Minutes of the Special Faculty Senate Meeting Devoted to General Education, 29 January 2008

The Faculty Senate met on Tuesday, 29 January 2008, at 5:00 p.m. in Wachovia Auditorium. This was the ninth special meeting of the academic year dedicated to the General-Education Proposals formulated by the ad hoc Committee on General Education.

Speaker Joe Kelly called the meeting to order. Next, the Minutes of the October 30th meeting were approved.

Speaker Kelly then asked for unanimous consent to insert pages 2-3, which contained goals approved by the Senate in Spring 2007, into the current Gen-Ed Proposal. Darryl Phillips (at-large) asked if everything on those pages would still be in effect, even though the other goals of the Gen-Ed Proposal have not yet been approved. Speaker Kelly said that they would be in effect, including the rider about the Gen-Ed Committee. Mr. Phillips then asked if Senators could make changes to those goals, and the Speaker answered that they could. The Senate then gave its consent to insert the pages.

At this point, the Speaker said that the entire Gen-Ed Proposal was up for debate. Larry Krasnoff moved to delete page 7 of the document (Goal II.2: Social and Cultural Analysis) for the same reasons given for deleting pages 15-18 in the last Gen-Ed meeting. The motion received a second. George Pothering (chair of the ad hoc Committee on General Education and guest) responded that the reason p. 7 is there is to make clear that social and cultural analysis is part of Gen-Ed. The following pages specify the content of the analysis. The Senate then voted on the motion to delete p. 7, which passed.

Mr. Krasnoff said that it was important to look at the overall balance and structure of the Gen-Ed Proposal. To do that, he thought it would be helpful to remove the Roman numerals, which he thought were confusing, and replace them with Arabic ones. Hugh Wilder (Philosophy) agreed that the current numbering system was confusing.

On a different topic, Gary Harrison expressed concern about the additional requirements contained in the Proposal (a speaking course, an extra science course, two interdisciplinary courses, and so on), which he said totaled to eighteen extra hours. He was skeptical about the view that double-counting would take care of this added burden, and thought that some students, such as those in secondary education, would be especially burdened by the added requirements. Steve Livin (Hospitality and Tourism) echoed Mr. Harrison’s concerns, adding that the additional requirements may cause other problems or burdens, such as with advising. Meg Cormack (at-large) thought the new requirements might make it difficult for students to graduate in four years.

George Hopkins (History) pointed out that the new Gen-Ed requirements were comparable with what many other schools required. Julia Eichelberger (guest) said that the Gen-Ed Committee examined the issue of graduation rates and asked whether it would take students longer to graduate under the new requirements. The answer, they found, was that it would not take them longer. There was room for every major to complete the new requirements in four
years. She added that the process of determining what courses double-counted would all be
online and be easy to track.

Paul Young (Mathematics) asked how the Gen-Ed Committee could possibly determine that
students would not take longer to graduate, especially given the fact that many courses (e.g.,
interdisciplinary courses) have not yet been approved. Mr. Pothering said that he did the
graduation calculations, and did so by looking at those current courses that would probably
count for the new proposed requirements. Though there was some approximation involved,
he said that the scheme was likely to be pretty accurate, and that it gave a reasonable picture
of what will happen under the new requirements.

John Hakkila (guest) reminded the Senators of why the College is reviewing its current Gen-
Ed system. It’s because our current system needs improvement. Science education under the
current system, he insisted, is inadequate. He said that Senators should ask not how the
Proposal will impact their respective departments, but whether it is a good curriculum for the
twenty-first century.

Returning to the issue of extra-required credits, Todd Grantham (guest) was concerned that
they would discourage students from double-majoring or taking minors. Mr. Litvin suggested
that the new requirements might provide the wrong incentives to students, encouraging them
to focus on what courses double-count, rather than on what courses they need to take. He also
thought that the new system would cut out electives (students would just take courses they
have to take, not those they want to take), and that it would cut down on minors, such as
foreign language minors, which his department thinks is important for their majors.

Pete Calcagno (Economics and Finance) also had concerns about double-counting and
thought students would design their course schedules to double-, triple-, and quadruple-count.
He also wondered about what students can do now with respect to double-counting. Cathy
Boyd (Registrar and guest) said that currently, though there are some restrictions, students can
double-and triple-count courses.

