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The Process of General Education Reform: An Impossible Dream ... Almost!

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**INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULA,
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THE PROCESS OF GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM: AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM...ALMOST!

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Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT

1. The Beginnings

Curriculum review and reform are always threatening, particularly if the curriculum is the general education portion of the university's academic offering, particularly if the liberal arts departments see general education as the only area of the curriculum wherein they can promote their principles. For those involved in the process of general education review and reform, the experience is heady, representing a unique opportunity to design an educational program that is ideal. But idealism carries with it dangers, and the dream of an ideal educational program can become impossible to realize, unless the anxieties implicit in change are met squarely and practically. What follows is one university's attempt to make a new general education curriculum, to make its lamb of idealism lie down with the lion of reality.

Sacred Heart University defines itself as a comprehensive university in the Catholic tradition, epithets that suggest a tension so basic as to imperil any kind of curriculum review. Its "comprehensiveness" implies room for credit hour-laden professional studies; its "Catholicity" mandates a strong liberal arts emphasis. Further, its student body of career-oriented and often underprepared learners must impact on the kind of general education curriculum it can maintain. These very tensions, however, enforce creativity among reform-minded faculty and administrators; one understands that general education reform is in some respects a struggle for the soul of the university.

The simplest explanation for why the review was begun in the first place is that the last university strategic plan (1989-94) called for it and that a faculty survey showed strong support for it. Moreover, a faculty and administration team reported after attending a workshop on liberal education sponsored by the Lilly Foundation that the time for curriculum review was at hand. The rationale for review included in that report focused on (1) the curriculum reviews being undertaken by other universities and the reports on general education being issued by NEH, AAC, and the Carnegie Foundation; (2) on the relatively long period (about 20 years) our current general education curriculum had been in place; (3) on the accelerating pace of change in our environments (university, United States, world; technological, social, political); and lastly (4) on the intellectual excitement such a review might have on the Sacred Heart community.

Released in August 1991, the Lilly team report prompted the Faculty Senate to appoint a task force to begin the review process. This faculty committee began its work in the fall of 1991. It examined such matters as the rationale for our current general education curriculum, its relation to the university's mission, the character and needs of our students, the concerns of the faculty, the definition of general education. This was a year of "venting," a necessary, though somewhat unproductive, process, but one that all review probably starts with. Three problems that received constant attention were the size of the general education curriculum (too large, some felt, just right, others argued); the obvious deficiencies in content of the model then in

place (no computer courses, no non-western courses, no compulsory study of foreign language, etc.); and the critical balance between the teaching of "skills" and the teaching of "knowledge" (balance?—more skills needed! more knowledge demanded!). And so the first year ended: much had been discussed, little had been achieved.

At this point the Academic Vice President, satisfied, yet desirous of moving the process along, selected a smaller group from the committee and asked them to work throughout the summer. He provided stipends, so that our attention might be undivided, and charged us to study the literature on general education review and to formulate a model to focus faculty discussion during the next academic year. The small group worked swiftly and productively, kicking around various models, some our own, some borrowed from the work of others (Lynne Cheney's *50 Hours* provided a model, for example, that seemed very near to what we wanted). We worked to articulate principles that would guide our design—an absolutely crucial step in curriculum reform—and we designed a survey to measure the overall feeling the community might have about general education.

Among the principles that emerged from our studies were the following; General education should be:

1. accomplished in 40 credit hours,
2. thematic, non-discipline-specific,
3. vertical,
4. coherent,
5. graduated in skill-deployment,
6. "capped" by a culminating experience.

The danger, we perceived, was to publish these ideals in the absence of input from the community at large; we especially did not want to lose contact with the faculty, and here the survey was of great help. Faculty and administrators were polled to determine their perceptions of the general education requirements then in place and the weaknesses and strengths they saw in them. We also "floated" our principles to measure their acceptability.

