

What Misinformation?

As we all know, one of the easiest way to dismiss criticisms rhetorically is to label them as misinformation. Before the discussion about the Learning Education Program degenerates into more name calling, I think we should take a step back and calmly consider the context of this discussion: The General Education Task Force is proposing fundamental revisions to our General Education program. The key issues are (1) whether such far reaching changes are needed, (2) whether the LEP will significantly improve the GE of our students, and (3) how much the LEP will cost in terms of money, labor, and disruption. The burden of proof in all three issues falls on the proponents of the LEP, and in my view not only have they failed to make a convincing case for themselves, but they have hardly addressed these issues.

(1) Is our current program in such dire shape that it must be replaced rather than reformed? The GETF claims that our current GE program is broken beyond repair. However, they have **no evidence** to support this claim, in part because they have not taken the opportunity to assess the current program. Virtually everyone seems to agree that our current program isn't perfect and that it would be helpful to articulate the coherence of the various subjects that are taught in it, as NEASC has asked us to do, and discuss other reforms. And many have argued that other disciplines should be encouraged to submit course proposals. But these criticisms, which aren't unusual for large institutional programs, fall well short of GETF's dystopian claims about its quality. Improving our current program through incremental changes would be much less costly and disruptive, and the proposed changes would be more carefully scrutinized and consequently more likely to succeed.

(2) Do we have reason to believe that the LEP will be a significant improvement over our current GE program? The GETF asserts that the LEP is based on careful research by top experts about best practices in education. The problem with this claim is that there is **no objective evidence** that nondisciplinary GE programs like the LEP are pedagogically effective, despite the fact that their proponents are strong advocates of assessment. Not just a lack of evidence that they are any better than disciplinary programs, but that they work at all. This is a particularly damning flaw in the LEP. How do we know that this isn't just another pedagogical fad that will go out of style in a few years? The GETF had the opportunity to generate *some* evidence for the LEP by offering trial sections of particular courses and assessing them, but they decided not to do this. Combined with the absence of sample syllabi and the lack of any substantive discussion of how the LEP will be implemented, the program and its consequences are very much a black box. As a result, the LEP is a risky experiment that uses our students and faculty as guinea pigs. If we employ the same critical thinking skills and standards of evidence that the proponents of the LEP claim it will teach our students, the appropriate response to the promised benefits of this program is a very high degree of skepticism. Would your academic discipline take a leap of faith on a proposal that was this unproven and vague, especially one that is as far reaching and expensive (see 3) as the LEP?

(3) What is a reasonable estimate of the amount the LEP will cost, and how would SCSU pay for this program? The GETF has yet to provide any estimate of the LEP's costs. Critics of the LEP have tried to calculate the number of faculty that we will need to be hired in order to add 2 GE courses and lower class sizes to 20 in all 6 Tier I courses. This calculation

isn't easy because it is difficult to judge how many remedial courses will be required before students are able to pass proficiency exams in these 6 courses. But if the implementation of the FYE program is any indication, the costs will be enormous. I don't doubt that the Administration will make the LEP a priority, but this doesn't mean that there will be adequate funding for such a far reaching program, especially in the current financial climate: Despite the fact that FYE is a priority for them, the class sizes in Inquiry and LINKS have been increased. Another indication that SCSU's long term budget is stretched to its limits is that the other goals in the Strategic Plan were being neglected even prior to the economic crisis.

The GETF claims, in response, that hiring won't be necessary because there will be an influx of faculty from disciplines that don't currently teach GE. But if this is true then why was so much hiring necessary to staff the FYE courses? The fact of the matter is that other faculty aren't sitting idly by waiting for something to do, but are teaching courses for their majors. These sections will need to be staffed by new hires. Another solution that is being discussed is to eliminate much of the release time that faculty currently receive. I don't think that this is realistic either: The vast majority of this release time is for doing administrative work. Given the budget cuts in the administration, faculty will need to do even more of this work. And the LEP will also generate additional administrative work implementing and overseeing different parts of the program. Something will have to give in order to find funds for the LEP: Unless faculty are required to do this administrative work while teaching a full course load or major cuts are made in programs across campus, significant amounts of hiring will be necessary. So far, there hasn't been a candid discussion about how the LEP will be staffed and funded. Until the faculty are provided with the relevant details, we are being asked to sign a blank check.

There are a number of other issues that I'm unable to address here, and I'll be happy to discuss them at the debate me and Mike Shea are having **this Thursday, 4/23 at 12:30 in EN B 121 A&B**. I'm sure that I can speak for both of us by saying that we hope to have a civil discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the LEP, and that we don't want partisanship to alienate faculty who have yet to decide how they will vote.

Sincerely,

Rex Gilliland,
Philosophy