Annual Report, General Education Committee, 2017-2018

Committee Members: Kristen Ashworth, Jim Bowring, Wesley Burnett, Lisa Covert (Chair), Susan Divine, Mary Beth Heston, and Kevin Keenan

The General Education Committee had three priorities for the 2017-2018 academic year: 1) improving communication with the campus community; 2) certifying courses for the General Education curriculum and particularly the Math/Logic alternative; and 3) discussing the possibilities of a new General Education certification/assessment cycle.

To address the first priority, we worked with Megan Gould to develop a webpage for the General Education Committee. The webpage will be maintained through the joint efforts of the General Education Faculty Liaison (Gia Quesada) and the committee secretary. The committee also experimented with a “General Education Month” initiative to solicit feedback from programs and departments about their current levels of engagement with the General Education program. Although the committee did not receive the level of participation we hoped for, the feedback we did receive led the committee to conclude that this was a valuable process to continue in the future. Many of the responses addressed the perception that assessment placed a significant burden on programs and departments. A few departments delved deeper, examining changes to the curriculum prompted by the assessment process. Some departments and programs affirmed that they wanted to maintain their current level of engagement with General Education, while other departments posed questions about their current level of engagement and about the current distributional model. Finally, the committee discussed the need for feedback from students about their experience with Gen Ed. The committee decided this year to focus on collecting data that others have already compiled.

For the second priority, the committee certified eleven courses for the General Education curriculum and one course for the Math/Logic alternative. The committee made several efforts to encourage more departments to submit courses for certification for the Math/Logic alternative and building that course list should remain a priority. The committee also discussed several challenges posed by Special Topics courses and study abroad courses, but in light of other conversations about Special Topics courses on other Senate committees, the General Education committee decided to wait to make any changes. Another issue that the committee discussed was the need to clarify expectations about the extent to which a course proposed for the Humanities requirement should focus on primary source analysis. Although proposals all included signature assignments that incorporated primary source analysis, in some cases it was not clear how much these skills were reinforced throughout the semester. Finally, the committee worked to identify unanticipated challenges presented by Curriculog, in particular the lack of forms specifically for the Language and Math/Logic alternatives.
For the third priority, the committee used feedback collected from the General Education Month responses to identify some possibilities for modifying the current schedules for assessment and certification. The committee concluded that the implementation of a multi-year assessment cycle might address some of the problems that several departments and programs identified. For example, we thought this might entail assessing the General Education courses for each area (Humanities, Social Sciences, Foreign Languages, etc.) once every three years, which would give faculty more time to evaluate assessment data and implement changes before the next assessment cycle. Gia Quesada suggested that the next step will be to present this idea to the ARGs and program directors and chairs in May.

The committee recommends that the 2018-2019 committee follow up on these items:

- Continue discussions about developing a new assessment cycle
- Continue General Education Month conversations with departments and programs
- Discuss and clarify expectations for the extent to which courses proposed for the Humanities requirement demonstrate an engagement with primary sources throughout the syllabus
- Continue to recruit courses to certify for the Math/Logic Alternative
- Develop a survey to solicit student feedback on Gen Ed (especially alumni)
- Continue discussion about Special Topics and study abroad courses in conjunction with members of other relevant college-wide committees