Mr. Pothering, addressing the issue of additional requirements, said that at the start of the
Gen-Ed review process, the Gen-Ed Committee held forums about what should be included in
Gen Ed. All the items in the Proposal—the speaking intensive course, the intercultural
course, interdisciplinary courses, etc.—all came up in those discussions. The faculty, he said,
wanted those things in the curriculum. He added that double-counting helps deal with the
added requirements and allows students to cover a lot of ground.

Mr. Wilder observed that while each item in the Proposal is good, the total is too much. He
said that the possibility of students having to take more than 122 hours to graduate would be
costly to the College. It means that students who should have graduated will take up more
faculty time and occupy seats that other students might need. He added that making sure that
students graduate in a timely fashion is a problem that many colleges are trying to solve.

Mr. Young expressed skepticism about the advantages of double-counting, giving the
example of a math student who chooses to take an interdisciplinary math course in differential
equations and a writing-intensive math course. Though such courses might double-count for the Gen-Ed requirements and the major, the math student wouldn’t be broadening his/her education much because he/she would still just be taking math courses. Jason Overby (Chemistry and Biochemistry) said that double-counting encourages students to take the path of least resistance and would be an incentive to try to game the system. Richard Nunan (at-large) thought these views about double-counting were a little exaggerated. He pointed out that some of Mr. Young’s examples were unlikely to double-count because they did not meet certain criteria in the Proposal as it has thus far been amended. He added that the Senate has put in some restrictions about what can be double-counted.

Jose Gavidia (guest) voiced concern about the size of the proposed Gen-Ed curriculum. He said that Harvard requires only 30 credit hours for Gen Ed out the 133 required to graduate. He added that SACS, our accrediting agency, only requires 33 credits. He thought that the College’s Gen-Ed requirements should be kept at that minimum.

Mr. Phillips noted that the foreign language requirement takes up 0-12 credits, not 0-3 has it is stated in parts of the Proposal. He also said that since the Proposal is about replacing the status quo, the Senate needs to think about what the status quo is and look back on what it has done. It has approved the First Year Experience (passed last spring) and forced itself to reflect critically on Gen-Ed goals. Mr. Phillips then passed around a handout on blue paper that showed how the goals in the Gen-Ed Proposal match up with our current Gen-Ed requirements. He noted that we already do a pretty good job of reaching those goals, and that what is needed is a mechanism that allows the Senate to make incremental changes to our current system. He suggested that the Senate needs to form a standing Gen-Ed Committee (as the Second Gen-Ed Proposal proposes) that could study what has been done in the Gen-Ed review and suggest needed incremental changes.

Mr. Overby and Mr. Wilder endorsed Mr. Phillips’ idea. John Huddelstun complimented Mr. Phillips for the clarity and simplicity of the blue sheet and what it represented. Mr. Nunan also thought Mr. Phillip’s idea had promise, but said that the Senate still needs to consider the Proposal before it. He added that he was not particularly happy about implementing ideas piecemeal and hoped that some needed wholesale changes to Gen Ed could be made. Doryjane Birrer (English) said that though blue sheet is clear and simple, simplicity isn’t necessarily an argument for resisting reform. The current Gen-Ed system is static, she added, whereas a goal-driven model allows for new courses, new ways of connecting disciplines, and new ways of thinking. That is what is exciting about the Gen-Ed Proposal’s goal-driven model. Conseula Francis (English) said that model on the blue sheet is flawed in that it doesn’t have a mechanism to show if we are achieving our goals. The new proposed system is dynamic in that it encourages students to learn many skills and apply them in different settings. Mr. Parson supported Ms. Birrer’s and Ms. Francis’ remarks and argued that, notwithstanding the idea embodied in Mr. Phillips’ blue sheet (that our existing Gen-Ed system achieves many of the goals outlined in the Proposal), the Gen-Ed Proposal offers something fundamentally different from what we currently have. With the Proposal, “we aren’t just shifting deck chairs,” Mr. Parson said; “we are re-organizing the decks.” And concerning the issue of double-counting, he said that we don’t really know how it will work,
but we can have Gen-Ed Committee monitor it and come back to the Senate to propose changes, if they are needed.

Mr. Hakkila endorsed the comments of the previous three Senators and spoke in favor of the Gen-Ed Proposal. He said that Gen Ed is important, that the College needs to take stock of its current system and expose students to a wide variety of disciplines, and that the Senate has a chance to implement a truly interdisciplinary Gen-Ed curriculum. He stressed that interdisciplinary work is especially important in science education and spoke of his frustration with working in other colleges where rigid systems prevented meaningful interdisciplinary work. He echoed the view that simplicity isn’t a reason for having something. If it were, we would try to simplify out current system.

