

# General Education Review Committee Interim Report

February 2015

## Introduction

Following a [comprehensive curricular review](#) in the early 2000s, the [Report of the Task Force on General Education](#) proposed a new [Program in General Education](#) in 2007. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted to approve the report and adopt the new program in May 2007. The [Final Legislation Establishing the Program in General Education](#) provides programmatic details and the motivating conception of liberal education that guides it. The legislation also called for the Dean of the Faculty to appoint a committee to review the Program within five years of its inception.

Dean Smith appointed the General Education Review Committee (GERC) in the spring of 2014. The committee is comprised of Senior Faculty members from each division of the FAS [Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences] and the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. This interim report describes the current state of the Program in General Education, highlighting successes but also emphasizing areas in need of improvement. The final section lays out possible ways forward; we request comments and suggestions about them.

### 1. Philosophical Orientation of the General Education Program: *Ars Vivendi in Mundo*

There has been some version of a general education requirement at Harvard since 1946. (See [here](#) for a brief history.) The guiding philosophy of the current program returns to, and interprets, an ancient aim of a liberal arts education: it is to help ground a student in the *ars vivendi* – the art of living. The Program recognizes, however, that at present this art is pursued against the background of a wide range of social and cultural traditions, and in the context of scientific and technological change. So it goes beyond the traditional characterization of the liberal arts in aiming to prepare students to live as mature adults *in the world at large*; it prepares them for an *ars vivendi in mundo*.

To emphasize the global aspect of the art of living is to put a contemporary spin on a traditional educational aim. In particular our program is not organized around the presupposition, manifest in thinkers from Plato to Christian moralists and beyond, that there is a univocal and metaphysically grounded account of virtue and the good life. The Program itself presupposes no such univocal account, though the study of such accounts may well be a central feature in it. The Program does, however, retain the traditional idea that to engage with basic questions about how to live and what a good life consists in is the educational aim *par excellence*. In this way, the Program seeks to address the challenges of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to prepare students to find worthy ways of living in it. How to implement these principles effectively is the main challenge that the Program faces.

The Program identifies four issues with which Harvard students must engage during the course of their time in the College. It aims to help students reflect upon and understand themselves in the context of:

- the nature of civic engagement. [Civic Engagement]
- ways in which individuals are products of and participants in social traditions. [Social Traditions]
- ethical dimensions of what people say and do. [Ethical Dimensions]
- the need to be flexible enough to respond critically and constructively to social, scientific, and cultural changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. [Response to Change]

## 2. History of Implementation

After the Faculty established the Program in General Education in 2007, a committee planned the transition from the Core program. A primary goal was to make sure that the General Education Program would offer enough courses so that students entering in the fall of 2009, who were required to graduate in the Gen Ed Program, could comfortably satisfy its requirements. Because of these time pressures, the standards for admitting courses to the Program were understandably different at the Program's inception than they have since become. As a result, the courses in the Program do not satisfy a uniform standard. In addition, there is no process for reviewing courses once approved. One result is that the Program has grown to an almost unmanageable size. In the fall of 2014, the catalog listed 574 courses that satisfied General Education requirements. About half are "front of the book courses," whose primary catalog designation is in a Gen Ed category. The other half are "back of the book courses" – departmental courses that also satisfy Gen Ed requirements. Based on our discussions with faculty, it appears that most departmental courses that satisfy Gen Ed requirements were not developed with the philosophical principles of Gen Ed in mind. This includes courses brought into the Gen Ed Program from the Core, which in many cases, have not been modified to reflect the principles of the Program.

## 3. General Education in its Current State

The committee gathered evidence from the four constituencies that interact with Gen Ed: students, faculty, TFs and TAs, and administrators. Over the fall semester we held dozens of hours of public meetings with hundreds of members of these constituencies. We also solicited feedback in smaller, more individualized contexts and examined data from various surveys. With the help of experts in institutional research, we ran statistical analyses on the Program and on the data we collected. We have a good handle on the current state of the Program.

The Gen Ed requirement is the central defining feature of the Harvard College education. It makes up about 25% of a student's course load, and is the single most unifying experience that students across the College share. It is disturbing to discover,

therefore, that despite strengths, and serious efforts by many constituents, the Program is failing on a variety of fronts.

The constituencies expressed misgivings about the following aspects of the Program. (For a more extensive list, see [here](#).)

