Minutes of the Special Faculty Senate Meeting Devoted to General Education, 25 March 2008

The Faculty Senate met on Tuesday, 25 March 2008, at 5:00 p.m. in Wachovia Auditorium. This was the fourteenth 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. The minutes of the December 4, 2007 Faculty Senate meeting were approved. Next, debate resumed on Meg Cormack’s pending proposed amendment, which had been divided into two parts. The first part sought to remove the requirement of Goal 2 specifying that the second intensive writing course be a literature course.

Darryl Phillips (at-large) began the discussion by stating that he opposed the amendment not only because it diluted the literature requirement, but also because it affected the ability of students to learn to read critically. There was a sense, he thought, that the foundational elements of Gen Ed would be watered down by the proposed amendment. Freshmen won’t read and write as much. Instead, what we should be doing, he stressed, is increasing first-year reading and writing requirements.

Mr. Wilder stated that he had mixed feelings about the amendment. The Philosophy Department, he said, had tried to move the literature requirement to a different goal of the Gen-Ed Proposal, but it was defeated. George Pothering (guest) remarked that that proposal would have eliminated literature as requirement and made it merely an option. Ms. Cormack (at-large), responding to Mr. Phillips’ remarks, said that critical thinking, reading, and writing skills are taught in non-literature courses. For example, her courses in religious studies develop those skills. Tim Carens (English), also in response to Mr. Phillips, said that we do need to teach writing and reading skills to first-year students, but they need to continue developing those skills beyond the freshman year. Many students, he continued, come to ENGL 102 weary and think that they are done with their writing courses upon completion of 102. It would be better to have the writing instruction spread out over the course of four years while the students are in college.

The Senate voted on the first part of Ms. Cormack’s motion, which failed.

The Senate then turned its attention to the second part of her motion, which would require all intensive writing courses to include workshops as well a require students to produce at least 15 pages of writing. Ms. Cormack wondered if this part of her amendment was necessary given the failure of the first part. Scott Peeples (English) and Larry Krasnoff (Philosophy) thought it was. Mr. Peeples said that it’s not just the English department that should insist on these requirements, but other departments as well.

Hugh Wilder (Philosophy) thought the standards were too specific. Such a level of detail was not appropriate for the Gen-Ed document. The craft of teaching writing, he added, develops and changes. Draft workshops, which are standard now, may not be in a few years as other methods are introduced.
Jerry Boetje (Computer Science) agreed, saying that we don’t want to “micromanage” here, though we can express to the future Gen-Ed Committee that writing is important. He then moved to amend Ms. Cormack’s amendment to change Approval Criterion 1 by underlining the word “significant” and striking the parenthetical phrase “at least 15 pages.” The motion received a second.

Jason Overby (Chemistry & Biochemistry) thought that focusing on such textual details was inappropriate. George Hopkins (History) agreed, saying that the minutes will reflect what the Senate wants when it comes to writing instruction and other pedagogical and curricular matters.

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The Senate next voted on the second part of Ms. Cormack’s amendment, which failed.

Discussion of the proposal as a whole resumed. Speaker Kelly said that in the interest of moving deliberations forward he would limit debate on any proposed amendment to 20 minutes.

Mr. Hopkins asked when the Gen-Ed Proposal would go into effect if it were enacted. The Speaker said that it would be in about two years.

Alex Kasman (guest) spoke about the B.S. and B.A. degrees and said that the current Gen-Ed Proposal, because of its size, might make it impractical for students to earn a B.S. Students would have to stay in college more than four years to earn the degree. If the College were then to drop B.S. degrees, it would be a very serious development.

Calvin Blackwell (Economics & Finance) spoke against the Gen-Ed Proposal, arguing that though it has some good features (e.g., the interdisciplinary science course and the speaking course), it was too big, too complex, not very flexible, and required extra hours to complete. The added complexity and size will increase advising time, he continued, and create negative, hard-to-predict effects (such as forcing students to take summer courses to meet their requirements). He thought that our current Gen-Ed program was good, that it too (as Darryl Phillips has argued) contained goals, that it could be presented as a goal-oriented system, and that the proposed Gen-Ed program was no better than the current one. Mr. Overby agreed and said that his amendment last week was intended to inject flexibility into the proposal, but that the Senate voted it down. Rohn England (Mathematics) thought the new system would require heavy use of adjuncts and urged the Senate to remand the proposal to the Gen-Ed Committee for remodeling. Pete Calcagno (Economics and Finance), also speaking against the Gen-Ed Proposal, was concerned that it would create all sorts of unintended consequences, which could become exacerbated by a lack of resources.

John Huddlestun (Religious Studies), speaking to the concern over unintended consequences, said that such a view could be applied to any Gen-Ed reform. Todd McNerney (Theatre), speaking to Mr. Blackwell’s view that the current Gen-Ed system is good, said that the reason
for initiating the Gen-Ed reform was that the current system is inadequate and needed to be changes. He said that he thought there would probably be problems in transitioning to a new system, but that they would be sorted out. He said that double-counting would take care of the concerns about the Gen-Ed Proposal’s sizes and extra hours. He added that the proposed Gen-Ed system is in some ways more flexible than the current system (e.g., in the new system a student who gets a D in a science course wouldn’t have to take the next course in the sequence and could switch to a different science). He stressed, too, that Gen Ed must play a big role in a liberal arts college. The new proposal highlights Gen Ed’s centrality in the College and is designed to allow students to forge connections among disciplines.

