IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM QUALITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA: THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM IN 2007

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When we do something infrequently, it’s usually for a reason. Sometimes it’s because there’s minimal need (for example, a good house-paint job usually lasts for about ten years, so homeowners don’t do monthly checks). At other times, it’s because the task is fraught with difficulty (for example, we all know that Social Security needs fixing, but achieving a consensus is so problematic that action is rarely undertaken). Reforming a university’s General Education Program is in the “fraught-with-difficulty” category.

I offer this essay as my personal reflection on UHM’s General Education Program at the end of 2007. My reflections are informed by my tenure as a faculty member here (30+ years); my work on both the System and the UHM General Education Task Forces mentioned below; and my work, since Fall 2001, as Faculty Administrator of the Faculty Senate’s General Education Office. While the work I describe has involved hundreds of faculty members and a score of administrators, the opinions that I offer are my own.

General Education at UHM Pre-2001

General Education requirements and offerings at UHM changed little between 1971 and 2001. Although General Education reforms during the ’60s were achieved under the banner of “Student Choice,” the General Education curriculum quickly solidified into a rather rigid menu of requirements and options. Since most Arts and Sciences departments had at least one class on that menu, there was little momentum away from the status quo. For decades, all UHM students needed a minimum of 40 credits to satisfy Core requirements. Many colleges had additional Core requirements.

When change in General Education requirements did occur, it always involved additions. In the ’80s, the long-standing Arts and Sciences second-language requirement became a University requirement. For many students, that meant an additional 12 to 16 credits. In the late ’80s, the Faculty Senate added 5 Writing-Intensive classes as a Graduation Requirement. For the most part, students didn’t protest this “addition” because it could be met through courses in the Core and in their majors. What’s more, success in Writing-Intensive (WI) classes soon became known among students as advantageous in job interviews.

By 1995, virtually every Mānoa student needed approximately 56 Core and Graduation-Requirement credits, plus 5 WI classes, in order to receive a bachelor’s degree. Arts and Sciences students, who received the majority of bachelor’s degrees, needed approximately 64 credits plus 5 WI classes. Students in certain professional schools needed 60 more credits for their majors. Add the requirement of upper-division electives and the limited range of menu
choices and you have no surprise: most UHM students required a minimum of 5 years to earn a bachelor’s degree.

The General Education reform movement begins

By 1995, more and more faculty and administration conversations involved questions about our undergraduate requirements. Post-graduation surveys highlighted growing dissatisfaction with the scope and inflexibility of Core requirements. Departments found that they could not add new requirements for majors, however significant might be new knowledge in a discipline, without pushing students toward 6 years as undergraduates. More and more individuals were admitting, privately and then publicly, that it was not healthy for any Program to go 25 years without systematic review. That was especially true of General Education, which affected each and every student.

Also by the mid ‘90s, the full University of Hawai’i was finally functioning more as a System. When discussions about General Education reform began in earnest in the UHM Faculty Senate’s Executive Committee, there was consensus that we’d best attempt it as a System. Thus was born a 2-year endeavor to review and reform UH’s General Education requirements as a System. The endeavor was overseen by the System’s Council of Faculty Senate Chairs; led by a troika of UHM, Community College, and 4-Year College Senators; and staffed by a UHM Professor of Education.

The endeavor produced reams of useful data and generated faculty discussion across the System. It highlighted common needs. But the logistics of achieving System consensus across many islands seemed to keep good ideas from gaining steam. The reform effort wasn’t gathering momentum.

During the second year of that endeavor, problems involving undergraduate education at UHM, where most System students sought bachelor’s degrees, became pressing. Recurring fiscal crises virtually eliminated any possibility of initiative and program development. Non-system transfer students in particular were complaining about the lack of fit between UHM General Education requirements and typical requirements elsewhere. Both freshman and transfer-student enrollments were dropping. Faculty members knew that the upcoming WASC accreditation self study had to address these realities. So, in the Fall of 1998, the UHM Faculty Senate created its own Task Force on General Education and Graduation Requirements, chaired by Senator Eldon Wegner.

The General Education reform effort gains momentum

The new Task Force began quickly, because the System effort and the State’s ongoing fiscal crisis had made our needs clear. Through weekly meetings, informed by periodic open forums and Senate discussions, the Task Force created a draft Plan for General Education by May of 1999.

Fall 1999 saw nearly weekly forums on aspects of the new General Education plan, forums that were open to both faculty and students. Especially heated were discussions in two areas: maintenance of the universal second-language requirement, and how Hawai’i should be highlighted in graduation requirements. (One example of how the two areas merged: the
language requirement became the "Hawaiian or Second Language Requirement." In November 1999, Senator Wegner held a joint meeting of the UHM Task Force and representatives from each UH System campus. General reaction to the UHM plan was positive, since the overall plan was seen as flexible and inclusive.

In December 1999, the full UHM Faculty Senate adopted the Task Force’s General Education Plan. The campus now had a new General Education Program set to begin.

