

University General Education Committee Minutes
April 15, 2022 via Zoom

Present: Amy Sayward, Lando Carter, Deana Raffo, Keith Gamble, Rebecca Fischer, Leon Alligood, Ryan Otter, Warner Cribb, Rachel Kirk, Laura White, Sungyoon Lee, Keely O'Brien, Janet Colson, Mark Frame

ex officio: Susan Myers-Shirk, Jeff Gibson, David Carleton, Amy Aldridge Sanford, Chris Brewer

Guests: Brian Frank, Beth Wright, Kari Neely, Teresa Thomas, Katie Brackett, Tyler Henson, Betsy Dalton, Kristen West

Introductory matters:

Keith Gamble, Vice Chair of the Committee, opened the meeting given the temporary absence of Lando Carter, the Committee's chair. Gamble asked if there were any comments or edits to the minutes of the last meeting, which were circulated ahead of this meeting. There being none, the minutes were approved.

Making comment period material public:

Gamble then turned to the first item of business, which was a committee decision about making the comments collected during the university community comment period public. At the meeting held on Tuesday with the Provost, Deans, and Chairs, there had been a demand that the comments be made public. Susan Myers-Shirk, the General Education Director, had appropriately deferred to the committee. Gamble believed that the comments should be made available once the names were removed. Warner Cribb moved to make the comments anonymous and then public, and Mark Frame seconded the motion so that it could move to discussion.

Frame asked whether there was any language within the survey that would give a reasonable person a sense that their comments would not be made public. Given ethical considerations, he asked whether there was any language that implied that the comments would be provided only to the committee. He also suggested that those who had provided their comment via email should receive an email notifying them that their comments would be made public unless they objected to such release. Laura White affirmed these concerns but wished to balance these with campus fears about a perceived lack of transparency. Upon further review of the language in the survey, it seemed suggestive but not definitive about being shared publicly. Rachel Kirk asked if identifying information—beyond names—could be removed without destroying the integrity of the comments. Katie Brackett stated that the student survey data was made public with the only information redacted being when people were mentioned by name. Frame suggested reviewing the comments to remove such personally identifying information and housing but not actively distributing it. Gamble added that Tennessee's laws

related to recording and utilizing conversations were much more open than others, reducing the expectation of confidentiality in regular communications.

Amy Sayward offered a friendly amendment that making this information available is consistent with the committee's practice of being transparent in its processes and that Myers-Shirk's action of not releasing this information prior to a committee vote was appropriate. The amendment was accepted by both Cribb and Frame. The committee voted unanimously to approve the motion to make the anonymized comment data available.

Discussion of university comment feedback

Gamble then moved the committee to the next item of business, discussion of the feedback received and a decision of how best to move forward—without any expectation that there would be a vote during this meeting on a particular model. The conversation would instead focus on how best to respond to the university comment feedback. He pointed to the materials that Myers-Shirk had circulated to the committee ahead of today's meeting, including a reminder about the committee's values and the new outcomes, which have been approved by the committee and the campus community. He also pointed to the entirety of the survey feedback as well as a set of themes that Brackett had identified from the survey data. He said that he would welcome committee discussion of what model might best respond to this feedback, but first he asked Myers-Shirk to talk about the work of the Design Team in response to the feedback, which was also included in the preparatory materials emailed to the committee.

Myers-Shirk explained that this was the result of brainstorming with the Design Team that is meant to be something that the committee could use to talk about the survey results and campus comments; it was not intended to be a proposed revision to the models sent out. This was specifically designed to address expressed concerns about student confusion and to ensure that all students would be exposed to all eight outcomes without additional software or advising needed. It also maintained a menu-driven system that most current faculty, students, and advisors are familiar with. However, some questions had arisen about whether courses in—for example, Natural Sciences (a Disciplinary Knowledge category)—would also count in the Scientific Literacy category (which is in the Explorations category). To help the committee understand and address that question, Tyler Henson and Teresa Thomas had been invited to the meeting, because the goal was to ensure that new confusion was not introduced into the plan.

The brainstorming kept the Foundations and Disciplinary Knowledge categories unchanged and added subcategories to Explorations. Additionally, Blueprints (formerly known as pathways) would still live in the Disciplinary Knowledge category. The document also included current catalog language about the categories. Carter then returned to chairing the meeting now that he had a stable internet connection, and he opened the discussion. Gamble queried Henson

about what the stumbling block was in having a General Education class that could live in two different categories within the Gen Ed curriculum. Henson explained that it was a question of students wanting courses to count in different places and to reassign those places as circumstances changed. Gamble asked how this was different from counting a course in General Education and in their major. Henson stated that having Gen Ed courses built into majors was problematic, especially for transfer students, because it often resulted in their having to take more than 120 credit hours to complete their undergraduate degree. Gamble stated that a clear theme of the comment period was making things simple, which he supported. Cribb asked whether courses for Natural Science and Scientific Literacy could potentially be included in the same list. Brian Frank stated that the Design Team certainly did not want to limit student choice and flexibility in drafting this idea and suggested that perhaps some course choices could be “starred” with instructions that at least one of those courses is required (to fulfill the Disciplinary Knowledge category), which would allow students to choose two starred courses or a non-starred course for their Explorations category course. Thomas stated that that would be possible.

