Overview

Mission: “The purpose of the General Education requirements is to ensure that every graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison acquires the essential core of an undergraduate education that establishes the foundations for living a productive life, being a citizen of the world, appreciating aesthetic values, and engaging in life-long learning in a continually changing world. For this reason, these core requirements provide for breadth across the humanities and arts, social studies, biological sciences and physical sciences; competence in communication, critical thinking and analytical skills appropriate for a university-educated person; and investigation of the issues raised by living in a culturally diverse society.”

Administration

- L&S serves as the “Trustee” for GER
- Dean Scholz convenes the University General Education Committee (UGEC)
  - chair: L&S Assistant Dean
  - faculty from across all units that confer undergraduate degrees
  - ex officio representatives from admin offices and key student support units across campus
  - ASM-appointed students
- UGEC reports to UAPC
- Provost supports assessment via annual grant process

The Requirements: Four Domains

Breadth
- Natural Science, 4 to 6 credits (One 4- or 5-credit course with a lab or two courses for a total of 6 credits.)
- Humanities/Literature/Arts, 6 credits
- Social Studies, 3 credits

Communication, 3 to 5/6 credits
- Part A: Literacy Proficiency. 2-3 credits at first-year level in reading, listening, discussion, and writing.
- Part B: Enhancing Literacy Proficiency. 2-3 credits of advanced communication course work, usually in a discipline.

Ethnic Studies, 3 credits

Quantitative Reasoning, 3 to 6 credits
- Part A: 3 credits of mathematics, statistics, or formal logic.
- Part B: 3 additional credits in quantitative reasoning.

Courses

- Minimal GER
- Many GER courses (like other large, complex research universities, “cafeteria style”)
- Prior to GER approval, courses are reviewed by faculty committees or liaisons
- Many GER courses also count toward other requirements
- University-wide requirements, implemented within local contexts

Assessment

- When the requirements were established, the credit-based system was chosen over other models (e.g., core curriculum) as most appropriate to institutional culture and decentralized structure.

- Challenge/Opportunity: “Cafeteria-style” requirements force articulation of connections between courses based on learning outcomes. This can help address concerns assessment, “depersonalize” evaluation of an individual course/instructor and focus on program-wide learning.

- Requirements with clear learning outcomes are easier to assess. Requirements for which no learning outcomes were articulated (e.g., “Breadth”) are more difficult. Priority: articulate learning outcomes in the four domains of GER.

- Since 2003, assessment activities have been guided by a long-term assessment plan involving high quality, but small, studies of course-level effects. Priority: articulate sustainable assessment strategy, balancing breadth and depth.

- Assessment leads to recommendations for change (revisions to Comm B requirements/courses, improved support for oral communication, outreach to advisors about timing requirements).
Recommendations

a. “Early” Completion of the Ethnic Studies Requirement

When the Ethnic Studies Requirement was first implemented (1989), the faculty recommended that it be completed “early”, but left that term undefined, rendering it difficult to implement. The goal of “early” completion was to allow the requirement to have a positive effect on campus climate.

In 2012, the UGEC sponsored a survey of students who had, and had not taken an Ethnic Studies course to determine if the course had a discernible effect on students’ personal growth and attitudes that might affect campus climate. Students who had taken an Ethnic Studies course scored higher on ES learning outcomes measures than those who had not (even when controlling for the student’s age and number of semesters at UW-Madison). Differences were small but statistically significant, and were observed for students with low and high levels of prior experience with diversity. This suggests that these courses have a positive impact on students’ affective and behavioral skills and attitudes (though, of course, we cannot make definitive statements about causality).

The Ethnic Studies Subcommittee and the UGEC recommend that the Ethnic Studies Requirement be completed “early” in students’ careers, and recommend that “early” be understood to mean within the first 60 credits taken in residence.

b. Enforce timely completion of certain General Education Requirements

Assuming approval of (a), three UW-Madison General Education Requirements will have associated with them credit limits intended to ensure timely completion of the requirements. These requirements have not been enforced by any means other than advising and limiting course enrollment opportunities. The UGEC recommends adopting a more consistent approach to enforcing these requirements, perhaps by using the enrollment system.

Communication A: within first 45 credits taken in residence
Ethnic Studies: within first 60 credits taken in residence
Quantitative Reasoning A: within first 60 credits taken in residence

Implementation

- The effective date for this change should be linked to admitted cohorts to allow transition
- Outreach to all undergraduate schools and colleges, advising community
- Maintain capacity to deliver “early” Comm A and QR-A; work with ES faculty and departments to build capacity in elementary and intermediate level course array for ES courses
- Work with Registrar’s Office and Schools/Colleges to develop tools for implementation
- Pilot tools on requirements that have high compliance (QR, Comm) before enforcing on ES (lower compliance)

Links and Contacts

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