- Gen Ed occupies no place in the College's identity. Students report that from the time they interact with the College as High School juniors through the end of their time as undergraduates, the College does little to convey what Gen Ed is or what role it plays in undergraduate education at Harvard.
- Students and faculty are often unable to articulate the grounding principles of Gen Ed.
- Many courses that satisfy the Gen Ed requirement do not, either explicitly or implicitly, aim to satisfy the philosophical principles of the Program.
- Some faculty who teach courses that satisfy the Gen Ed requirement do not know that their courses satisfy the requirement.
- Students and faculty tend not to understand the distinction between a Gen Ed requirement and a distribution requirement. (See section 4 below for a discussion of this distinction.)
- Many Gen Ed courses are large. Median class size for "front of the book" [Gen Ed] courses is 50-99, as compared with 10-19 for non-Gen Ed courses.
- TFs and TAs find Gen Ed courses among the most difficult to teach.
  - The range of student expertise varies dramatically.
  - Students' commitment to the courses, as manifested in their attendance and effort, varies more dramatically than in other courses.
  - Section sizes tend to be larger than those in non-Gen Ed courses.
  - There is little Gen Ed-specific training for TFs, and what there is was reported to be ineffective.
  - TFs and TAs are sometimes not experts in the material.
- Students report not taking their Gen Ed courses as seriously as other courses.
- Students report feeling frustrated that other students do not take their Gen Ed courses seriously.
- Students wish more Gen Ed courses *were worth* taking seriously.
- Students choose Gen Ed courses differently than other courses: they tend to look for low workloads and courses that easily deliver high grades.
- More generally, students have come to expect high grades for little work in Gen Ed courses; this is a source of dissatisfaction from students and faculty alike.

- Students report being unable to discern why some courses count for Gen Ed and others do not.
- Students complain that there are too many Gen Ed requirements.
- Some students report frustration at not being able retroactively to have courses satisfy the Gen Ed requirement.
- Many faculty and students report discontent with the categories of Gen Ed.
- Some faculty report not being able to understand why their courses have not been approved for Gen Ed; more generally, they express frustration with the approval process.
- Some faculty, especially those in the Arts and Humanities, have an incentive to teach large Gen Ed courses in order to support their graduate students. Some faculty members report having responded to this incentive by lowering the expected workload for their Gen Ed courses and promising high grades to students.
- Other faculty members, especially those in the Natural Sciences, have an incentive not to teach Gen Ed courses. They report finding it difficult to recruit qualified teaching fellows, as graduate students are generally funded by grants to support research. In many cases, the level of compensation provided by the College for teaching is inadequate, so that graduate students with a full teaching load must also be partially supported by research funds. This produces a tension between teaching and research demands, and serves as an effective disincentive for advisors to allow their students to teach.
- The Standing Committee on General Education expresses frustration that there is no mechanism for reviewing courses once they are accepted into the Program. They note, however, that with 574 courses on the books, a review procedure would be lengthy and arduous.
- The Standing Committee also reports a lack of financial support, and more generally a lack of commitment to the Program on the part of the College and University.

#### 4. Preliminary Analysis

A fuller analysis that addresses these concerns in a comprehensive way will await our final report. A basic issue, however, is worth emphasizing here:

While many students and faculty highlight the success of specific Gen Ed courses, the Gen Ed Program at Harvard has not yet established a clear and consistent identity among our students and faculty. Moreover, despite its prominence in every student's curricular experience, it plays no defining role in the identity of Harvard College. Most students agree that a well-executed Gen Ed program would be valuable, but they are confused about the goals and purposes of the current program. Faculty, by contrast, are more divided about the value of Gen Ed, some preferring a straight distribution requirement instead. But these results are tenuous in both cases, since much of our discussion with students and faculty revealed confusion about what a general education requirement *aims to be* and how it differs from a distribution requirement.

The distinction is easy to state.<sup>[1]</sup> A distribution requirement, of the sort found at Cornell or Yale, requires that students take courses from a range of different departments. It is motivated by the thought that a good college education is one in which a student learns about a variety of disciplines. One way to develop such a requirement at Harvard would be to require that students take departmental courses in each division of the FAS [Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences] and the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. It would be typical, with a distribution requirement, for every course in the catalog to satisfy at least one distribution requirement.

By contrast, a general education requirement, of the sort found at Chicago or Columbia, requires that students take non-departmental courses organized around a basic philosophy regarding what kinds of issues, texts, or positions a generally educated person should engage with and to what end. Even if they teach texts or ideas that are presented in departmental courses, general education courses are taught without an explicit disciplinary perspective and with a different range of concerns.

Confusion about this distinction at Harvard stems from the fact that in practice our program is a chimera: it has the head of a Gen Ed requirement with the body of a distribution requirement. Gen Ed is the head of our requirement because the Program claims to be motivated by a General Education philosophy. But the distribution requirement is the body because many courses that satisfy the requirement fail to manifest or even identify that philosophy.