2. The Survey and Faculty Meetings

Almost 50% of those surveyed returned responses. These have proven invaluable to the committee, pushing us in directions we initially thought little about, enabling us to resist the calls of certain constituencies to move in directions the community-at-large was wary of.

We examined carefully those areas where overwhelming numbers suggested change or no change. The inclusion of a course in computer literacy, for instance, found favor with 94% of our respondents; modern foreign language with 93%—and neither of these was part of the general education curriculum then in place. Most courses which were part of the curriculum received high percentages to be continued or received even slightly more attention. But a significant number of respondents called for a reduction of emphasis on philosophy and religious studies; and the proposed inclusion of theology (not currently part of the general education curriculum) earned a strongly negative response.

Generally, we found that most respondents favored a curriculum model that would contain both core and distributional courses; most advocated a curriculum of between

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40 and 60 credit hours. These responses suggested fundamental content with the structure and size of the current general education curriculum. Most favored interdisciplinary studies, but wanted no directives about teaching methods. Overwhelming numbers asked that courses in non-western cultures be taught and that contemporary social issues be addressed in the new curriculum. There was little support for "service" activities as a part of the academic curriculum. Finally, there was strong support for a more "coherent" general education experience.

Thus, we concluded that certain basic propositions had the endorsement of a significant portion of the community and particularly of the faculty: (1) that the general education curriculum plays a vital role in educating our students; (2) that it needs to be re-evaluated; (3) that it can be and should be improved.

The committee had found none of its basic principles to be obnoxious and so we began to work towards a model that would grow out of them. That would mean a general education curriculum that would be vertical, interdisciplinary, sequenced, and theme-directed. It would incorporate these elements into a more coherent educational experience for our students. We determined to continue the emphasis on skills courses, particularly in the freshman year, and began discussion of a senior capstone course. We recognized that mandatory courses in computer literacy and modern foreign languages could not be denied, and we committed ourselves to providing a course in non-western culture(s) and infusing "globalization" throughout the curriculum. We decided to "hold the line" on requirements in philosophy and religious studies, despite some pressure to increase them. We felt bound to writing-across-the-curriculum and the reduction in class size it entails. Finally, we felt that the community's interest in general education allowed us to insist upon its rising from the posture of "servant to the major" and taking its place alongside the major as equal in importance.

Such were the ideals of the committee. Then we began to meet with faculty disciplines, to display our models, and suddenly those ideals were under assault. In truth, meetings with faculty groups were a continuously valuable experience. Committee members gained tremendously from "walking in another's shoes." Some of our more idealistic proposals, we discovered, through the scrutiny of the faculties that would be involved in implementing them, simply would not work. And so we abandoned them. The faculty-at-large served to keep the committee realistic, reminding us of who we are, who our students are, what the university's economic realities mean for general education. Too, we became more sensitive to the fears that many liberal arts professors have in response to burgeoning business, accounting and professional studies majors. We tried to allay those fears, without sacrificing general education on the altar of territoriality. Meetings with the faculty reminded us that curriculum reform is not an abstract thing; it involves jobs, job-quality, and professional self-esteem. It was crucially important for our small group to sit down in a "backroom" and discuss a new general education curriculum; it got us off the ground. But it was equally important to find ways to involve the entire faculty in the process, if only to get us back down to the ground once more.

Where We are Now

Meetings with faculty groups and within the committee itself continued all through the 1992 academic year and into the summer. Among the principles that had come

under attack, none was more distressing and comprehensive in its impact than the 40 credit hour curriculum. With a current general education curriculum of some 50 plus credit hours, we realized that to add some 15 additional credit hours in the form of courses on computer literacy, modern foreign languages (at least 6 credit hours), non-western cultures, and a capstone course would be to make the general education program unwieldy. Yet to subtract sufficient credit hours to reduce to 40 hours and still add these new courses was impossible. We came to understand that given our students' needs in the skills arena and the deeply-felt faculty concern that whole areas of knowledge would be jeopardized by such reductions, a 40 hour general education curriculum simply couldn't happen. Reluctantly, we rethought this principle and decided to aim for a curriculum of roughly the same credit hour size as the one then in existence. Still, cuts would have to be made, never easy when one is talking about disciplines whose upper-level offerings are in no small part sustained by their inclusion in the general education curriculum.