The process of the new General Education Program’s implementation begins

The UHM faculty soon discovered that it had done the easy work of General Education Reform. The hard work lay ahead.

Three issues dominated reform efforts during the 3 semesters between the Senate vote and the Fall 2001 date of the new requirements’ going into effect.

The first involved Board of Regents (BOR) endorsement of the new General Education Program. While all parties saw the advantages of the new Program, questions were raised in some quarters about the UHM-centered processes whereby the Program had been adopted. Most parties agreed that System reform of General Education would have been the preferable course. Some parties insisted that it should have been the only possible course. In point of fact, Mānoa was not alone in following what appeared to be a “go it alone” process. The same decision had been made by the faculty at UH Hilo, the campus with the System’s only other full 4-year undergraduate program. It was perhaps no coincidence, then, that the Regents adopted new, independent, General Education Programs for both UHM and UHH in June of 2000.

The second issue involved faculty governance. The new General Education Plan called for total faculty governance. Since the faculty had previously played an essentially consultative role in General Education, governance processes had to be developed from scratch. Particularly problematic were issues relating to membership of the various General Education committees. Thus, it took a full year of discussion to produce a General Education governance document. The document was approved by the Senate at the end of 2000, 9 months short of the new requirements’ becoming effective.

A third issue took over the main faculty governance body during its first semester. The agenda of the interim General Education Committee became dominated by college and school requests for waivers from the Hawaiian or Second Language requirement. This issue remained a source of contention between professional-school faculty and Arts-and-Sciences faculty. By the end of 2000, some schools had achieved the waiver they sought, but not to the delight of all.

The main victim of the lengthy debates over governance and language requirements was the General Education Program itself. By early 2001, it was clear that the development of new General Education courses for F01 would not be possible. The Senate was forced to craft a plan whereby existing courses would be mapped to new requirements, thus buying time for the various faculty General Education committees.
General Education at UHM Today

The full-on effort to implement the new General Education Program began in September 2001. By then we had faculty Committees with multiple duties: to oversee implementation (the General Education Committee); to review Core-course proposals (the Foundations Board); and to review Focus course proposals (involving Contemporary Ethical Issues; Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Issues; Oral Communication; and Written Communication). Staff support for the several committees is provided by the General Education Office, a unit that was essentially an extension of responsibility for the Manoa Writing Program, the office that had long supported Writing-Intensive classes.

It soon became clear that governance by faculty committee would not be easy. Indeed, the faculty knew of predictions that faculty governance on such a grand scale would prove impossible. Perhaps the challenge implicit in that prediction was one factor that motivated the faculty committees to do an enormous amount of work during AY 2001-03. As a result of that work, students began Fall 2002 with a full range of courses that had been designed for the new General Education Program.

Advantages of the new General Education Program

The advantages of the new Program are several.

1. The Program offers students General Education course choices. The old requirements were an instance of “one size fits all.” The new requirements offer significant new options in each student’s first-year Foundations curriculum, in Diversification courses, and in Focus courses. (Attachment A shows current enrollments in General Education courses.)

2. The Program enriches the first-year curriculum. Many students continue to benefit from the traditional two-semester World Civilizations sequence. Other students choose from new and modified courses that present global and multicultural perspectives through anthropology, art, religion, music, women’s studies, literature, and geography (the list may expand). First-year Mathematics and logic courses have been modified to emphasize symbolic reasoning. Old and new courses provide more variety in the linkages offered freshmen in First-Year Learning Communities.

3. General Education course designations are determined by a class’s meeting of hallmarks, not by departmental affiliation. Faculty committees spent a great deal of time working out hallmarks for each component of the new Program. These hallmarks involve a course’s content, scope, emphases, and - perhaps most importantly - methods of inquiry and critical thinking. Faculty Boards review course proposals to ensure that the General Education hallmarks are met. Course proposals may come from any department.

4. The General Education Program emphasizes UHM’s uniqueness: our Pacific roots in a globalizing world. Hallmarks for Foundations and Focus areas require designated courses to include content that involves Hawai‘i and Pacific perspectives within global contexts. Focus requirements involving Hawaiian, Asian, & Pacific Issues and Contemporary Ethical Issues are intended to engage students with 21st-century social realities.
5. The General Education Program is under faculty, not departmental, ownership. All governance entities are composed of faculty members from diverse disciplines. Any department can propose courses for General Education designations. Thus, the meaning of "our" in "our General Education Program" is far more inclusive than it was previously.

6. Coherence within a student's undergraduate experience is to be designed around a student's major, complemented by General Education courses across the student's 4 years. Data show that students identify themselves by their majors, not by their experiences in sundry required courses. The faculty can enhance each student's sense of identity by helping students select General Education courses that complement the goals of each major.

7. General Education involves courses to be integrated across 4 years rather than as a lower-division "module."

8. As a result of UH system faculty cooperation, the advantages of the new General Education curriculum and governance structures have been extended to the students at nearly all UH system campuses.

