

## **A “Linked” General Education: Presented by Dr. Troy Paddock and Dr. Byron Nakamura**

My proposal is to reform the current Gen Ed program by keeping the current AUR requirements and expanding Links program. For those who are not familiar with LINKS. It is a program that was established over 10 years ago by F.E. Lowe in philosophy. In their first semester of college, students take two or three class that meet the AUR and are linked in some thematic fashion. The class size is limited to 20 and all students have to take all of the classes in the Link.

Instead of offering LINKS only in the fall semester of the first year, Students would be required to take three different clusters of Links classes. For students who require remediation, one cluster of Links classes would be a first semester of INQ, ENG and MAT. Students would be required to take one linked set of classes in three of their first four semesters. Students would not be required to be in the same group of students each semester. Whether or not we wanted to create set clusters of “linked” classes to ensure that students have consistent choices is something that can be worked out.

One of the under appreciated values of the current system and its 100 level classes is that they serve two functions. A) Meeting AUR requirements, and B) Providing an introduction to the major. This allows undecided students to explore a variety of fields while also progressing towards there degree. I believe that this proposal meets the goals set out in the three tiers listed in III. of the Goals Statement: foundations, areas of knowledge and values. It is fair to assert that: the basic **competencies** are already covered by the various course offerings in the existing Gen Ed program. It is also reasonable to maintain that the **areas of knowledge** and **values** are also covered in some form or another in the current system. A “Linked” set of classes would allow students to focus on a particular theme from at least three disciplinary perspectives and offer the opportunity to examine values from multiple perspectives, thus staying true to the guiding principle stated in I of the Goals Statement. In this sense, I respectfully suggest that it has the potential to be more rigorous than the LEP proposal.

The advantages of the proposal are the following:

- 1.) As the Gen Ed task force acknowledges in several places in the LEP proposal, the LINKS program has been successful here at SCSU.
- 2.) It gives departments a great deal of flexibility to be innovative. Courses can be linked in a variety of fashions
- 3.) It is has a much higher possibility of providing real interdisciplinary interaction and cohesion.
- 4.) It retains the advantage of providing an introduction to the major while contributing to the progression toward graduation.
- 5.) This proposal integrates all three tiers and reinforces the principle that all three tiers (foundations, areas of knowledge and values) inform all courses.
- 6.) I think it would not be as costly to implement this program.
- 7.) Finally, the USP talks about our community of teacher/scholars. There is no recognition of the role that scholarship plays in out teaching in this program. While I concede that it is not imbedded in the current program either, many

faculty here use their scholarship to inform their teaching, including 100 level classes.

### **Why I cannot support the LEP proposal**

As best I can tell, the most compelling argument for changing the Gen Ed program is a supposed lack of coherence. It is not the fact that the Gen Ed program as it exists is not fulfilling its current objective. The increased retention that appears to be the result of the FYE program suggests that the current curriculum is not failing students.

From the May 2002 report:

According to the May 2002 report to UCF, NEASC asserts that our Gen Ed program is outdated:

NEASC ensures that our graduates demonstrate competence in “written and oral communication; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continued learning. Students must also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimension of humankind.”<sup>1 (4)</sup>

<http://www.southernct.edu/committees/ucf/GenEdFinalReportLancorFix9-04.pdf>

Most important, however, is the fact that our professional responsibility requires a review of general education—we need to provide our students with the best education possible, and that includes, perhaps primarily, their general education. As a faculty, we must ask ourselves, and answer honestly, the following questions:

- Are we satisfied with the level of skills and knowledge that our students bring to their upper-division courses?
- If we did not already have a general education program and were to design one, would it look like the one we now have?

The Gen Ed task force has clearly taken the second question to heart, but I fear that they have forgotten the first question. There is no way that I can see how LEP better prepares students for upper level history classes. In fact the only two departments that can clearly say that they would benefit from this program with regard to the first question are ENG and FLA, (maybe MAT)., although I am not certain that the current system does not serve them in the same way.

The problems listed in **PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT GOALS OF GENERAL EDUCATION** point more to organizational problems in administration than with the curriculum itself. (9-10).

The loose distribution system at Southern appears to be based more on the needs of individual departments than on an across-the-school philosophy or mission statement. Perhaps the biggest criticism that could be leveled at the current Southern general education requirements is that they are not truly tied to the mission statement of the institution (and, perhaps in reverse, that the mission statement needs tying to the general education program).

I think that this can be addressed within the current system.

Among the shortcomings of the loose distribution system are the following. The faculty has no control of the general education curriculum because, by its nature, the loose distribution system

neither encourages nor requires collaboration and oversight; therefore, the curriculum often lacks a coherent educational philosophy beyond that of exposing students to a wide variety of subject matter. Furthermore, the actual content of such programs reflects more a political compromise than a concern about what is best for the students. Additionally, teaching non-majors is frequently of little interest to faculty and often viewed as merely a "service." Consequently, students fail to see a purpose to a liberal education and so lack interest in their general education classes; this perception of pointlessness is reinforced by advisement that encourages students to get their general education courses "out of the way." (5)

This paragraph calls out to be unpacked:

- Statement about faculty control is false. UCF is an example of faculty control over the program and requirements.
- Loose distribution curriculum "often lacks" a coherent philosophy, but it is not intrinsic to the program.
- What is meant by political compromise? Is that necessarily a bad thing?
- How does any Gen Ed program avoid the "service" tag. There are some faculty who prefer to teach just majors, there are others who are educators in a broader sense and believe that teaching their field is an important component of any liberal education.
- It is not clear that LEP will evoke a different feeling from students about their Gen Ed program. "Out of the way" is mode of thinking that is indifferent to program distribution.

