What Should Constitute General Education For Our Students—and Why?

Like many of us, I wear a few different hats around here. In addition to being a member of the English Department, and director of the Teaching and Learning Center, this year and next I am chair of Faculty Conference and faculty representative to the Board of Trustees. This past weekend, I was part of the annual board retreat. I was part of the annual board retreat. I was part of intensive sessions on Friday afternoon, all day Saturday, and half the day Sunday. I was a bit exhausted after the experience, as two of my predecessors in this role, Marilyn Smith and Marsha Bollinger, warned me I would be. But as David Letterman says, it was a good kind of tired. I drove away after lunch on Sunday excited about the future for Winthrop.

I left for the Friday board meeting directly from Academic Council, where a proposal to make some changes to our general education program was passed and will be discussed at this week’s Faculty Conference. We will not vote on the proposal until the April 25 Faculty Conference meeting, which will give us all time to think about these important proposed changes.

I was a member of the General Education Taskforce that came up with these proposals. We first met near the end of last spring semester, then did a bit of work over the summer before starting in earnest early in the fall. Our proposal is the result of many hours of research, discussion, and at times, argument. Since general education is at the heart of our mission as a university, any discussion of it is bound to bring forth contention and argument—and it should.

I am not writing to argue for the eventual passage of the proposed changes, but to open up some issues to think about as discussion continues. There are four proposals: change the name from Touchstone Program to General Education Program; reduce the minimum hours of graduation from 124 to 120; establish guidelines that majors and programs will use to make sure they are allowing students as much flexibility as possible in fulfilling their general education requirements; and reduce the total hours of general education, as well as change the distribution of hours within categories.

When such proposed changes are put before us, it is natural for us to think first about the immediate effect on us and on our own programs. But I think it is helpful to step back and think from a wider perspective. What is it that we expect general education to achieve?

I have written about the results of this Peter D. Hart poll from 2007 before, in which he asked employers what they look for in new college graduates. Speaking of David Letterman, here is the top ten:
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1. The ability to work well in teams—especially with people different from yourself
2. An understanding of science and technology and how these subjects are used in real-world settings
3. The ability to write and speak well
4. The ability to think clearly about complex problems
5. The ability to analyze a problem to develop workable solutions
6. An understanding of global context in which work is now done
7. The ability to be creative and innovative in solving problems
8. The ability to apply knowledge and skills in new settings
9. The ability to understand numbers and statistics
10. A strong sense of ethics and integrity

How well does our current general education program help our students achieve these skills and traits? Would the proposed new program satisfy these goals? I think these are important questions to ponder.

When we passed our current general education program ten years or so ago, hard-working colleagues had been working on it for seven years. A decade later, it seems like a good idea to revisit the program (and I sure am glad this committee did its work in less than a year. Then again, we were merely building on the good work those folks did way back when.)

On a personal note, I was opposed to the changes we made last decade. I agreed with the addition of what would become HMXP and CRTW (which remain unchanged), but I did not agree with the changes to general education categories—I thought we were watering down essential aspects of our students’ common experience. A few years ago, after a meeting of Academic Council, Tom Moore drew some proposed changes to our program on a napkin. I was appalled at what I saw was further watering down.

So what has made me change my mind? There are several reasons why.

Examining every single major program of study showed me how little flexibility many of our students have in their general education: in some cases, so much is dictated that students have virtually no choice within the categories, and in other cases, many students are fulfilling a majority of their general education within their majors. To my mind, neither of these is acceptable. The first case makes life very difficult for students who transfer into Winthrop, and very difficult for students who change majors—sometimes even more difficult than being a transfer. The second case seems to violate the very idea of a “general” education.

Another change came when I learned that SACS requires a minimum of 30 hours of general education. Our current general education program ranges from 46-58 hours. When we looked at a number of our peer institutions, Winthrop was definitely on the high end of the scale. It’s good to be at the top sometimes, but are we asking more of our students than we need to? The new proposal ranges from 35-50 hours.

I look forward to the conversation, discussion, and even the contention that will result from this proposal. As a professor here, as the person who oversees efforts of teaching and learning, as chair of Faculty Conference, I hope we will all keep in mind the ultimate focus: our students and their learning.
XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/

Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology, and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don’t have the time or they can’t at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop

See you there!

Thought For the Week

“Be good and you will be lonesome.”
—Mark Twain