

Application Narrative

**AAC&U Institute on General Education, May 21-26, Newport Rhode Island
North Carolina A&T State University**

Introduction

The general education curriculum review committee at North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&T) is at an important juncture in its review and revision of the general education core curriculum. After spending the last year reviewing the current general education curriculum structure at NCA&T and developing a core set of general education learning objectives to guide the revision process, we hope to be able to use the AAC&U Institute on General Education to focus our attention on three critical components of the revision process: (1) the development of a formal structure for the revised general education core curriculum, (2) the formulation of assessment criteria for both individual courses and the overall program, and (3) the development of alternative governance structures for the general education program that are consistent with the tradition and history of our institution and that will ensure that the general education program achieves the learning objectives that are set out for it.

History of the General Education Review/Revision Process at North Carolina A&T State University

1. Background

The General Education Core Curriculum Review Committee (GECCRC) at North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&T) was formed by the Provost during the spring semester of 2002 to review NCA&T's current general education program (whose structure was developed more than twenty years ago) and recommend revisions based on a survey of "general education best practices" of universities around the country. The GECCRC initially included thirteen faculty representatives representing the seven academic schools and colleges at the university; since then the committee has expanded to seventeen members, with representatives from the library and student affairs being added to the group. The group meets once a month to report on committee activities and plan future action.

Starting in 2001, the university also developed a strategic vision plan, "Uncompromising Excellence: Blueprint for the Future" (FUTURES), that refocused the university's efforts on developing an "interdisciplinary learning and research university." Revision of the general education core curriculum is a critical component in this process and is explicitly included in the FUTURES goals and objectives. In particular, in addition to developing students' broad intellectual skills and introducing students to various methods of inquiry, the revised general education core curriculum is viewed as providing students with opportunities for "visionary and distinctive interdisciplinary learning, discovery, and engagement."

2. Commitment to an Open, Transparent Process

We believe that the general education review and revision process should be open and transparent. We encourage full participation in the process by inviting all faculty to participate in our monthly GECCR meetings and by posting all meeting minutes, presentations, documents, and reports to a regularly-updated general education web site (<http://www.ncat.edu/~simkinss/gened/>). In addition, we seek campus-wide faculty input on important general education-related issues via open Town Hall meetings. For example, as noted below, we used a series of Town Hall meetings to solicit feedback from faculty regarding general education learning objectives during the fall, 2003 semester.

3. Review of NCAT General Education Program – Spring, 2002

During spring, 2002 the GECCRC undertook a comprehensive review of NCA&T's current General Education program, including comparisons with peer institutions, surveys of faculty, student transcript reviews, and student focus groups. Our review summary, completed in June, 2002 is available at http://www.ncat.edu/~simkinss/gened/GECCR_C_rpt_06_02.pdf, and includes a variety of recommendations on content, assessment, and governance of the general education program. During the fall semester of 2002, external consultants from the University of Minnesota and NC State University visited campus to review the General Education program and provided the Committee with a report of their findings. The GECCRC responded to the external reviewers' recommendations in spring of 2003 and also developed an initial draft of general education objectives and expected outcomes.

4. Development of General Education Learning Objectives – Fall, 2003

A five-person GECCRC Executive Committee was formed in summer, 2003 to begin developing a detailed General Education Review and Revision Action Plan, including a timeline. This committee developed a draft of broad general education learning objectives that were shared with faculty at the start of the fall, 2003 semester and were discussed in a series of General Education Town Hall Meetings in October, 2003. Faculty feedback at these meetings was used to generate a revised set of learning objectives in January, 2004. The revised version of the learning objectives also draws heavily from Chapter 3, "The Learning Students Need for the 21st Century," of the AAC&U *Greater Expectations* report. The GECCRC also developed a "preamble" for these learning objectives that highlights the purpose of general education at NCA&T and provides a set of "guiding principles" for the program (available at www.ncat.edu/~simkinss/gened/preamble.pdf).

5. Current and Future Foci – Structure, Assessment, and Governance

The GECCRC is currently (spring, 2004) seeking endorsement of the revised general education learning objectives from each of the schools/colleges in the university and will forward these objectives for approval by the faculty senate by April, 2003. At the same

time, the GECCRC is initiating discussions on issues of structure, assessment, and governance of the general education program as we move to the revision phase of the general education review/revision process. Over the next twelve months we hope to (1) put in place a formal revised general education program, (2) develop assessment criteria for general education courses and the overall program, and (3) determine a governance structure for the general education program that is consistent with the history, tradition, and mission of the university.

