faculty development activities for JMU's Center for Faculty Innovation where she directs a number of campus-wide programs focused on improving the teaching, scholarship and service of JMU faculty. In particular, she has worked to redesign orientation for new faculty to include a series of concurrent teaching workshops. She has also worked to establish the Madison Teaching Fellows program, which selects six JMU faculty each year to address a specific pedagogical issue (such as large classes).

Dr Hurney is a developmental biologist and her research laboratory explores tail development in the four-toed salamander, *Hemidactylium scutatum*. Currently she has two undergraduates working with her to analyze embryonic development in *H. scutatum*. One of these students is a graphics design major who fell in love with biology in Dr Hurney's general education course. This work has been presented at two national meetings and a publication of a normal table of development in *H. scutatum* is in preparation.

Dr. Hurney received her Biology degrees from the University of Rochester (BA) and the University of Virginia (PhD). She pursued post-doctoral research at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. In her free time, you will find Dr. Hurney out riding her bicycle or cooking some fantastic meal in her less-than-fantastic kitchen.

Robert E. Shoenberg, PhD.

Robert Shoenberg has, for the past 17 years, worked as an independent consultant to colleges and universities, higher education organizations and government agencies, principally dealing with matters related to undergraduate curriculum. This work has ranged from advising individual institutions to managing multi-campus projects to program evaluations. His various projects have covered the full range of subject matters as well as the management of undergraduate studies.

Dr. Shoenberg has written extensively on undergraduate education, particularly general education. Published work during the past year has included a guide for students to the purposes of undergraduate study, entitled *Why Do I Have to Take This Course?*; a study of state general education requirements as they relate to transfer issues; and a report of a project dealing with internationalizing education in the disciplines.

Before undertaking his consulting career, Dr. Shoenberg served for 14 years as Dean for Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Earlier positions included Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Buffalo State College, a year as an ACE Fellow in Academic Administration at the University of Southern California, and five years of full time teaching at Williams College. Related work includes eight years as a member of the Montgomery

County, Maryland Board of Education and eleven years as a trustee of Montgomery College (MD), a position in which he continues to serve.

Dr. Shoenberg's baccalaureate degree is from Amherst College. M.A. and Ph.D. are from the University of Michigan. All three degrees are in English literature.