Rethinking General Education

Lessons from the Integrating General Education conference in Portland, Maine
Lesson 1: It better be a big boat (because we’re all in it)

The most central lesson of the conference is that the issues we are struggling with here at Washburn—how to define general-education skills, how to assess student learning in general education, how to connect general education with capstone experiences—are also being struggled with at campuses across the nation.
Which means we are not alone
Which also means no one else has the answers, either
Lesson 2: Why Do We Care?

So, ok, reworking general education and coming up with effective assessment tools is bound to be a hassle, is bound to provoke arguments and turf battles and too many committee meetings, and why should we even bother?

Because we have to. For at least 3 reasons.
1) Accountability
From Congress to state legislatures, from accreditation agencies to constituents, the growing demand in higher education is for clear accountability. Assessment provides that.

2) Oversight
If we are going to argue that we provide students with a broad liberal education, we had better be able to show that we do so. A well-organized general-education curriculum, with clear assessment as a component, makes good on that promise.

3) Faculty demands
The faculty survey on general education provides a clear and decisive mandate for a revision of our present general-education program (and an obvious message of dissatisfaction with the present program). A similar agenda was implicit in the faculty approval of the Washburn Transformational Experience requirement.
Lesson 3: You know how we’ve been told over and over that grades do not constitute assessment? Well, guess what:

“Stop denigrating the assessment that faculty are already doing, using grades”

--Stephen Spanghi, keynote speaker
We knew that all along, didn’t we?
It doesn’t mean, of course, that grades are enough (they can be one component in a range of assessment tools)
Lesson 4: Models of General Education

Broadly speaking, we can identify three models for general education:

1) The smorgasboard approach (our present model)
2) Developmental models
3) Core curricular models
The Smorgasboard Approach

- Presumes general education should take place in the first couple years (mostly) of a student’s college experience.
- Presents a range of choices for general education each of which fulfills defined goals in terms of content (spheres of knowledge) and skills.
Presumes general education should be experienced throughout the student’s college career.

Provides general–education courses fitted to each level (freshman through senior) of a standard college career.

Tends to organize general education around broad themes.

Often culminates with a capstone course designed to integrate the lessons of the whole general–education experience.
Core Curricular Model

- Shares with the developmental model the fundamental idea that general education should be experienced throughout a college career (and also usually links to capstone experiences).
- Necessitates the development of new courses that fulfill “core” functions in terms of both content and skills.
- Tends to encourage team-teaching and interdisciplinary experiments.
The clearest trend in general education across the nation is toward models (either developmental or core curricular) that see general education as something that should be experienced throughout a student’s college career, rather than as something to get out of the way in the first year or two of college.
What that means for us

- The implementation of the Washburn Transformational Experience requirement provides a perfect hook for reorganizing general education along such lines.
- We need to think about what works for us, what thematic principles might be used to organize offerings in general education, what core courses might mean for Washburn.
- We also need to consider what upper-level general education really might consist of, which upper-level courses truly constitute general education and which ones do not.
- We still have work to do...
Examples of general models
  ◦ Multidisciplinary menu of courses
  ◦ Thematic
  ◦ Core courses
Courses from multiple disciplines

Students take certain number of hours from each identified discipline

Example: Eastern New Mexico University
Themes are defined, courses identified for themes

Example (Indiana State University)

1. Critical Thinking – To develop students' capacities for independent thinking, critical analysis, and reasoned inquiry.
2. Communication Skills – To enhance students' writing, speaking, reading, and listening abilities.
3. Issues of Value and Belief – To enhance students' capacities for making informed and reasonable choices.
4. Lifelong Learning – To help students develop the knowledge and intellectual skills that encourage participatory citizenship, acknowledge the value of learning, and facilitate and adaptation to change.
Core Curriculum

- Set of courses which are required of all students
- Example ([Fairleigh Dickinson University](#))
  - CORE1006 University Core A The Global Challenge
  - CORE2007 University Core B Perspectives on the Individual
  - CORE2008 University Core C Cross-cultural Perspectives
  - CORE3009 University Core D The American Experience: The Quest for Freedom
Implications

- No “one size fits all” model
  - Many variations
  - Hybrids
- Need to tailor to institution
- AAC&U Gen Ed Promising Models Web Site
  - http://www.aacu.org/resources/generaleducation/promisingmodels.cfm
The Process
Importance and Urgency of Reform

- There needs to be general agreement that reform of the General Education program is important.
- The most successful Gen Ed reform processes are done relatively quickly—we must keep it moving.
Rather than one (or a few) committee(s) or group(s) deciding on a new Gen Ed program and presenting it as a “done deal,” we must make the process inclusive and transparent.

All stakeholders (as we define them) should be involved in the process so everyone has the chance to be heard.
Agreement to Disagree

- Throughout the process some individuals and/or groups will not get “their way.”
- We must agree to accept decisions of the majority (or however we decide these decisions will be made) and move forward.
Different schools start the process in different ways.

A common (and familiar) way to start is roundtable discussions.

An important part of “the start” is setting a timeline.
Some Issues to Keep in Mind

- Transfer students
- Lack of flexibility in some professional programs
- WTEs
- Assessment