6. Timeline

An annotated timeline for future general education review/revision activities is provided below:

Spring and Summer, 2004

- Endorsement of general education learning objectives by schools/colleges
- Approval of general education learning objectives by faculty senate
- Develop preliminary assessment strategy for general education program
- Develop preliminary policies for inclusion of courses in general education curriculum
- Draft alternative structures for general education curriculum (e.g. thematic clusters, credit hours, goals and objectives)
- Draft alternative structures for general education institutional governance

Fall, 2004

- General education structure, assessment criteria and governance model finalized and presented to faculty for review and feedback via Town Hall meetings
- Ongoing revision of structure, assessment criteria, and governance model
- Initial development of pilot courses for general education program

Spring, 2005

- School/college and senate approval of general education structure
- School/college and senate approval of general education governance model
- Initial pilot courses offered
- Continuing development of pilot courses for general education program

Summer, 2005

- Implementation of general education governance model
- Post-course assessment of pilot courses from spring, 2005
- Revision of general education policies and procedures based on assessment of pilot courses
- Departmental development of new general education courses

Fall, 2005

- Second round of pilot courses offered
- Approval of first round of general education courses for general education curriculum
- Begin testing of course and program assessment process

Faculty learning groups meet to discuss implementation of general education curriculum

Spring, 2006

Analysis of course and program assessment data from fall, 2005

Continuing development of general education courses based on fall, 2005 experience

Revision in course assessment policies and procedures based on fall, 2005 experience

Faculty learning groups meet to discuss implementation of general education curriculum

Fall, 2006

Full implementation of new general education curriculum

Ongoing assessment of general education courses and overall program

7. Summary

The GECCRC has completed its review of the general education core curriculum and has begun the job of developing revisions to that curriculum based on a core set of learning objectives. During the next twelve months the GECCRC will tackle fundamental issues of general education structure, assessment, and governance. We want to think about these issues carefully at this point in order to save both time and energy, as well as avoid backtracking, in the implementation phase of the project.

NCA&T Team Goals for the AAC&U Institute on General Education

As noted earlier, the NCA&T GECCRC is at a critical juncture in the general education core curriculum revision/implementation process. We believe that the AAC&U Institute on General Education will provide an invaluable opportunity for our team to focus its energy on three related issues - structure, assessment, and governance - that will drive the next stage of the general education revision process. In addition to providing a concentrated period of time free of other academic commitments and distractions, the Institute will give us the opportunity to benefit from the insights and feedback of a distinguished panel of institute faculty, as well as other participants who are also in the midst of curricular review and revision. Our goals for the Institute are summarized below.

Goal 1: Develop a Preliminary General Education Program Structure

At this point we have developed (and shared with faculty) a core set of general education learning objectives and “guiding principles” for the program, but have not yet developed a formal structure for the general education curriculum. Our next step is to develop alternative scenarios for making these learning objectives operational. In particular, we intend to focus on answers to the following questions:

- How should the general education curriculum be structured to achieve the learning objectives we have developed?
- What alternatives can we develop to replace the current “distribution requirement” framework?

- What types of thematic clusters of courses make sense, given our learning objectives, the mission of the university, and the FUTURES strategic vision?
- How can the general education curriculum address uneven student preparation for the general education core curriculum?
- How can we develop a general education curriculum that ensures interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking?
- How many credit hours can be devoted to general education?
- How can we ensure the development of general education learning objectives into the major?

Institute Action: By the end of the Institute we plan to develop at least two alternative general education curriculum structures that address these questions. The resulting alternative structures will be shared with the GECCRC and faculty during the summer and fall, 2004.

Goal 2: Develop General Education Course and Program Assessment Plans

The general education learning objectives were developed with an eye toward course and program development and assessment. We intend to use these learning objectives to provide faculty and departments with a guide for course development for the revised general education curriculum. Our plan is to “wipe the slate clean” in terms of the current set of courses that satisfy general education distribution requirements and have departments “make the case” for including particular courses in the revised general education curriculum based on how well these courses satisfy the general education program’s learning objectives.