Interdisciplinary studies were perceived to erode the integrity of the disciplines. Many faculties worried about "watering down" courses and coming at issues from no approach at all. As a corollary, some argued against a theme-directed curriculum. It seemed shallow to some and forced to others. And many introductory courses served to promote the major or were needed as supporting courses for majors--such as political science to social work, psychology to nursing, math to chemistry. Many faculty members doubted the ability of the university to provide resources of time or money necessary to their "retooling"; others had no interest or desire to retrain. In the face of such opposition, the committee de-emphasized its "interdisciplinary" and "thematic" ideals, but insisted that the general education curriculum not be used principally to encourage interdisciplinary, theme courses, under the aegis of a permanent general education curriculum committee, without, however, mandating them.

Sequencing of courses was attacked by faculties who felt their courses should be privileged as "most" basic to successful learning, but on this point the committee countered that everyone could not be first and that the skills of language and numeracy had to be in place before sophisticated learning could occur.

Many persons averred that if we were serious about exposing our students to non-western culture, we would have put more than one course in the curriculum model. As these were often the same persons who took us to task in terms of the size of curriculum, their admonishment presented us with a dilemma: how to do all we should for our students and still allow them the flexibility to pursue their majors and take electives. Our recommendation was that all general education courses be appreciative of contributions from non-European and non-American cultures; it was the best we could do.

Verticality was assailed by professional studies programs which need virtually the entire junior and senior years for various kinds of practica. This problem is one of a number yet to be resolved, but the committee stands solidly behind the idea of a four-year general education curriculum, support for which has come from all segments of the community.

Finally the capstone course presents difficulties for many disciplines that would prefer that experience be grounded in the major. Initially, the committee saw this course as one dealing with ethics and contemporary social issues. However, a number

of faculty members who would naturally teach such a course disavowed interest. A decision on the course and its precise nature has yet to be worked out.

Other issues to be dealt with persist: Should proficiency in our exposure to modern foreign languages be our goal? If the former, at what level would proficiency be pegged? If the latter, what end does mere exposure serve? If team-teaching is too expensive and if interdisciplinary courses are undesirable, how can the kind of generalist experience implied in the term general education be achieved? Is the tandeming of courses possible? Is it efficient? And if so, in what areas? And how shall the training necessary to such an endeavor be effected? How do transfer students and the 25% of our freshman class who require remediation fit in the general education program?

All of these questions and many others that curriculum reform has raised can be answered. Patience is needed and compromise. Faculty members and disciplines that dig in their heels and will not even look at the possibility of doing something new have little or nothing to bring to the process of resolution. Nor must the committee which has invested so much time and energy in curriculum reform insist that its way is the only way.

An instance of this. One of the most vexing issues being faced by the whole university is how "distributional" general education should be. Rather than dictate to the faculty that course X is acceptable and course Y not, the committee has resolved to adhere to guidelines and let the disciplines meet them. For example, we believe all general education courses should:

- (1) deal with the human experience
- (2) involve significant writing and oral communication
- (3) not be principally an introduction to a discipline.

Any course, we say, which meets those criteria should be eligible for general education designation. Again, however, the committee sees the reform of general education as a great opportunity to develop new courses and hopes the faculty, even the most reactionary elements, will come to share our enthusiasm.

