An Overview of General Education in  
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at  
The University of Iowa

Preface

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Iowa has seen frequent, often protracted, faculty discussion of the structure of the general education requirements for the degrees offered by the College. The College’s discussions usually have reflected national discussions of the role and the structure of general education in the overall undergraduate curriculum. While some aspects of the College’s General Education Program have remained consistent across every review and revision, there have also been a few fundamental changes. One invariable aspect of all discussion and change has been that in this college, at this university, faculty governance and decision-making has been the driving and most powerful force. No dean, president, or student group has been able to exert as much influence as individual faculty members and departments. Every revision of the General Education Program has been both strengthened by the insights and experience of the College’s finest teachers and scholars and weakened by the inevitable compromises necessary to achieve consensus across the faculty. An analysis by historian Stow Persons of these discussions up to 1990 identified a strong component of departmental self-interest as an underlying component of nearly every suggestion and decision made by the faculty. While individual faculty members and administrators have made repeated and thoughtful attempts to focus discussion on the underlying philosophies and goals of the general education component of the liberal arts, more “political” and “economic” considerations of resource allocation and departmental status have often been more powerful determinants of the shape and motivations for change in the General Education Program.

Before 1949

The University of Iowa “opened its doors” in 1855, but did not begin to function fully until 1860 (Persons, 6-7). At that time, students could choose either a “departmental plan” of instruction, in which requirements were determined by the department, or the “class plan” which prescribed a fixed curriculum for four years of study leading to a degree. In 1905, the prescribed class plan was replaced with a curriculum that continued to prescribe two years of underclass work, followed by two years in which students completed major requirements and were required to elect courses from departments outside the major.

The program of a student’s first two years included course work in English, foreign languages, social science, and natural science. These basic requirements have remained the core of the General Education Program throughout its many permutations.

In 1941, President Virgil Hancher appointed Harry K. Newburn, a professor in the department of education (not then a separate college in the University) as Dean. He began a

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1 Stow Persons, *The University of Iowa in the Twentieth Century: An Institutional History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990). Professor Persons’ account of General Education in this volume (pages 244-274) was extremely helpful and informs all of the following, up to the discussion of the Ryan Committee. Specific quotations from Persons will be indicated by the page number in parentheses.
review and revision of the undergraduate curriculum in liberal arts, forming a faculty committee to work with him. At that time, the undergraduate shared curriculum included:

- 2 full years (4 semesters) of work from the Department of English;
- a one-year (2 semester) course on the principles of speech;
- physical education/military science for two years (4 semesters);
- a foreign language (usually 2 years);
- 12 hours (four courses) in mathematics and natural science; and
- 12 hours chosen from a group of subjects (primarily social sciences).

Persons notes that the departments of philosophy, religion, art, and music were not included in those offering required courses, and “in the ensuing discussions of curriculum revision it became evident that these departments were determined to be included as well” (Persons, 252). Subcommittees were formed to explore various areas, and the groups met frequently in 1942 and 1943. Faculty members not on the committees also became interested, and various proposals were drafted. The idea of “common core” courses was popular with some, others preferred offering existing courses as general education courses. Persons interprets the inability to form a consensus as “the stubborn resistance of the departmentalists…to the adoption of a substantial core of courses representing a coherent philosophy of general education” (Persons, 261). After more public and private power struggles, in 1944 a General Education Program was adopted.

The new curriculum set the minimum number of semester hours for a degree at 126. Included in the 32 semester hour core requirements were:

- 8 semester hours of natural science
- 8 semester hours of social science
- 8 semester hours of literature
- 8 semester hours of historical-cultural studies.

Students were also required to satisfy (usually by course taking) “basic skills” requirements in reading, writing, and speaking; to take physical education for four semesters (men were also required to take military science) and to “read or speak a foreign language with the degree of proficiency to be determined by the staff” (Persons, 264). Persons’ final summary of the process is probably not too harsh: “Two years of discussion of general education finally broke down in a scramble for enrollments among a faculty largely oriented toward departmental specialties” (Persons, 265). Although “core courses” were called for in the curriculum, only a few interdisciplinary courses were developed. Instead, departmental courses were offered to satisfy the “core requirements,” and the College’s awkward combination of a philosophy of general education with the development of a set of general education courses that more resembled a “distribution requirement” system began.
1949-1979

A strong culture of departmental autonomy and a Liberal Arts Dean who supported that culture helped faculty members resist every effort to revise the General Education Program for thirty years. During that time, in fact, more and more courses were added to the list of those approved for General Education, and the idea of “core courses” became more and more attenuated, although the “core course” numbering system remained.

