

University General Education Committee

Meeting minutes, January 27, 2023, in James Union Building, Room 100 and via Zoom

Voting Members Present: Keith Gamble (chair), Leon Alligood, Janet Colson, Warner Cribb, Rebecca Fischer, Mark Frame, Virginia Hemby-Grubb (via Zoom), Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, Angela Hooser, Rachel Kirk (via Zoom), Sungyoon Lee, Ann McCullough, Scott McDaniel, Keely O'Brien, Amy Sayward, Cheyenne Sweeley

Voting Members Absent: Nita Brooks, Sydney Fischer, Terry Goodin, Yi Gu

Ex-Officio: Christopher Brewer, Jeff Gibson, Susan Myers-Shirk, Stephen Severn

Others present: Christabel Devadoss (via Zoom), Tammy Melton, Betsy Dalton, Christina Cobb, Thomas Hudson, Deb Perry, Rebecca Calahan, James Hart, Matthew Duncan, Chris Stephens, Mary Beth Asbury, Stuart Fowler

Introductory matters

Keith Gamble, chair of the University General Education Committee (UGEC), opened the meeting at 12:30 p.m. by asking if there were any edits needed to the minutes from the 18 November 2022 meeting. There being no edits suggested, they were considered approved. He then asked Susan Myers-Shirk, General Education Director, to provide the committee with an update on her work with the departmental liaisons and on the assessment plan.

Myers-Shirk explained that there was a kick-off meeting the previous week with the departmental liaisons. They are preparing to meet in their faculty learning communities (FLCs) and work on their course proposals, with the goal of having proposals in Curriculog for all of the legacy courses by the end of April 2023. The assessment plan is in progress, integrating information and conversations from the SACSCOC conference. She hoped that the February meeting of the UGEC might have sufficient time to review and finalize that plan.

Discussion of procedures for reviewing and voting on course proposals

Gamble pointed out that the committee was now at a momentous point now that there were courses to potentially be added to the model approved last academic year and conforming to the new student learning outcomes approved the year before that. After reminding the committee of its charge, he explained that the committee would likely spend much of the remaining academic year reviewing proposals. In terms of procedure, he explained that there were departmental representatives present for each of the course proposals on the agenda. They could field questions from the committee to start discussion of each of the proposals. Then the committee would focus on the central question—does this course allow General Education students to meet the outcomes on the rubric—along with the questions of whether the course meets the SACSCOC definition of a General Education course and whether the course falls within the category definition parameters. Gamble then asked for any questions or comments on the process before beginning.

Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand asked if the committee would vote on each proposal singly. Gamble affirmed that, explaining that a vote would follow discussion of each proposal. A committee member could move to table a proposal if more information was needed before UGEC could make a decision. If not tabled, committee members could vote to approve the proposal, to approve with stated conditions, or to reject the proposal (with a clear statement about what changes would be needed for the proposal to be approved). Mark Frame asked if he had violated committee policy but posting his comments on Curriculog. Gamble said that there was no policy; however, he encouraged members not to post in Curriculog, because it triggers multiple emails across the system. That is why materials are posted in Teams, a space for discussion outside of Curriculog. He also let UGEC members know that there was no point in posting a “vote,” as Myers-Shirk will post the committee’s vote in Curriculog, which is the only official record of the committee’s will.

Frame asked if UGEC intended to review all legacy courses before reviewing proposals for new courses. Myers-Shirk stated that the legacy courses have been her priority, but new courses are also being developed and will be on the committee’s agenda. Gamble expanded that while legacy courses were “fast-tracked,” which likely raised the expectation that they would arrive before the committee sooner, that some departments have moved quickly to develop new courses or adapt existing courses to fit the new General Education curriculum. There being no further questions or concerns raised, Gamble moved to the first course proposal listed on the UGEC agenda.

Frame stated that he had big, broad questions for all of the proposals on the UGEC agenda for the day. He explained that he was concerned that there were was a gap between the rubrics that have been created to assess student learning of the new General Education outcomes—which will be utilized by the Assessment Team in the True Blue Center--and all of the course proposals. While he had no doubt that the faculty who created the proposals and the assessable assignments could clearly see the connection between the assignment and the Gen Ed outcome rubrics, he worried about how the assessment team members, who lacked specific expertise in each discipline, would do so. He wanted to see a much more detailed explanation of these connections—specifically, what would a “benchmark” student assignment of this type look like? He acknowledged that the committee had not requested this level of detail in its initial design of the proposal submission form, but he worried that without this that assessment of the program might be much more difficult. Gamble stated that he understood Frame’s point but sees UGEC’s charge a bit differently. Rather than looking in the proposals for how an expert might score student work, Gamble was looking to see if there was sufficient alignment evident that he could imagine members of the assessment committees being able to align the two. From that frame of reference, it would be a problem if UGEC members did not see any alignment between the assignment and the rubric. However, Gamble did not think that the departmental proposal should instruct the assessment team on how to assess the assignment.