The inspiration for the LEP can be seen the 2002 report's discussion of trends in General Education:

**"Trends in Gen Ed.**

In terms of content, several salient themes appear. One is a more explicit focus on the intellectual skills such as critical thinking, reading, and communication. So, rather than placing the curricular focus entirely on discipline-based information, reforming institutions emphasize the use of disciplinary information to develop students' intellectual skills (e.g., problem solving). Moreover, this approach is coordinated from course to course in the general education program. Another theme is a pointed emphasis on understanding both the global community and the diversity of community in the United States. Another item of concern is providing a solid grounding in technology, its uses, and its social implications, expanding this category to embrace the notion of information literacy: sources, management, and uses of information. Furthermore, issues of morality, ethics, and civic responsibility are given renewed attention in all curricular areas. Finally, the teaching of science to non-majors has received considerable attention."

- What is the clear distinction between disciplined based information and the use of disciplinary information?
- There is no evidence that our current system cannot be modified to meet these trends in a fashion that is much less disruptive than installing the LEP

**The Goals of the LEP which articulated in the 3 tiers Competencies, Areas of Knowledge and Experience, and Values. Can be achieved in the current system.**

The chief argument in favor of the LEP appears to be its interdisciplinary appeal.

Objections to the LEP proposal:

There are two basic categories of objections that I do not want to touch upon in great detail because they have been made before. I will simply mention them briefly because they do play a role in my thinking.

- 1.) The implementation of the program, especially the testing to assure mastery of Tier 1 skills is problematic.
- 2.) The costs of this program is yet to be determined. During a time of financial crisis, do we want to undertake this program. If we do, then what are we giving up?

My major objections to this proposal have to do with the conceptualization of the program in terms of the values it expresses and how it executes said values.

The proposal asserts that the current model developed in the 1970s does not meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student.<sup>1</sup> However, there is no clear exposition of why this current model is inadequate. It is simply asserted and taken as a given.

The Characteristics of LEP as listed on page 6 are not as straight forward as it is asserted: **Concretely articulated goals: The goals are on paper, but that does not mean that they are clear or concrete. A stroll through the appendix defining each competency, area of knowledge and experience, or value reveals a number of ideas that are not concrete.**

- **Curricular coherence** throughout (as in LINKS and the Honors College) The curricular coherence is asserted, it is not demonstrated in any convincing fashion.
- **Assessment and review** to determine its success How? What happens when students fail?

#### **Tier 1:**

This construction looks primarily like a remediation year. Students options are limited, especially if they have remediation needs to address. This has the potential to feel like the 13<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>2</sup> Southern's Liberal Education Program progresses through three tiers, each focusing primarily on **one** of the three goal groups, while addressing the other two groups as well. In the first tier, small classes that include *Value Discussions* and *Areas of Knowledge and Experience* help students develop foundational *Competencies* essential to academic discourse (Tier 1).(Page 7) What is the academic discourse that is referred to here. With the exception of a few programs (e.g. Women's Studies and Liberals Studies), it is a discourse that is defined by departments. The foundations for the competencies is also departmentally based as witnessed by the program itself:

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<sup>1</sup> The current All-University Requirement (AUR) arrangement, a general education model developed in the early 1970s, addressed students' needs at that time. While steeped in rich traditions that have nurtured tens of thousands of students over two generations, this AUR paradigm no longer meets the educational needs of current Southern students. With almost three fourths of high school graduates entering higher education, and with enormous changes continuing in technology and information access, Southern must update its general education approach to address this new twenty-first-century demographic. (page 5)

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“To ensure uniformity and rigor, in this tier Written Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, and Multilingual Communication will be taught by the English, Mathematics, and Foreign Language departments respectively” This assertion, because it cannot be demonstrated, is a tacit recognition of the importance of departments. Or it assumes a some departments are more equal than others position.

**“Tier 2: Explorations** - Tier 2 courses serve as foundations of knowledge in areas that prepare students for self-realization, life-long learning, and citizenry in the twenty-first century.

What is the academic definition of an “area.”?

“Rather than acting as introductions to specific academic majors, they incorporate knowledge from several disciplines while being rooted in the discipline of the department offering them. They are broad enough to serve as a foundation to an area of knowledge, and yet provide sufficient depth to allow for critical thinking and the development of insight. This approach promotes coherence of knowledge from the students’ point of view and offers faculty new opportunities for creative interaction. In the long term, faculty teaching these courses may well attempt to coordinate or otherwise link their courses with other Tier 2 courses, or even propose team-taught courses.”

What is the evidence of depth or coherence of knowledge? If anything, this model suggests a more superficial approach because in order to teach a class that takes an approach from several disciplines it requires informing students of a variety of disciplinary approaches before(!) one can even approach the topic at hand. Where does the student get the background to understand the significance of various disciplinary approaches? Ideally, that is where the introductory courses for various disciplines comes in.. Here, the reference to link is appropriate. It is a pedagogically sounder approach to link two or three disciplines thematically rather than having a single faculty member teach the course. It is not clear to me the LEP simply does not replace one loose distribution system for another.

There is also a “presentist” mindset in this proposal that disturbs the historian in me.

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**Tier 3: Connections** - The Capstone Experience integrates *Competencies, Areas of Knowledge,* and *Discussions of Values.* It addresses both the role of values in decision-making and any relationships among the values. **Particular focus is on contemporary issues** and how values inform one’s perspective on these issues. The subject area is drawn from the *Areas of Knowledge and Experience* that the program has plumbed since Tier 1.

Requirements of all Tier 2 courses

• provide insight to issues of the 21st century and/or important issues in students’ lives, (page 9)

The only mention of history at all

- American experience!
- Social Structure, Conflict and Consensus

Not at all

- Global awareness
- Cultural expression
- Natural World
- Time and Place