With the arrival of a new Dean for the College of Liberal Arts, Howard Laster, in 1977, there was another opportunity to address general education. The Dean formed what is usually called the “Ryan Committee,” after its chair, Marleigh Ryan, a professor in and chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Literature. The Ryan Committee’s initial report proposed a number of changes to the existing structure, including the addition of a requirement in “international studies,” a reduction of the English requirement, more attention to writing across the curriculum, and the elimination of the Physical Education requirement. Public forums and private lobbying reduced the scope of the changes made. When the faculty finally approved a modified version of the Ryan Committee report, one major change had occurred. The nomenclature of “Core” courses was dropped and all courses were clearly identified as having departmental homes. The new program became best known by an acronym, “GERs,” representing the “General Education Requirements.”

The new program no longer distinguished between “skills” and “general education” requirements (that is, the “skills” formerly composed of Foreign Language, Physical Education, and Rhetoric). Here are the basic requirements of the 1979 incarnation:

- Rhetoric: 1-2 classes
- Foreign Language: 4 years in high school or 4th semester level here
- Humanities: 3 courses, Interpretation of Literature [the last remnant of the English Department’s year-long requirement] and two others
- Natural Science: 2 courses, one with a laboratory component
- Historical Perspectives: 2 courses
- Quantitative or Formal Reasoning: 1 course
- Social Sciences: 2 courses
- Physical Education: 4 semester hours (usually 4 half-semester courses)

Along with the requirements, the new program included an elaborate structure of faculty oversight. Committees (called the “Coordinating Committees”) of faculty were to be established to review courses submitted for satisfaction of the general education requirements. These committees were to be composed of faculty members from departments that offered courses in the area, and an equal number of faculty members from departments that did not offer courses in the area (“inside” and “outside” members). The committees were also charged with writing “criteria statements” for each area.

1979-1996

Various changes were made to the details of the General Education Program during the next 15 years. The first major addition to the program was the inclusion of a requirement in

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2 The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has extensive files on the Ryan Committee and subsequent changes to the General Education program. These files are part of the records of the Associate Dean for Academic Programs.
“Foreign Civilization and Culture.” Not exactly the “International Studies” requirement that the Ryan Committee had recommended, this new requirement was approved only after a vigorous debate and only after a compromise had been reached that would ensure that students would be able to “double count” the courses taken to satisfy the requirement—all courses were to be also approved in either the Humanities, Historical Perspectives, or Social Sciences area.

In 1989, one of the last vestiges of the concept of a “core” general education program was dropped, when all students were permitted to use courses to satisfy both major requirements and the requirements of the general education program. The change was made “to simplify problems for those students who change majors without shrinking the breadth of the General Education Requirements.” At the same time, the Educational Policy committee proposed and the faculty approved an end to departmental “waivers” for majors offering B.A. and B.S. degrees.\(^3\) (For example, the Historical Perspectives requirement had been waived for History majors.) Similar waivers for B.M. students and for those earning the B.F.A in Art were not ended until the mid-1990s.

As on many campuses, in the 1980s students and faculty members in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences became concerned that the General Education Requirements were highly eurocentric and ignored cultural diversity. After much discussion and student agitation, in 1991 the faculty approved the addition of a “cultural diversity” requirement. Courses were to “introduce[d to] one or more cultures or peoples of the United States different from majority or dominant cultures. The stated rationales are (a) to foster greater understanding of the diversity of cultures in the United States, and (b) to provide knowledge, critical understanding, and appreciation of patterns of behavior and values” in the words of the resolution. Like the Foreign Civilization and Culture requirement, all courses in the area were to be approved in another area as well, and “double counting” would ensure that no student would be forced to take additional course work to complete the General Education Requirements. This provision was made to conciliate faculty members, especially in the sciences, who found the General Education Requirements already too intrusive on student time and effort, and who resisted any attempt to enlarge the requirements.