Upon completion of the consultation process—still ongoing as we write—and the ultimate approval of the new general education curriculum, the committee will recommend that a permanent standing general education curriculum committee be formed. It will have the task of ascertaining how best to infuse the principles of general education that have emerged from our three-year labor into the components of the curriculum. Working with department chairpersons, it may have to pick and choose from among many offerings. It will certainly need to publicize general education courses in a timely fashion so that students can make intelligent course selections. It will need to foster an advising system that ensures those students in the professional studies majors get into the right courses at the right times. It will advocate for the expenditure of faculty development dollars, so that the curriculum might maintain its vitality. It will constantly review the general education curriculum to make sure our students and education are being served.

4. Lessons

A process so long and intense as curriculum revision must finally teach us many things. Mistakes will be made; moments of breakthrough will occur. Based upon the

lessons we learned, we offer some advice you may find useful when and if you undertake general education curriculum renovation:

1. Know your university from top to bottom. What your students need and desire from education, what your colleagues are willing to and capable of pursuing, what the administration will support, how the mission can be served, all influence the kind of curriculum your committee can shape.
2. Set up a small committee of like-minded people. The issue is not to achieve lockstep uniformity, but to achieve anything at all. Arguments will arise and some of them will be protracted and acute. What you do not need are the endless complaints that inevitably occur when large numbers of faculty gather in one place. Or the intractable, dilatory tactics of a colleague who is out of sympathy with the whole process of review, who would rather leave everything as it is.
3. Work from principles. In the final analysis, the curriculum must grow out of principles. Working towards particular models or themes in the absence of such an underlay will subject you and your colleagues to accusations of fadism and worse. Principles, once agreed to by all, are not subject to easy dismissal. If you want your work to be taken seriously, it must stand on solid ground.
4. Be idealistic. By the same token, don't settle for anything but the best. Thoreau said to build your castles in the air; that's where they belong. There will be enough nay-sayers and cynics to keep you honest, but you may never have another opportunity to affect the educational climate of your school. So go for it.
5. Keep in touch with the faculty. These are after all the persons who will have to make do with what you produce. And because their interest is so vested, they will show you all the pitfalls of your proposals. If they are honest, and most are, they too want the best curriculum possible. There will be, to be sure, some defenders of "turf" merely, so don't surrender on principles too readily. But don't be afraid to listen, either. The faculty is a resource for wisdom and perspective; use it.
6. Be patient. General education curriculum review and reform is a long process. Tempers get short, nerves frayed. Time and time again you will be tempted to throw up your hands in despair. Every compromise exacted feels fatal. But with time and preparation, your ideas just might catch on. Then you'll have everybody talking about education. We are at that stage now; it is most satisfying. And best of all, something good may come of it.

The Proposed General Education Curriculum

<u>Freshman Year: Languages for Learning</u>		18 credits
GE 101, 102	Rhetoric	6
GE 103	Computer Literacy	3
GE 104	Math	3
GE 105, 106	Modern Foreign Language	6
<u>Sophomore Year: Foundations of Thought</u>		6 credits
GE 201	Philosophy	3
GE 202	Religious Studies	3
<u>Components of Culture</u>		12 credits
GE 203	Western Civilization	3

GE 204	Western Literature	3
GE 205	Art/Music/Film is Western World	3
GE 206	Modern Culture & Society	3

Junior Year: Dimensions of Human Experience 13 credits

GE 301	Behavioral & Social Sciences	3
GE 302	Humanities	3
GE 303	Physical/Natural Sciences	4
GE 304	Religion/Philosophy	3

Senior Year: Capstone 4 credits

GE 401	Non-western Culture	3
GE 402	Senior Seminar	1

Total credit hours 53 credits

- A. GE 201 & 202, and GE 203 & 204 may be tandemed.
- B. Students must elect to do a research project in any one course during both their sophomore and junior years.
- C. Students may test out of any GE 100-Level course.
- D. Students do not have to take the particular GE 300-level course their major falls under.

Biographical Notes:

Dr. Thomas Curran is an Associate Professor of History, Dr. David Curtis is an Associate Professor of English and Dr. Frances Grodzinsky is an Associate Professor of Computer Science. All served as members of the General Education Review Committee at Sacred Heart University.