

Concerns about the General Education Proposal

Rex Gilliland, Philosophy

I'm writing this letter to share my concerns about the General Education Task Force proposal. In my 2 ½ years on the Task Force, I was often a dissenting voice, though I attempted to play a constructive role and make positive contributions to the proposal. In my view, the GETF proposal deserves a fair and open-minded hearing due to the hard work the committee members put into it and the fact that they operated in good faith. That being said, the proposal would radically change the nature of general education at SCSU, which encompasses almost half of the courses we teach and is a major component of our mission. The vote on this proposal will be a monumental decision, for many of us the most important policy decision we will make in our academic careers.

While I think there are some promising innovations in the proposal, I have serious reservations about it. The purpose of this letter is to encourage other faculty to think carefully about its potential consequences and make an informed decision when they vote. I think all faculty share the same basic goals for GE, though we may disagree about how these goals are best achieved. By voicing these concerns, I'm not questioning the commitment of GETF members to quality GE, but instead whether the proposal will have its intended effect.

My primary concerns pertain to the program structure in the blueprint endorsed by the faculty, especially the elimination of disciplinary categories (e.g., its effect on quality control and on disciplines that are perceived by students as challenging), as well as the number of goals that need to be satisfied and the staggering complexity that results from this.

The Elimination of Disciplinary Categories

The GETF members who wrote the blueprint decided to eliminate disciplinary designations from the proposal in order to avoid turf battles over courses and to promote multidisciplinary approaches to teaching. In the GETF proposal, many of the courses combine elements from a variety of disciplines. The committee was guided by the principle that, with few exceptions, any instructor should be able to teach any course, no matter the discipline or background of the instructor, and that the key elements of the goals should be written with this inclusiveness in mind. However, the GETF has recently backtracked on this principle, assigning particular competency courses to English, Mathematics, and Foreign Languages. While this may be necessary to ensure quality (I've argued that both Natural World courses should be assigned exclusively to Natural Science faculty), it suggests that eliminating disciplinary designations isn't such a good idea after all.

- If GE instructors are required to teach a significant amount of material outside their areas of expertise, how likely is it that this material will be taught well? Admittedly, some courses in the current GE program could be better, but disciplinary standards do provide a significant degree of quality control.
- If the goals for each course are defined so inclusively and the instructors come from a variety of different disciplines, how do we insure that a given course has a consistent identity, and how do we judge the quality of individual instructors?
- If there aren't clear mechanisms in place for dealing with quality control and course identity, can we rely on oversight committees (e.g., UWIC, GETF) or instructors at annual 2 hours meetings to perform the time consuming and politically charged task of setting and enforcing standards? And will we have to give these bodies a discomfiting level of discretion?
- GETF members have cited examples of other universities implementing nondisciplinary GE programs as precedents, but have been *unable to provide any data* indicating how well students are doing in these programs. If there isn't any evidence that this experimental model works and works better than a disciplinary model, isn't this proposal a huge gamble, and doesn't it use students and faculty as guinea pigs?
- Is this truly a *general* education program if students can cluster their GE courses in the disciplines that are closest to their major, and avoid taking courses in disciplines that they perceive as challenging or esoteric?

- Since departments will face the prospect of losing or gaining faculty lines depending on how many GE students they attract, won't this put disciplines perceived as challenging or esoteric at an unfair disadvantage? Won't it also generate a race to the bottom, with departments watering down the rigor of their courses in order to attract more students?
- Will the elimination of disciplinary categories really reduce the number of turf battles over courses, or will it merely postpone them until the implementation of the program and the scheduling of courses? And doesn't it give the administration much more control over the number of GE sections most departments offer, and thus their faculty lines?

The Complexity of the Proposed Program

The GETF proposal contains 24 goal, and each of them contains multiple key elements. Each of the 16 courses has to cover multiple goals (including all of their key elements) – usually at least 4 and in some cases many more – given the recurrence of goals throughout different stages in the program. There are some other universities currently implementing nondisciplinary GE programs, but *all of them, to my knowledge, have simpler goals and a much smaller number of them.*

- The proposal certainly has ambitious goals, but how realistic are they?
- Given the staggering number of goals and elements, will students and faculty be confused about the purpose of the courses and the overall program?
- With so many required topics to cover in a course, will this lead to superficial courses rather than the focused depth that the proposal claims to provide?
- If their hands are tied by numerous required topics, will instructors lose interest in teaching these courses, or ignore many of the requirements if they do teach them?

How Risky is the Proposal?

As my comments indicate, the GETF proposal is a radical departure from our current program, and, given its enormous complexity, there is *no precedent* at other universities. Every experiment of this sort has risks, and we should consider the risks before voting on it. How likely is this program to succeed? How successful is it likely to be? If it fails, what will be the consequences in terms of disrupting our students' education, wasting energy and financial resources, and making faculty skeptical about GE reform?

NEASC Requirements and Alternative Models

It's been said that we have no choice but to approve this proposal given the expectations of NEASC, our accreditation agency. We shouldn't let external pressures force us into a decision we aren't happy with. However, the NEASC expectations are rather minimal: They want us to add assessment and elucidate the purpose of each of the GE courses. *The GETF proposal goes well beyond these expectations*, which could in my view be satisfied quickly and with little controversy by implementing the assessment component of the GETF proposal and writing a document for students and faculty that better explains the contribution that each course is supposed to make in the current GE program. This would take less time than implementing the GETF proposal, and NEASC has been patient in the past as long as we have shown progress.

That being said, the choice we are making isn't merely between the current program and the GETF proposal, which form two extremes. We should ask not only whether the proposal is significantly better than the current program, but whether it is better than *more moderate alternatives*. In my view, there are a number of innovations in the GETF proposal that would improve our current program, such as *some* emphasis on skill development (though I think that, like No Child Left Behind, there is too much emphasis on this in the proposal), the capstone course, and the form of assessment in the proposal (which seems reasonable and nonintrusive).

While one alternative would be a less complex, nondisciplinary model, this wouldn't address many of the concerns raised above. In my view, the most promising alternative would be one that retains disciplinary categories but integrates the components from the proposal mentioned above. It would also allow us to add elements that didn't make it into the proposal, such as sequencing GE courses over 4 years, requiring that junior and senior year GE courses be taught at a more advanced level, as well as trying out new courses out on a trial basis, so that their value and feasibility is clearly demonstrated before they are adopted.