

General Education Task Force Activities for the 2016-2017 Academic Year

Purpose

This document summarizes the activities of the General Education Task Force during the 2016-17 academic year. It does not include the results of the various surveys, forums, and focus groups the Task Force conducted (referred to below), which are available in separate documents.

Review of Previous Activities

The General Education Task Force was appointed to review our current General Education program and formulate specific proposals for revisions to it. Our current General Education program was implemented in 2005 and so is in need of updating and review. Also, assessment was not built into the current program and has been piecemeal, so information on how well it is working is incomplete. In the Task Force's original timeline and charge, its work was to begin in the Spring 2016 term and is scheduled for completion by the end of the Spring 2018 term. In the Spring 2016 term, the Task Force engaged with faculty to collect information about their views on General Education, how well it is working, and what is needed to improve and update it. To this end, in the latter half of that term, the Task Force conducted discussion groups in every unit (at the school or college level), at one of their regularly scheduled monthly meetings, and also designed and implemented an online faculty survey, which was opened at the end of the Spring 2016 semester to all faculty. The online survey asked faculty to rank their seven top goals for General-Education-relevant skills and areas of knowledge, and also similarly to rank the importance of various high-impact practices. In addition to this quantitative survey, there were also several open-ended qualitative questions, to which faculty could respond to any degree they saw fit.

Activities during the Fall 2016 Term

In August 2016, as fall classes approached, the Task Force looked over the responses to the online survey. Although about 100 faculty responded, and wrote what was, collectively, a copious set of qualitative comments, some units (such as the Arts and Education) were underrepresented, given the relative size of their faculty. Accordingly, we decided to extend the deadline for responding to the survey, and to encourage faculty who had not yet responded to do so. Overall, we ended up with 114 respondents, which, though it did not perfectly match the distribution of faculty across the units, did so acceptably well in our estimation. We then looked at the responses with three aims. First, we formulated summaries of the quantitative rankings, which could be presented in easily ascertainable graphical form, and took into account both how highly each option was ranked among those who ranked it, but also how many people chose to rank that item in their top seven. Summary graphs were produced, and slated for presentation to the Academic Senate. Also, demographic information about survey respondents was included. Second, we asked one Task Force member in the social sciences to do an analysis of the qualitative responses (22 pages total from the online survey, along with 15 pages of notes from the forums in the six academic units), looking for common themes that were present. We then asked each Task Force member to look over the qualitative responses, to verify the analysis was appropriate, and also to review the notes from the faculty forums in their units, to identify which themes were most common in their units. Thus, our aim was to get a good overall picture from the qualitative comments of faculty concerns. Since we only had 5-10 minutes to present the summary data at the September Senate meeting, we summarized this set of emphases in a phrase chart where themes deemed as more important by faculty were assigned larger fonts, so that visually the emphases faculty gave were readily grasped. These graphs and charts were presented publicly and given to the Senate Executive Committee for distribution, and also to anyone who requested them. The Task Force also decided to later produce a more detailed report of the various faculty surveys and forum discussions, for eventual distribution to all faculty, at some point during the 2016-17 academic year.

In the meantime, the Task Force decided to continue its information-gathering work, by concentrating on students, and their views on our General Education program. We discussed possibilities such as an online survey, public forums, and several others. In the end, we decided it would be most fruitful to concentrate on

discussion in classes consisting mostly of juniors and seniors. The idea was to focus on students who had some significant amount of experience with General Education, and had concrete ideas of how it worked and fit into their educational experience over time. We also decided to look at other data that was already available (such as NSSE and alumni surveys that had been conducted). We discussed whether to design and conduct our own alumni survey, but decided in the end to concentrate (at least initially) on focus groups with our current upperclassmen. We then designed a framework for the student focus groups, which included some background on General Education and a summary of our current General Education program, and six open-ended questions to guide the discussion. Each focus group would be facilitated by one Task Force member while one or more other members took notes. The aim was to have a 20-30 minute discussion in each class. We then had to recruit various faculty members to let us conduct these focus group discussions in their classes. Happily, we had volunteers from faculty in all units, and in addition, conducted a discussion in a regular Student Government Association (SGA) meeting, after the SGA president asked the student representatives if they were willing to do this (which they were). These focus groups were conducted in late October through the end of November. Overall, we had 17 discussions, with classes varying in size, but averaging around 15-20. In larger classes (more than 30), we split the students into two groups when possible, with the aim of maintaining discussion groups of around 15. Every Task Force member helped out in at least several of these student focus groups. As the semester ended, we set for the beginning of the next term the task of analyzing this new set of qualitative data (35 pages total when combined) and writing a summary report. We also decided that at some point we should also canvas the Professional Advisors Council (PAC), to get their input.