Warner Cribb then asked on what basis members of the committee should be judging courses. He thought the proposals were solid, but he was not an expert in these fields. He thought it was difficult to examine the courses and know what students would be doing and how the True Blue Center could assess them. Frame followed up by stating that he believed that UGEC had the job of governing how assessment could be done until such a time as the True Blue Center started assessing the program. Frame was especially concerned about “inherent variability” in the assessment of General Education outcomes not only between courses striving toward the same outcome but between instructors of the same course, especially when there was not a standard assignment. He also worried about the

possibility of assessing the overall impact of General Education, given the random sample of students and assignments on one hand and sparse data available, for example, from the California Test of Critical Thinking at the end of a student's time at MTSU. He was concerned that approving courses without assessment criteria would mean that the Center and new General Education program would be starting out from a deficit.

Gray-Hildenbrand stated that this thread of conversation had characterized the past two and a half years and asked what specific information was needed in the proposals. Frame, pointing to Gray-Hildenbrand's proposal, praised the consistency in assignments across the sections of RS 1000, but he wanted the faculty members to go into greater detail in how this assignment should be assessed according to the outcome rubric. He explained the Introduction to Psychology course proposal was currently hung up on how to norm the assignment to the rubric. Gamble stated that he saw that norming process as the work of the assessment team rather than the department. Cribb stated that he agreed with that and was happy not to add to faculty workload. However, he was concerned that UGEC was headed toward having too many General Education courses if the committee could not better evaluate how the assignments would be assessed in relation to the rubrics. Gamble stated that he did not believe that UGEC was setting assessment aside but rather that it would decide if the assignment can be assessed using the rubric.

Frame stated that he was concerned about the possibility of a large number of proposals for new General Education courses, primarily due to the limitations placed on student exploration by the current financial aid regulations. This makes General Education one of the few ways that departments can introduce students to their course offerings; Cribb agreed.

Discussion of GEOG 2000 – Introduction to Regional Geography

Christabel Devadoss identified herself as the departmental representative present to discuss the GEOG 2000 proposal but asked whether it was a conflict of interest for her to speak on behalf of her department since she was also a member of the Implementation Team. Gamble clarified that there was no conflict of interest and thanked her for being present to answer committee members' questions.

Gamble stated that the central question was whether this course allows students to meet the outcomes as described. GEOG 2000 is using the Critical Thinking outcomes. He stated that he looked at the rubric and the assignment, imagined being on the assessment team, and asked, could I connect the work to the rubric? He saw alignment between the two.

Sayward said that she was confused because the assessments listed in Curriculog did not include the assessable assignment, but it should. She also stated that she would have liked to see an integration of the True Blue outcomes and the course outcomes in the sample syllabus that was attached. Devadoss asked whether all of the True Blue Core outcomes were supposed to be listed rather than simply the link to them (which was included in the sample syllabus). Sayward tried to illustrate orally how the two sets of outcomes might be integrated. Devadoss asked the clarifying question of whether the course could have course objectives that were beyond the scope of the new General Education outcomes, and the answer was absolutely. Gamble stated that this was not a course proposal problem but an observation of what information UGEC might need to make meaningful decisions. It was important that the committee be able to tell the course proposers what was needed to move forward, so he welcomed more questions.

Frame stated that Sayward had a point, and he was not a fan of hyperlinks in syllabi. However, he was averse to providing instruction about what faculty had to include in their syllabi. He thought it was essential that the committee figure out what to communicate to departmental liaisons about what the committee needs to see included in the Primary Outcome Assessment (POA) section of the proposal in Curriculog, since several perspectives of what should be included here had already been voiced.

Myers-Shirk said that the attached assessable assignment was one of the things that could be used to assess this General Education outcome. Other things will also be assessed as part of the course, but our primary goal is to assess the primary General Education outcome identified in the proposal. Devadoss said that the discussion had been helpful, as there were different types of outcomes and assessments serving various purposes in the syllabus and the course.

Gray-Hildenbrand emphasized that no one had proffered that the assessable assignment is inappropriate. She asked whether the asking questions to clarify their own process or to develop an amendment to the course proposal that could be made in Curriculog. She asked her colleagues on the committee whether they would vote yes on a proposal if the departmental representative was able to answer the committee's questions to their satisfaction. Frame asked how any amendments would be made to the proposal in Curriculog. Gamble answered that if UGEC approved a proposal with conditions that only Susan could make the edits in Curriculog with departmental permission/guidance. Devadoss indicated that this would be a desirable route to amendment from the department's perspective.