We plan to develop guidelines for admitting courses into the general education program, which in turn will be used to assess the success of these courses. Courses will be assessed on a rotating schedule (every 3-5 years) to make sure they are meeting the general education learning objectives they were developed to satisfy. Courses that are not meeting those objectives will need to be revised and go through a “readmission” process similar to the admission process for new courses. Thus, we need to develop clear, concise rules for how courses will be admitted into the program, reviewed, and assessed, based on the core learning objectives we have already formulated.

Institute Action: By the end of the Institute we plan to develop a “rubric” for course development and assessment, as well as policy rules for the general education course admission/readmission, review, and assessment processes.

In addition, over the next six months our team will begin to tackle the difficult issue of overall general education program assessment. At this point we have not begun discussing how assessment will occur at the program level to ensure that students that finish the general education core curriculum achieve the program’s learning goals and objectives. Part of the reason we have not addressed this issue is that we have not determined the governance structure for the overall program. This issue is addressed in the next section.

Goal 3: Develop a Coherent General Education Governance Structure

The current general education core curriculum has little formal oversight or accountability outside of course grades; students simply earn a prescribed number of credit hours with passing grades across a number of functional areas. External consultants that reviewed our general education program cited this lack of intentional institutional oversight as a weakness in our program and suggested that we consider an independent “General College” structure to implement a revised general education curriculum.

We are currently beginning to informally review a variety of alternative governance structures but have not yet formally addressed this issue in our committee. The selection of a general education governance structure is intimately tied to the issue of program assessment and accountability; we plan to develop an assessment strategy that is both consistent with the ultimate governance structure selected and that will ensure the achievement of overall general education program goals and objectives.

Institute Action: By the end of the Institute we plan to develop at least two alternative governance scenarios to share with the Chancellor, Provost, GECCRC, and the overall faculty in summer and fall, 2004.

Institute Action: By the end of the Institute we plan to outline common program assessment strategies and specific processes related to each of the governance scenarios developed during the Institute.

Benefits of Participation in the AAC&U Institute on General Education

Our team is made up of faculty members and administrators from across the university who are important players in the NCA&T general education review/revision process. Two members of the GECCRC executive committee will attend – a faculty member from sociology and a faculty member from the economics department who is currently serving as the interim director of the university’s teaching and learning center – as well as two faculty members from key departments in the College of Arts and Sciences (English and math) and one faculty member from agriculture and environmental sciences. All team members are members of the GECCRC. Participation in the AAC&U Institute on General Education has the full support of the Provost and Chancellor.

While these members have been meeting monthly (with the rest of the GECCRC) for the past year and a half, the Institute will allow the team to jump-start the revision phase of our review/revision process by developing action plans that will be brought back to the full committee for review and revision before sharing with the general faculty during fall, 2004. The opportunity to spend a concentrated time on the three broad issues described above will save valuable development time and help us maintain our ambitious timeline. Often the summer months are “lost” to projects like curricular reform but we cannot afford to lose any time; we are committed to steady progress as outlined above and the

Institute will provide us with high quality focused time and access to experts in general education reform that is hard to replicate on campus. We hope to gain from the Institute faculty, as well as other participants in the workshop, deeper insights about our own general education revision process and helpful suggestions on how to promote faculty buy-in, ongoing assessment of learning outcomes, and the development of a culture of interdisciplinary learning and teaching.

At the same time, we believe that the progress that we have made in our own general education review/revision process will provide valuable insights for other teams who may be just beginning their own general education curricular review. For example, we believe that the open, participatory nature of our review process has helped to promote a healthy campus-wide discussion of teaching and learning issues related to general education and energized faculty to think about innovative solutions to institutional challenges such as students underprepared to engage in general education coursework, growing enrollment and class sizes in freshman and sophomore classes, use of adjunct faculty to teach general education courses, and the role of general education in professional degree programs such as engineering and business. In addition, the review process has sparked campus discussions on the role of ethics, race/ethnicity, and healthy lifestyles in a general education curriculum. Overall, we hope to be able to share stories of our own success in laying the groundwork for meaningful curricular reform, as well as gain from the experiences of others. We look forward with anticipation to participating in the AAC&U Institute on General Education in May.