Activities during the Spring 2017 Term

As the Spring term began, we set out to analyze the student data we'd gathered the previous term. First, each person on the Task Force was to finalize and distribute their notes from the focus groups they'd attended, if they had not already done so. As with the qualitative data from the faculty forums, the social scientist on our Task Force volunteered to do a qualitative analysis of the notes. Then, as a group, we looked over this and settled on the common themes that had emerged in the discussions with students. Finally, the Task Force chair wrote up the results of our group analysis into a 5-page report. An announcement that the report was available was made in a Senate meeting, and a presentation of the results was given at a Liberal Arts and Sciences meeting, and discussed with that unit's faculty. Meanwhile, three Task Force members attended the AAC&U's annual General Education conference, held this year in Phoenix. This was the same conference that three Task Force members attended last year and found to be highly informative and valuable to our work; one person on the Task Force who attended last year attended again; the other two attendees were new to the AAC&U's yearly conference. The attendees reported to the Task Force what they had learned, and the Task Force discussed which things that the attendees found attractive might work for our campus. Additionally, the Task Force agreed to apply to send a team to the AAC&U's conference on General Education and Assessment at Loyola University in Chicago, which, if our application was successful, would occur in late May. The Task Force chair wrote up a proposal along with Associate Vice Chancellor Chen, and this was submitted; the application was successful, and the Task Force was canvassed for volunteers to attend as part of the team. The project was to develop an action plan for assessing our General Education program. At the same time, the Task Force began to discuss some specific ideas for revising General Education in response to all the concerns and suggestions we had received from faculty and students, and what we'd learned at national conferences and in our own investigations into practices at other universities. We decided that we would aim at developing three specific plans, one "conservative" (a revision of our current General Education program, keeping its basic structure), and two more substantial ones. A trial "conservative" version was produced and discussed by the committee. The aim was to develop the two more substantial revisions late in the term, and, after that, to begin a series of public discussions with faculty, to get their feedback, then to revise these, in a kind of feedback loop so that the plans to be voted on eventually would've been seen and discussed by many people well before any final vote. To complete this broader plan, and to address the incomplete nature of our current assessment of General Education, it was agreed that we should fully define all the learning outcomes for our current General Education program, and for some additional elements that faculty and students had suggested, as well as others not in our current program but listed in the LEAP list of

essential learning outcomes (which the Task Force agreed to use as the primary organizing motif for all proposals we would develop, based both on the intrinsic merits of the LEAP guidelines, and the fact that Indiana has committed itself to being a "LEAP state.") To accomplish this, we broke up into three sub-groups, each of which was responsible for some set of learning outcomes and goals. Each sub-group was tasked with refining these; in some cases, this required little work, since the outcomes were well-defined. However, there were many cases where the learning outcomes had been only vaguely defined. We had hoped to complete both this task and the formulation of drafts of the three possible new General Education structures; however, developing our General Education learning outcomes in detail proved to be a time-consuming task, and we ended the term with just that—a complete and detailed draft of learning outcomes for every part of our current General Education curriculum and possible additions—with a decision to continue our work in the fall term. (One thing we still need to do is to organize the learning outcomes into a hierarchical structure that at the top level is easily grasped and clearly coherent and attractive.) The idea behind this, which we'd gleaned from our readings and the various conferences we'd attended, was to concentrate first on what we want students to know and be able to do (the outcomes), i.e., the "big picture," and after this, to design specific curricular elements around this. We also wanted to include various "high-impact" elements we'd discussed this year and agreed to integrate into any proposals (e.g., first-year experiences, community engagement, etc.). Appropriately, this year, and especially in the spring term, we increased our links with other initiatives on campus, with some Task Force members attending a Carnegie Project meeting (on community engagement), and that project promising to send to us their recommendations for integrating community engagement into General Education, after they completed those recommendations during the summer. Finally, in late May, the team we'd assembled for the Loyola conference on General Education and Assessment attended that conference and developed a draft action plan for assessment of General Education. This action plan will be among the first items slated for discussion as the new academic year begins.

General Education Task Force Members 2016-17

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Kristyn Quimby (Health Sciences)
Cathy Borshuk (Liberal Arts and Sciences, Psychology)
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