9. The General Education Program is dynamic; it is designed to undergo constant assessment and renewal. All General Education designations are time-limited: the appropriateness of each Core designation is assessed in a course's fifth year as a condition of renewal. Focus designations maintain for only three years before mandatory review. The entire General Education Program is subject to ongoing assessment by the faculty General Education Committee. (Several assessment plans are being developed. Most General Education areas now have student learning outcomes, and assessment plans will become operational with the creation of the Mānoa Office of Assessment.)

10. The flexibility built into the new General Education Program makes a student's graduation in 4 years feasible. The previous Core involved 40 credits from about 140 course choices. The new Core involves 31 credits from among some 1800 course choices, including more than 1000 upper-division possibilities. This is a particular boon to the growing number of extra-System transfer students, who no longer have to "backtrack" to take lower-division approved General Education courses. (See Attachment B.)

**Steps toward Fulfilling the Potential of UHM's General Education Program**

I here list a few challenges that the full UHM community has to meet if the real potential of our General Education effort is to be achieved.

1. **UHM needs a dedicated assessment unit to complement efforts of the General Education Faculty units.** Faculty boards can set policy, determine student learning outcomes, and review proposed new General Education courses. But the Administration has to make it possible for significant assessment research to occur.

2. **UHM has to do more to ensure that each student chooses his or her General Education courses wisely.** The array of opportunities in General Education becomes
meaningful only when a student has clear educational goals and chooses General Education courses accordingly. We need to require that students come to Mānoa with clear goals and a plan for achieving those goals. We need to provide enhanced advising for freshmen and sophomores in order to ensure that student course choices truly reflect those goals. The New Student Orientation Program provides a first step; perhaps, however, it should be mandatory, and free. Many students can benefit from guided assessment (and perhaps modification) of their educational plans. But our current student/advisor ratios make all of this more of a dream than an accomplishable goal.

3. **UHM has to recommit itself to ensuring that class-related activities in General Education Foundations courses will engage and even excite new college students.** Our new Student Success Center and the Office of Faculty Development and Support are likely catalysts for such a recommitment. Nonetheless, having and even enhancing programs offers only an opportunity. We have yet to figure out how to transform such opportunities into freshmen and sophomores who are fully engaged in their own education.

4. **Decisions on transfer credits and application of those credits to General Education requirements must be made accurately and quickly.** The flexibility of General Education is particularly advantageous to students who transfer to UHM from outside the UH System. However, to take full advantage of this flexibility, transfer students need to learn quickly how their previous courses will apply to UHM requirements. We have to ensure that recent progress in this area will continue. We also have to ensure accuracy so that no individual college or school will counter initial official decisions on course transfer.

5. **Students need to understand the consequences of changing their major.** Students are not aware that each UHM major may require specific General Education courses. As a result, when students change their majors, they may be surprised to find that they have to take 100- or 200-level courses involving General Education requirements that they have already satisfied. Again, UHM needs to provide sufficient advising to ensure that students’ educational plans and choices involve consideration of possible consequences. For many potential UHM graduates, such advising has to begin when they are in a UH community college.

6. **The promised Mānoa Office of Assessment has to guide faculty, administration, and students in making best use of the results of student-learning assessments.** Up to now, our efforts have focused on the development of assessment plans. Until we know how the results of assessment can be used to improve student learning, we will have “only just begun.” There’s little point in creating models of excellent assessment unless we have both the will and the resources to convert assessment results into improved teaching and learning.

7. **Some significant advantages of the new General Education Program will be realized only when each Major relates its requirements to the requirements of General Education.** Because most Faculty attention to date has been involved with the creation or assessment of new or revised General Education courses, many departments have not addressed possibilities for complementarity between major requirements and General Education requirements. A particular need is to look at how student needs related to both critical thinking and information processing can be met through such complementarities.
Future Prospects: Continuously Improving Undergraduate Education

The UHM administration and, particularly, the UHM Faculty deserve commendation for their accomplishments in General Education reform to date. But the General Education Program is no longer new, and the energy that surrounded its early implementation will predictably lag. We have to defy that prediction—perhaps via the 7 “Steps Toward Fulfilling the Potential of General Education” just outlined.

We can defy that prediction if, as I hope, the assessment goals designed into the Program are fully accomplished. That hope represents our greatest opportunity for changing the way we at UHM “do” undergraduate education. It holds promise of making us into an ever better educational institution. In this effort, we cannot afford to fail: the people of Hawai`i, of the Pacific, and, increasingly, of the world are depending on our success.

11/01/2007
Graduation Report: Average Number of Credits for Undergraduates
2003-04 and 2006-07

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Number of graduates

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School of Architecture not included because it discontinued the BArch degree.

Data from STAR Data Metrix Graduation Report

Information provided by the General Education Office, Bilger 104, gened@hawaii.edu