Garret Mitchner (guest) saw as a flaw the fact that the proposal didn’t have a “phase-in period. He also thought there were some hidden inflexibilities in the proposed system and suggested that the proposal first needed to be tested before being fully implemented. Hugh Wilder (Philosophy) also stressed that there were risks to adopting the new system. He thought that the current one was pretty good and that no one has persuasively explained what is wrong with it. He thought, too, that the proposed system wasn’t much different from the current one, but the risks involved in adopting it were high. Mr. Phillips echoed the view that a case has not been made as to what is wrong with the current system and why it should be scrapped. He said that one argument he has heard—that change is good—may be appealing, but isn’t sound. Another argument—that we need assessable goal-based system—has merit, but the current system could also be assessed, as shown in the blue sheet he circulated in a prior meeting, which mapped onto the current Gen-Ed system the goals of the proposed one. He added that good people could be opposed to the Gen-Ed Proposal and still be for Gen Ed and the liberal arts. He listed what he perceived as two more problems with the Proposal were it to pass: (1) it would require that every course come back to the Senate, which was a cumbersome way of processing courses and no a good use of the Senate’s time; and (2) it lacked adequate resources to implement. As an example, Mr. Phillips referred to the mention of six new lines in Appendix B, which he thought were insufficient.

Tim Carens (English) said that various claims have been made in Senate about resources, and wondered if the Provost (who was present at the meeting) could speak to the issue. Provost Elise Jorgens said that the institution was prepared to commit the resources to implement the proposed Gen-Ed plan. The resources, she emphasized, would not be unlimited, but they would be there. Some big figures have been thrown about, she said, but it was important to remember that the new system would not require more courses. She stressed again that the institution was willing to commit the resources to a new Gen-Ed system.

Mr. Peeples, addressing the question of what is wrong with the current system, said that the answer is found in various goals and requirements of the Gen-Ed Proposal, which includes the oral communication course, the interdisciplinary science course, and the international and global context goal. Those fill deficiencies in our current Gen-Ed curriculum. Conseula Francis (English) supported that view and said that scare tactics are being used to defeat the Proposal. Yes, there will be growing pains and difficulties to overcome in implementing a new system, but that is not a sufficient reason to vote down the proposal. In addition to benefits of the proposal mentioned by Mr. Peeples, she noted the writing-across-the-curriculum component and the intercultural goal. And as to the issue of flexibility, she said
that the fact that the Senate voted down amendments that would have eliminated or drastically modified certain goals was not an indication that Senators were against flexibility; rather, it indicated that they thought those goals were important. Mr. Pothering added that the Gen-Ed Proposal has the benefit of involving departments and schools in Gen Ed that have not participated (e.g. Dept. of Computer Science, School of Education, School of Business). That increased participation is a great opportunity for faculty.

Mr. Krasnoff announced that he was not going to vote for the proposal, though he had planned to so. He said that there was still no clear reason as to why the current Gen-Ed system was bad. Though there were some benefits to the proposed new system, as a whole it was still too complex and cumbersome and he did not think it worth the cost and risk. As for the argument that we need a new system for assessment purposes, that issue could addressed by the fact that the goal framework could be mapped onto the old system for assessment purposes; but more importantly, assessment shouldn’t drive the curriculum. Mr. Newhard, also speaking to the question of what is so bad about the old system, cited the original Gen-Ed Proposal, which stated that in the current Gen-Ed scheme the major is disconnected from Gen Ed, that students don’t see the long-term value of Gen-Ed, and that the Gen-Ed curriculum is not challenging. Do we need, asked Mr. Newhard, an entire new system to address these issues? He thought that better advising would help with these problems, and that instead of remaking the whole system, we should try to improve and strengthen the current one.

Brian McGee (Communication) said that he respects all his colleagues (“I like you,” he declared) and that he will continue to do so after the vote on Gen Ed. He disagreed, however, with the view that the current system could be tweaked and improved. He said that it was rigid and stultifying for faculty and students, that it was impossible to produce consistent learning outcomes from it, that its science education was seriously flawed, and that simply mapping our new goals onto our current system was an inadequate response to the issue of assessment. He concluded by stressing that the new system, should it prove not to work very well, could always be changed. The Faculty Senate as a legislative body can reverse itself. He asked the Senate to remember that it has this power.

Laura Turner (Theatre) said that she had heard that students were in favor of the Gen-Ed Proposal and had voted for it. She wondered if that were true. Ms. Eichelberger said that the Academic Council had voted for last year’s version of the Gen-Ed Proposal. Carol Toris (Psychology) thought that was an important fact. She said that she was for the Proposal and urged her colleagues not to be swayed by fears that problems might appear in the new system.

Mr. Wilder proposed a “new third path” between adopting the proposal and rejecting it entirely. We’ve learned a lot, he said, during the last two years. The new Gen-Ed Committee will benefit from that knowledge, retain many of the goals in the Gen-Ed Proposal, but present them in a modified from.

Jennifer McStotts (at-large) called the question. The Senate voted in favor of calling the question.
Mr. Krasnoff asked for a roll call vote. Speaker Kelly granted the request, but said that the Senate could overrule him, if it desired. RoxAnn Stalvey (Computer Science) challenged the ruling, arguing that the knowledge of how Senators were voting could influence those Senators who hadn’t voted. She favored a simple show of hands. The Senate voted on the challenge to the Speaker’s ruling and the challenge was successful.

Phil Dustan (Biology) moved that the vote be conducted by secret ballot. The motion received a second. The Senate voted and the result was a tie: the motion failed. The Speaker explained that lacking a majority, the motion was defeated.

**The Senate voted on the Gen-Ed Proposal and it was defeated, 33 voting in favor, 37 voting against.**

The Speaker reminded the Senate that next week deliberations on the second Gen-Ed Proposal regarding the formation of a permanent Gen-Ed Committee would begin.

The Senate adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Terence Bowers
Faculty Secretary