

February 11, 2009

Dear Members of the General Education Task Force:

After carefully considering the proposed Liberal Education Program, the undersigned members of the History department have identified several serious defects in the proposal that must be addressed before we can support this endeavor. In particular, we are concerned that the proposed program presumes to teach skills devoid of context, that it attempts to separate competencies from content and that it relegates students' first year of college to remediation. In addition, we have several practical concerns about the negative impact of this program on some groups of students.

The program is built on a paradigm that assumes that students become well-educated by learning a certain set of skills (or competencies in the language of the program) and that the content of the courses in which these skills are taught is of secondary importance for their education. While we understand and accept that students do not learn to write exclusively through English Composition courses and that Philosophy courses are not the sole avenue to critical thinking, we believe that the proposal does not recognize the value of academic disciplines. One of the strengths of the current General Education Program is that students are exposed to a variety of academic approaches to problems. Ideally, they will come to understand that anthropologists, sociologists, historians and others approach culture differently and appreciate the value of diverse approaches to knowledge. Ideally, they will recognize that chemists and biologists examine the natural world from different premises and understand the implications of these differences. The program being proposed, however, dilutes these disciplinary differences to a distressing degree.

In addition, most of the tier two "Explorations" are articulated in a manner that ignores the processes of historical development, the evolution of knowledge over time and the impact of the past on contemporary societies. Instead, the "Explorations" are focused too heavily on providing students a snapshot of the contemporary world. This deficiency is particularly glaring in the description of "Global Awareness," which ignores historical developments entirely. Even the description of "Time and Place" seeks a focus on "a specific time and/or place" and emphasizes "unique viewpoints" without any acknowledgment of the processes of historical development. The past is conceived as a static, separate world in this paradigm. This deficiency is particularly troubling when one notes that the only place where historical development is mentioned in the document is under the heading of the "American Experience." The underlying assumption of these "Explorations" is that only America has a dynamic, living history and that the rest of the world, past and present, exists in discrete, static snapshots. As historians, we find the articulation of the "Explorations" in tier two to be severely defective and even antiquated.

We are also troubled by certain aspects of tier one of the program. First, tier one essentially transforms students' first year into a year of remediation. While we recognize that many of our students are underprepared for college, we are philosophically and practically opposed to such an intense focus on remediation. This approach essentially creates a 13<sup>th</sup> grade and blurs the distinction between high school and college. In addition, those students who are well-prepared for college suffer because of their peers' weakness. We suggest that a better way to approach remediation would be through the admissions process and through coordination of remediation programs with community colleges.

Second, we are concerned that the tier one program delays students' introduction to academic disciplines. One of the virtues of the current General Education Program is that students take courses in a variety of disciplines during their first year. Ideally, undecided students will encounter several disciplines while completing their general education requirements and find their passion for a particular major during this process. The proposal undermines this type of exploration. Instead, students' freshman year is spent almost exclusively on Mathematics, English and Foreign Languages, in addition to FYE and whatever courses satisfy the technological fluency requirement. All other disciplines are relegated to vaguely described critical thinking and written communications courses. This creates a heavy burden on the three departments singled out for these duties while delaying students' exploration of other potential majors until later. In addition to damaging some departments' recruiting efforts, this delay hurts students ability to pursue a major and complete it in a timely manner.

Third, tier one also creates serious logistical difficulties for students in some programs, particularly those seeking teacher certification. Under the current General Education program, some of the state-mandated courses for certification also satisfy All University Requirements. Under the proposed program, that does not appear to be the case. Consequently, students seeking teacher certification may find it even more difficult to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Our inquiries about the impact of this proposal on these students have not been sufficiently answered. Instead, it appears that the committee has not considered these issues, or is not particularly concerned about them.

We are also concerned that students will find the proposed program confusing and that its success will require intensive advising to help students to understand what is required of them. Students find the existing General Education program confusing, despite its fairly simple structure. In addition, students are frequently poorly advised by faculty who ought to understand the current program. The new, more complicated program has the potential to leave students quite confused. We are skeptical about the potential for faculty advisement, already often deficient, to alleviate their confusion.

For these reasons, we cannot support the Liberal Education Program that has been proposed in its current form. While we support continuing inquiry into the efficacy of our General Education program, we suggest that a more careful examination of the

historical roots of the current program and its articulation of the core values of a liberal arts education may be more fruitful than its wholesale abandonment.

Sincerely,

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cc: UCF