Jim Neward (Classics) remarked that those in favor of our current system aren’t saying that it’s perfect, but that it is not as bad as some have made it out to be. A standing Gen-Ed Committee, he said, could be charged with making necessary improvements, but the whole system doesn’t need to be revamped. One problem now is that students don’t see connections between disciplines; that problem, however, could be addressed by better advising.

Ms. Cormack pointed out that Mr. Phillips was not advocating no change; rather, he said that change should be incremental. Proposals for interdisciplinary science courses, for example, could be implemented in this way. Jeffery Diamond responded that advocating incremental change can be a way of squashing change altogether. Perhaps no change will happen. He then asked if other colleges have used the goal-driven model, and wondered if distrust of the model could be alleviated by information on how well it has worked elsewhere. Ms. Eichelberger said that many colleges and universities use a goal-driven model (such as UNC Chapel Hill and Clemson), and that it is very common—more the norm than the distribution model. Kay Smith (guest) mentioned that Duke uses a goal-driven model and that many institutions are moving toward the model.

Mr. Phillips stressed that he was not arguing that the status quo should always remain, but that that a standing Gen-Ed Committee could set up a process to implement gradually some of the good ideas mentioned today and throughout the Gen-Ed discussions. Doing so will ensure that this attempt to reform Gen Ed will not be a complete failure like the previous effort. Mr. Krasnoff remarked that specific goals need to be connected to requirements and that simply setting up a Gen-Ed Committee will not lead necessarily lead to incremental change. Mr. Nunan said that the idea of establishing Gen-Ed goals is good, but the problematic part is agreeing on goals and requirements. Ms. Cormack pointed out that in the last Gen-Ed reform effort, the faculty voted down a less complicated system than the one proposed now. She agreed with the incremental-change approach. Ms. Birrer remarked that the current ad hoc Gen-Ed Committee has already done the work that others are now asking a future Gen-Ed Committee to do. She advocated pushing forward and making use of the work already done. Scott Peeples (English) stated that he was not optimistic about the incremental-change approach, suggesting that departments may become more possessive about guarding their territory and that the gradual changes might create a Gen-Ed system worse than our current one.
Frank Morris (at-large) thought Mr. Phillips blue sheet provided guidance for change. He stressed the importance of international and interdisciplinary courses for our students and suggested that cross-listing courses is one way of making incremental change toward a more interdisciplinary curriculum. He also listed what he saw as deficiencies in the Gen-Ed Proposal: he thought that there was not enough emphasis on history, that there needed to be more science content, and that the international/global component of the Proposal put too much stress on the contemporary and excluded the historical. He said that overall he was not prepared to vote for the Proposal.

Norris Preyer (Physics and Astronomy) pointed out that some incremental changes can be done, but others can’t—such as in the sciences where there are lab-lecture pairings and course sequences. Garrett Mitchner (guest) spoke against the Gen-Ed Proposal. He gave the example of Duke University, which changed from a distribution Gen-Ed system to a goal-driven one. The new Gen-Ed system had problems: there was an imbalance between the sciences and the humanities; there were too many hours required; and there were problems with double-counting. In fixing these problems, the system that eventually emerged looked, he said, like the old one that had been replaced. Any new Gen-Ed system, he stressed, must first be tested.

Thomas Ross (Psychology) then called the question on whether to end discussion and bring the Gen-Ed Proposal to a vote. The motion to call the question failed.

Margaret Hagood (Elementary and Early Childhood Education) commented that change causes anxiety, but education is about change and trying new things to find out what works best. We have to make a decision, she continued, on the whole scheme, not on the details and on logistical issues, which can be worked out and fixed later. The key questions are whether the new system helps us, and where does the change get us. George Hopkins (History) agreed that Senators should focus on “the big picture,” and urged the Senate to adopt the Proposal. Incremental change, he added, can be also be difficult to effectuate. It may not happen. During the Senate deliberations, accommodations have been made, he said, to address the concerns of Senators. Nothing is perfect for everybody, but the Gen-Ed Proposal overall is good for most everyone and helps the College.

It was now 7 p.m., the scheduled end of the meeting. Speaker Kelly announced that further debate on the Gen-Ed Proposal would resume at the next meeting scheduled for February 5. The Senate adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Terence Bowers
Faculty Secretary