Part of this problem is structural. About half of the 574 courses that satisfy Gen Ed requirements are “front of the book” [Gen Ed] courses; the other half are “back of the book” [departmental] courses. Most of the “front of the book” courses were designed with the Gen Ed philosophy in mind. But students report that even these courses sometimes fail to situate themselves explicitly in the context of Gen Ed. Many departmental courses were not developed with the Gen Ed principles in mind, and almost all fail to present themselves as Gen Ed courses.

The committee agrees that a Gen Ed and a distribution requirement each represent a possible good in an undergraduate education. A full discussion of these goods is subtle and complicated. But the bare outlines are clear. A distribution requirement protects students from internal and external pressures to specialize too much and for the wrong reasons. It provides exposure to a variety of disciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking. The value of this broader exposure is considerable in the current context of increasing demand for specialization. A general education requirement also distributes courses. But more importantly it aims to identify the fundamental value of an education and to help students understand the trajectory of their education in that context.

Unfortunately, our chimera fails to achieve either aim. It does not encourage the distribution of courses across disciplines because many courses in the catalog do not satisfy its requirements. This has elicited complaints from students, who are frustrated

about the many courses that they would like to take to satisfy the requirement but cannot. But our program also often fails to satisfy the aim of a general education requirement, because there is no guarantee that students will take courses that meet the goals of Gen Ed. Most importantly, the Gen Ed Program at present fails to identify the fundamental value of a liberal arts education at Harvard. The legislation is clear about this value, but the current implementation muddies it beyond recognition.

## 5. Possible Ways Forward

So what is to be done? The Committee sees three plausible responses to the current situation. We invite your feedback and discussion about these options.

### 1. The Full Gen Ed

The first option is to clarify and reiterate the philosophical principles of Gen Ed, and to change the current program so that it manifests those principles. There are many ways to implement this option; a basic consideration would involve getting rid of “back of the book” courses. The number of requirements might be reduced, and students might be encouraged to complete these courses early in their studies. A program of this sort, albeit motivated by different philosophical principles, is in place at Chicago and Columbia.

### 2. The Full Distribution Requirement

The second option is to replace Gen Ed with a distribution requirement. There are a variety of ways to implement this option as well, but a basic consideration is that all “front of the book” courses would have to find a departmental home in order to remain in the catalog. As with the first option, the number of requirements might be reduced. A program of this sort is in place at Cornell and Yale.

### 3. The Mixed Model

The final option recognizes the distinctive value of both Gen Ed and distribution requirements. It proposes to separate and clarify each set of requirements and its underlying pedagogical purpose, perhaps reducing the number of courses in each. For instance, the mixed model might require a fixed number of departmental courses – one each distributed across the divisions, say – and a fixed number, perhaps the same number, of pure Gen Ed courses. The question of Gen Ed categories, their definition and their number, would require discussion. One possibility is to combine six of the categories in the natural way: AIU and CB, SLS and SPU, SW and USW. [\[2\]](#) (This way of combining the categories is already implemented for some students, including transfer and advanced placement students.) ER and EMR do not naturally combine. But arguably a separate math requirement, analogous to the Foreign Language requirement, is appropriate in any case. [\[3\]](#) A program of this mixed sort is in place at Stanford, among other institutions.

We hope that colleagues reading these documents will offer comments and suggestions about these options. We are eager to hear your arguments for choosing one or the other, as well as your views about strengths and weaknesses of the current program that we may not have considered.

Respectfully Submitted,

Members of the General Education Review Committee

Sean D. Kelly (Philosophy), Chair

Jennifer Hochschild (Government, and African and African American Studies)

Maya Jasanoff (History)

Stephanie Sandler (Slavic)

John H. Shaw (Earth and Planetary Sciences)

Robert Wood (Electrical Engineering)

Todd Zickler (Computer Science)

---

[1] See Louis Menand's helpful book *The Marketplace of Ideas*, for a more detailed discussion of this distinction and its history.

[2] For reference, the eight Gen Ed categories are abbreviated in the following way: Aesthetic and Interpretative Understanding (AIU), Culture and Belief (CB), Science of Living Systems (SLS), Science of the Physical Universe (SPU), Societies of the World (SW), United States in the World (USW), Ethical Reasoning (ER), and Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning (EMR).

[3] The final report may take this up in greater detail, and we invite comment about it here. Preliminary analysis shows that in recent years about 40% of incoming first-year students are not qualified to take Freshman Calculus. That means that they are not comfortable with mathematics beyond the level of Algebra II. A math requirement might be modeled on our current Foreign Language requirement: students with an

appropriate level of fluency would be able to test out. But no student would be permitted to graduate from the College without at least minimum competency in the area.