Gamble suggested that moving forward the committee reserve the term “pathway” to refer to Tennessee Transfer Pathways and use the term “Blueprints” for refer to the interdisciplinary connections between courses within the Disciplinary Knowledge category that had been designed into one of the models that went out to campus. He also suggested that the university feedback had shown a pretty clear preference for Blueprints over Integrative Seminars. Sayward affirmed that she thought this was a correct reading of the campus comment period and that although she was a fan of the integrative seminar she was happy to move forward without this element of the model.

Kari Neely suggested that the revised model—through the listed courses—made it seem that only U.S. History courses could fulfill the outcome in the “History, Peoples, and Culture” category. Myers-Shirk responded that the category would absolutely be opened up, but for this first draft the Design Team had simply moved the courses in the current catalog into the draft for illustrative purposes.

Cribb asked Brian Frank of the Design Team about the question of variable credit hours in the categories and how this might affect CBAS students. For example, if a student took a four-hour Mathematics class in the Foundations category and a four-hour course in the Natural Sciences Disciplinary Knowledge category, if they might have variable credits or whether they might take a science course without a corequisite lab. Frank suggested that a point of confusion within the models that went to university comment was the variable credit hours in two of the categories and that simplicity and clarity had been the goal in the responsive revision being discussed. He stated that some departments might choose to make their labs optional, which could open up lab space, or keep them as corequisites in order to provide teaching experience for graduate students. Cribb added that—in keeping with the theme of clarity and simplicity—that it was

odd that Anatomy & Physiology II was a Natural Science course but none of the other two-part science courses were included. Otter added that Frank's analysis of lab courses was spot on and that some of the oddities in the current curriculum might be rectified moving forward as all courses when through the approval process.

Jeff Gibson asked about whether the discussion model would require two different course prefixes in the Fine Arts/Humanities category. Gamble suggested that in the student-facing document that was connected to this model that it makes sense—and makes things simpler and clearer—if instead we stated that three credit hours of literature are required and three hours of Fine Arts/Humanities are required. Carter said that there are a lot of small changes that can be made to make everything clearer.

David Carleton asked for further comment on the campus community feedback and asked for people's sense of what the issues were. Gamble said that he thought that discussion was best held within the context of future possible actions. He stated that his key take-away was the need for simplicity and clarity; he had lots of other points but believed those were best brought up in discussion of next steps since all committee members had received all of the campus feedback as well as Brackett's summary of themes within those comments. Carleton stated that his view of the feedback was that the current model is less complex than the proposed models. Carter added that one step away from that complexity in response to campus comment was the shift away from the integrative seminar and toward Blueprints. Sayward added that her read of the campus comment was that a vocal minority (about ten percent of faculty had responded to the survey, mostly from the College of Liberal Arts) had connected their fears about declining undergraduate enrollments and the increasing number of students securing General Education credits elsewhere to the General Education proposal. She was also concerned that the committee's goal of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration was not shared by those whose comments called for disciplinary limits on what courses could be offered in particular categories. White agreed that there was a lot of comment from the College of Liberal Arts but saw those comments as primarily wanting to ensure that the Liberal Arts are robustly represented in General Education. She also pointed to practical concerns and recommendations about slowing the pace of redesign by primarily focusing on implementing the outcomes that have already been agreed to.

Rachel Kirk commented that the survey data seemed to her to be an overwhelmingly negative response to the models and suggested that deeper analysis for this response might be needed. Although she described the models as pregnant with possibility, she urged further and deeper critical analysis. Carter agreed that such analysis is part of the committee's charge of responding to the campus comment.

Sayward remarked that approximately ten percent of the faculty had responded in any fashion to the model. Neely stated that she was shocked at the lack of engagement and at the lack of

understanding of the models, which might point to a need for the committee to travel to departments (rather than inviting faculty to town halls) and engage with faculty to show the opportunities as well as the challenges of the new models. Janet Colson asked whether the response rates of this campus survey was comparable to the earlier, pre-pandemic campus surveys. Brackett said that she could gather that data moving forward. Neely commented that the problem was the pandemic, which had broken the connection between faculty and the redesign process.

