

TO: General Education Committee
FROM: Members of the Foreign Language Department
RE: Gen Ed Proposal
DATE: 2/22/08

Although Gen Ed Committee chair, Jim Tait, was unfortunately unable to attend his scheduled meeting with the Foreign Language Dept. on February 8, 2008, we proceeded to review and discuss the Liberal Education Program draft document. We acknowledge the long standing work of the Gen Ed Committee and appreciate the time and thought that has been put into this document at this point. We particularly value that the newly proposed Liberal Education Program has been designed in three tiers, thus allowing students to grow in their academic exploration of the identified areas of knowledge.

The portion of the program with which we have serious concerns is Tier 1, “Competencies in Context.” According to the current plan, isolated, single competencies (embedded in contexts) are taught as individual courses. Only in Tier 2, after completing competency courses, are students then allowed to “explore significant topics and discuss values required for educated global citizenship” (p. 2 of the document). We are strongly opposed to this design for the following reasons:

1. To address isolated competencies before valued academic content is a seriously outdated curriculum concept.
2. The concept is outdated because the research has convincingly shown that to require skills *before* addressing the valued content does not work, but rather creates a two-track educational system.
3. A first year curriculum built on isolated competency courses is undesirable to academically qualified freshman candidates and will seriously hamper our goal of becoming a “university of choice”.
4. The idea of teaching competencies in isolation, one competency per course, patronizes faculty and students. One does not learn how to think critically at 2:00 and then learn how to express those critical thoughts in writing at 3:45; nor does one teach that way. In a natural learning setting, such competencies are intertwined.
5. The current Tier 1 makes no use of the defined areas of knowledge; therefore, only Tiers 2 and 3 are fully integrated.

As explained in the document’s first paragraph, the UCF subcommittee charged the General Education Committee with proposing “a coherent general education program based on current thinking and practices.” We argue that with the Tier 1 design as is, the program is neither coherent, nor is it based on current thinking and practices.

We understand that the Gen Ed Committee has already provided responses to some of the above expressed concerns. Following are our understanding of these responses and our rebuttals to those responses.

1. Response: “A large number of our freshmen have sufficiently weak skills that we must address them before we can address the areas of knowledge.” or “We cannot teach substantial courses in areas of knowledge while students have such weak skills; they must first develop those skills.”

Our rebuttal: This was the thinking that created the “skills before substantive content” approach to learning and teaching. The result, according to the K-12 studies, is a two-track educational system. Students forced to study isolated skill development, no matter how contextually those skills are introduced, know that they are not studying the interesting, valued material. They persist to fall behind or to linger at the skills-development level, while students studying the valued content achieve and grow academically. Furthermore, students with low skills who are challenged by the interesting, valued content while simultaneously taught the skills needed to engage in the content have been able to successfully achieve academically.

Additionally, for a teacher to say that we cannot teach complicated, interesting content until certain skill levels are achieved, suggests that the teacher does not know HOW to teach difficult content to those lacking the desired skills--naturally so. Content teachers and professors have not been trained in the area of differential instruction. There is, as of yet, no reason for them to be aware of the new educational movement in which content and skills are taught simultaneously. Teachers of content are learning that they no longer have the luxury of teaching only their course content. Rather, successful teachers are learning that their courses must contain content objects and skill objectives.

The substantive U.S. Dept. of Education grant awarded our department colleague, Dr. Verplaetse, addresses this very issue. The purpose of the grant is to train high school and middle school teachers who say “We cannot teach math/physics/history to students who do not yet speak sufficient English.” Verplaetse’s task is to teach them how to develop their course content while simultaneously developing the students’ reading, writing, and speaking skills.

This movement of teaching skills during and through more valued, academic content has surfaced in other disciplines also. Faculty involved in the writing across the curriculum movement have long recognized that teachers can teach academic content while also addressing the important skill of writing. Similarly, foreign language teachers have experienced an historical progression in their teaching methodologies from teaching grammar and skills in isolation to teaching grammar imbedded in topics of interest to the most current method of providing content-based language instruction.

This same instructional trend could translate to teaching physics while also teaching such competencies as quantitative reasoning and technological fluency. Equally so, it could translate to teaching the content of the American Civil War while also teaching the competencies of critical thinking and written expression. In fact, given what is known in the field of education about the learning of basic competencies, it is precisely through the interesting, challenging, valued content, that students are motivated to learn the competencies necessary to discover and express their new ideas regarding the challenging content.

2. Response: “Each of the competencies is so important that they must be taught in individual courses, to provide the necessary instructional time and attention.”

Our rebuttal: Competencies are learned from repeated, spiraled experiences with that competency, not from a singular dedicated course. It is far more effective for the learner to address each competency in a wide array of learning events and environments while focusing on varied contents. This repeated revisiting of particular skills in the face of varied academic experiences is what cements those skills for a learner.

3. Response: “We cannot assume that faculty from any department can teach any of the competencies. We must have the experts teach the competencies to ensure academic rigor.”

Our rebuttal: We agree with the first sentence. We disagree with the second. Faculty already know how to *use* each of the competencies or they would not have terminal degrees. But in

truth, they may well not have thought about how to teach those competencies. And, indeed, it may take some assistance on the parts of experts and the Faculty Development Office to help faculty learn how to teach content *and* competencies simultaneously.

We do not agree that experts are needed to teach the skills, however. To support this stand let us look at one example: critical thinking. The Philosophy department may claim expertise to this competency. But it is not fair to suggest that other faculty do not know how to think critically, or that they do not know how to help their students think critically. However, if we are to take the meaning of “critical thinking” and apply a formal logic definition to this term, then, indeed, it would take the expert to teach this concept. So, which competency are we talking about? If we turn to the discipline’s definition, then we are once again, returning to department courses, rather than the originally designed concept of non-department-specific general competencies as goals for our students. We believe the intent which was voted on and ratified by the faculty in 2005 was for the more general concept of competencies, not discipline-specific skill sets. In that case, any faculty member with a graduate degree should possess those competencies, and with appropriate training, would be able to learn how to help students develop those competencies within the context of his/her course content.

Despite our strong opposition to Tier 1, we believe there is a reachable solution. We would recommend that Tier 1 courses be focused around the same areas of knowledge as Tiers 2 and 3, thus ensuring a fully integrated three year general education program. Furthermore, we would suggest that any given course address one area of knowledge, while also explicitly addressing one or more competencies. So, for example, a faculty member could create a course on logic (mind and body area of knowledge) which also addresses critical thinking and written expression. Another could create a course on cultural expression addressing the competencies of critical thinking, written expression and oral expression. And if we wanted to make the program less fragmented and more cohesive, we could design course packages: for example, a series of three courses all addressing one area of knowledge, yet each addressing separate topics around that area of knowledge, and each explicitly addressing particular competencies.

We applaud the brave notion of requiring students to provide evidence that they have achieved certain competency levels, before moving to the second tier. We confidently advise, however, that the current design to accomplish this task is outdated, has a history of failure, and will be unattractive to more qualified incoming freshman candidates. We urge the Gen Ed committee to revise Tier 1, to integrate the areas of knowledge into the first year, and to incorporate the competencies into courses addressing those areas of knowledge.

Sincerely,

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CC: Dean Fredeen, Provost Williams, Faculty Senate President B. Johnson, UCF President D. Weiss