Earlier in 1991, another change was approved by the faculty, one that modified the Humanities requirement to specify that one course taken must be one designated as “fine arts.”

Neither of these last two requirements could be implemented until sufficient “seats” were available to ensure that students would not have their progress toward degree impeded by lack of access to needed courses.

Since 1994

By Fall of 1994, the then Associate Dean for Academic Programs, James B. Lindberg, had grown increasingly concerned by the slowness in the development of courses to satisfy the new requirements. At the same time, incremental additions of courses in the General Education Program areas had resulted in a swollen system of more than 200 courses, all of which were supposed to be reviewed at least once every four years. The “Coordinating Committees”

\(^3\) The Minutes of the College’s Educational Policy Committee (3/8/89 and 3/15/89) and of the Faculty Assembly (3/29/89) report on this change.
charged with this duty by the 1980 revision had become less prestigious assignments over the years. Service on a “coordinating committee” was often the province of newly tenured faculty (with little acculturation to the College) or by senior faculty nearing retirement, who were still interested in undergraduate teaching or still heeding the call of academic service. While the committees were often individually conscientious, the review process seldom had an effect on the courses themselves and committee members were often uncomfortable with the vagueness of their charge and the amorphous nature of the criteria they were to apply.

Charged by the Associate Dean to review General Education, The Educational Policy Committee went to work with a will and after nearly two years of work presented a proposal for discussion by the Faculty Assembly. As with previous attempts to modify the General Education Program, there were many preliminary discussions with Departmental Executive Officers and other faculty members which provoked reductions in the scope of the proposals even before they were presented for formal discussion at the Faculty Assembly. In that body, further modifications were made, resulting in a revision that was far from the more radical reconsideration of General Education developed by the EPC. A proposal to eliminate Physical Education from the General Education Program was defeated, but the courses were made part of the choice for the student-directed “distributed” requirement. Another part of the proposal, that would have modified the Foreign Language requirement, was also defeated in the Faculty Assembly discussion.

The 1996 revision resulted in the following General Education Program:

- Rhetoric: 1-2 courses, 3-8 hours
- Interpretation of Literature (8G:001): 1 course, 3 hours
- Quantitative or Formal Reasoning: 1 course, 3 hours minimum
- Foreign Language: 4th-semester competency for all degrees
- Historical Perspectives: 1 course, 3 hours minimum
- Humanities: 1 course, 3 hours minimum
- Natural Sciences: 2 courses, 1 with lab, 7 hours minimum
- Social Sciences: 1 course, 3 hours minimum, and
- Distributed General Education: 6 hours, with a minimum of 3 hours chosen from each of two of these areas: Cultural Diversity, Fine Arts, Foreign Civilization and Culture, Historical Perspectives, Humanities, Physical Education, Social Sciences

Associate Dean Lindberg, conscious that the revisions, though in some ways only a modification, did signal more than what could be considered an amendment of the Ryan Committee work, proposed a new “policy document.” The Educational Policy Committee worked for more than a year on various aspects of the document, including an introductory statement about the role of General Education in the college’s curriculum and specific “criteria statements” for each area. This document (available on the College’s web site) is open to continuous revision by the General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC). The GECC, a six-member faculty committee, was developed to replace the more cumbersome individual area coordinating committees. The GECC reports to the Educational Policy Committee.
In Fall 2002, the College reduced the number of semester hours required for graduation from 124 to 120. Since no changes were made at that time to the General Education Program, it now represents a marginally larger proportion of a student’s curriculum than it had previously.

In Spring 2004, the Department of Health and Sport Studies, the “home” of the physical education skills courses approved in the Physical Education area, proposed modification of the Physical Education area’s description and a new name. The Educational Policy Committee agreed, and in Spring 2005 the Physical Education area was renamed “Health and Physical Activity.” Courses in the area will include those that address health behaviors.

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