Frame stated that one reason that the committee was deliberating extensively on this first proposal and the reason this proposal should be amended is because it will be seen as a model for subsequent proposals. Cribb emphasized that he would like to see greater consistency in the proposals as well, and Gamble emphasized the importance of talking the issues through. Myers-Shirk reaffirmed that if there are conditions that are not substantive (which would trigger a "no" vote), they will be recorded in the minutes, and she will integrate them into the proposal in Curriculog (with departmental permission/guidance) so that they can set the bar for consistency and become good models for future proposals.

Gamble then moved to the secondary questions about the proposal. No comments or discussion ensued about whether the course was too narrowly focused or did not conform to the category definition for Human Society and Social Relationships. He then reminded the committee that it could table the proposal to request further information. There being no such motion, he moved to the committee vote, reminding the voting members that they could vote yes without conditions, yes with conditions, no with a rationale, or abstain. Sayward asked for clarification about the vote required to approve a course, which was a simple majority of the voting members present with any abstentions not counting toward that majority. Gamble also reminded the committee that under the procedures approved in the fall semester, if any member requested a paper vote the committee would shift to that method, but no such request had been made. He therefore proceeded to a roll-call vote.

Eleven UGEC committee members voted in favor of the GEOG 200 proposal with conditions, especially that the assessable assignment should be included and highlighted in the Primary Outcome Assessment (POA) section of the proposal in Curriculog and that the proposal should strive for clarity, especially in describing the assessment mechanism. Three members voted for unconditional approval, and one member abstained. Applause followed the first course being approved for the True Blue Core curriculum.

Discussion of GS 2010 – Introduction to Global Studies

Frame issued the same general concerns about this course proposal but expressed his appreciation for the assignment rubric. Sayward pointed out that this assessable assignment was included in the Primary Outcome Assessment section of Curriculog. Cribb asked about the National Culture Project (the assessable assignment), especially whether the group video component of the assignment could/should be assessed by the True Blue Center as part of the General Education assignment or whether only the individual components could be assessed as part of General Education. Gamble said that he was comfortable with assessment of group work if one of the students in the group was part of the random sample. He asked if other members of the committee were similarly comfortable. Cribb was, and Myers-Shirk explained that what the True Blue Center will be assessing is student learning based on the outcome, not individual student achievement, so group work is still a direct measure/evidence of student learning that can be assessed with a group assignment. There will be a random sample, and if this group project includes this student, then the group project. Gamble asked if there were any concerns about the secondary questions of specificity and category description. There being no further discussion, the committee moved to a vote.

Ten members voted for unconditional approval, and three members voted for conditional approval, with the condition being that there be greater clarity (so that the proposal can serve as a model for others) and clearer alignment between the assessable assignment, the rubric, and the Curriculog description of assessment. Scott McDaniel asked how the department should interpret this vote. Gamble interpreted it as friendly encouragement to the department to meet the conditions, which would make for a stronger proposal and would meet committee members' concerns. If the department were to refuse to make any changes, those conditional yesses would be "no" votes.

Discussion of RS 2030 – Religion and Society

Gregory Slack introduced himself as the departmental liaison, but Gray-Hildenbrand developed the proposal that was under consideration. Sayward opened the discussion of the proposal by asking why the True Blue student learning outcomes were not included in the sample syllabus that was submitted. Gray-Hildenbrand promised to integrate those in the revision.

Frame asked if Gray-Hildenbrand might be willing to emulate the type of rubric that was included in the Geography and Global Studies courses. Gray-Hildenbrand retorted that having gone through the AAC&U training for assessment, she did not believe that such a rubric was required for assessment. Frame said that such a rubric would be helpful to the non-experts in the field who will be tasked with assessing the student learning of these outcomes. Gray-Hildenbrand did not believe that expertise in Religious Studies was needed to connect the assignment to the rubric, especially given the explicit language that was included in the Primary Outcome Assessment that echoed the student learning outcome rubric for the category. Myers-Shirk echoed Gray-Hildenbrand's belief that the proposal had done an excellent job of linking up with the outcomes in the rubric.

Concluding matters

At this point, Gamble called an end to discussion, as the meeting had reached its deadline. He requested suggestions from the committee on how to improve the course-approval process moving forward, specifically in the next meeting, which is two weeks away. Both he and Myers-Shirk will be at the AAC&U Assessment Institute, but the meeting time coincides with a lunch break. He was willing to

extend an accommodation to Myers-Shirk to attend the meeting via Zoom, but he reiterated that it was the procedure of the committee to meet in person. Anne McCullough moved for the meeting to be held entirely via Zoom; the motion was seconded by Gray-Hildenbrand. In response to a question, Gamble reminded the committee that if he should not be able to connect that McCullough, as the Vice Chair of the committee, would chair the meeting. The motion passed 10-2-1 (ten in favor, two opposed, and one abstention).