Cribb stated that he believed that department chairs were the key to success for General Education redesign and that the meeting on Tuesday had enunciated some discontent among those ranks. Gamble stated that his conversations with chairs had found some quiet support among chairs.

Gamble then asked the committee what the next action of the committee needed to be in response to university comments. He stated his opinion that the committee needed to present a new model that responds to university comments. Carter stated that a new model would also have to be sent out for university comment.

Carleton stated that he could not read the survey results without seeing the negative. Any proposed change would have to be substantive and would have to respond to the comment received. When Carleton suggested a phase-in of redesign, Gamble stated that this is choosing a model—the current model—by default when it has not been determined what model will best fit with the current outcomes. Carleton and Gamble disagreed about whether a plausible study could be done to determine the benefits of redesign. Frank added that the current model is defined by the old outcomes.

Warner returned to his idea of requesting from chairs what courses they imagine would fit with the new outcomes. Neely pointed out that departments had done that over a year ago, as part of their response to the three models proposed. [Clarifying note: Departments had drafted proposed courses that might fit with an earlier draft of the outcomes; the final approved General Education outcomes had significant differences in the areas of Communication and Civic Engagement.] Frank explained that the committee had focused more on the responses to the models at the time. Myers-Shirk explained that the data was still available.

Frank stated his appreciation for everyone's comments and feedback. His read on the campus comment was that it was not really focused on the outcomes. Some talked about disciplinary boundaries, and others wanted to maintain continuity, stability, and transfer ease. The question for the committee is what are the anchors to consider against the pull of the comments. How can we minimize disruption? How can we be transparent about transfer? The key was simplicity and clarity. What are the anchors to consider against the background of the pull of the comments? We don't want a "wild west," but we do want some departments that

have been held outside of the General Education curriculum to be able to offer courses if they can support the new outcomes. We also want to make it possible for colleagues to collaborate across campus and to have the courses across the curriculum speak to one another in terms of overlapping outcomes. Student choice is important. The charge here is not to run to one or the other but to respond to both. Carter thanked Frank for distilling the conversation in such a cogent manner.

Sayward commented that although she understood the concerns that redesign could make transfer more difficult, it is also possible that MTSU could lead in the Tennessee Board of Regents on General Education redesign. TBR members have been attending the same AAC&U workshops as MTSU's redesign team.

Carter shifted the committee's discussion to setting its agenda of next steps in the time remaining in the committee. Otter agreed with Frank's call to think about the big picture. Having read through all of the university comment, attended town halls, and worked on redesign for years, he wanted the committee to see the big picture and understand our responsibility to students and campus.

Gamble suggested that a possible next step, given the university feedback and the discussion of the committee today, is to ask the Design Team what they are thinking. Frank responded that he understood the importance of looking closely at the data but also at the anchors in analyzing the compromise sketch from the Design Team. Does it preserve our anchors/core values? Is it responsive? What more is needed to make it clear and easy? Myers-Shirk also asked if it would be helpful to pull out the data that departments provided about possible courses under the new outcomes. Gamble said he thought it would be very helpful to pull those courses into the Design Team sketch and see how those courses would fit.

Myers-Shirk also stated that there was a sketch of a possible revision within the six-category curriculum, which would be a different step but could also have the course data added in. Sayward affirmed that including the course data would be very helpful and would avoid some of the pitfalls of the current sketch's inclusion of only the courses approved under the previous curriculum. White also agreed to having that information would help clarify matters, and in terms of being responsive, examining the six-category model with proposed courses could be helpful, especially in terms of viewing it through the lens of the new outcomes. Gamble asked whether it was possible for the Design Team to look at all of that within the week before the committee meets again. Sayward asked if the six categories could be described in a way that aligns with the new outcomes rather than the disciplines.

Carter commented that some action items seemed to be taking shape that honored the feedback but also moves the committee forward. Otter then said that the committee needed to engage in some reverse engineering if it was going to complete its task and suggested that

that timeline go out as part of the new model(s) for university comment. Sayward followed up that this really means that the committee needs to be prepared to vote next week on a model or models to go forward to university comment. Gamble summarized that the next UGEC meeting should decide what goes out for comment. There were two possible models: the one the committee started with plus all the feedback, and the category model adapted to the outcomes—with both being fleshed out with the courses suggested by departments. This could set the committee up to reach a 2/3 majority about a model before the end of the semester, but it would put a lot of responsibility on the Design Team this week. Frank stated his confidence that the Design Team could meet that mandate but asked for a deadline. Sayward, Otter, and Gamble expressed the opinion that the committee needed to maximize the Design Team's time given the tight turn-around.

The meeting adjourned at 4:01 p.m.