Revising General Education at WCSU

Why revise general education?

There are three primary reasons to consider revising our general education curriculum:

1. The current general education curriculum has only one goal:

   “The general education requirements at Western Connecticut State University are designed to expose students to the broad spectrum of human knowledge in the areas of writing and communication skills, humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural and computational sciences, and health promotion and exercise sciences. Students matriculated for all degrees are required to complete courses in these five broad areas.”

   This is a problem because:
   
   a. There are no defined learning outcomes (Non-compliant with NEASC).
   b. Without a specific purpose it is generally perceived by students (and I suspect their families) as filler. This is particularly evident in the number of students who elect to take their general education curriculum at community colleges to “get them out of the way.”

2. Faculty (and occasionally local employers) report that students are lacking in some fundamentals: writing, reading comprehension, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking to name a few. (No systematic assessment of this because our general education is not assessed at this point.)

   This is a problem because:

   a. Without these foundational skills it is difficult to progress in majors at an appropriate level. Majors should be able to build on and reinforce these skills, not introduce them.
   b. When these comments come from employers it is bad for all of our graduates.
   c. If students are weak in these areas they are less likely to succeed in completing their undergraduate degrees. While retention is complex, one very strong link to a lack of **retention** is a student who does not complete 24 credits at a 2.0 in their first year at WCSU.

3. Many majors are overburdened with requirements. There is a tradition of adding more requirements (often in general education) to address perceived gaps in knowledge or to add a vocabulary of another discipline without reconsidering how these might be addressed in the major.

   This is a problem because:
a. Students often cannot graduate in four years or with 122 credits.
b. Students who change majors or declare a major after their first year are very likely
to have to take extra credits.
c. Transfer students are likely to have to take more than 122 credits
d. There is no assessment of the impact of these requirements on the student’s
success in a major, so they appear arbitrary at best.

4. Transforming general education to one with clearly defined goals and learning outcomes
could allow us to defend the value of a traditional liberal arts degree in a culture that seems
intent on describing undergraduate education in vocational terms.
   a. Articulate the learning outcomes associated with general education
   b. Link those outcomes to the potential for success in majors
   c. Link them to those outcomes described as employers by many employers
      http://www.aacu.org/leap/businessleaders.cfm
   d. Assessing the impact of this change would be essential to determine whether or not
      it is making a difference in student success overall

Emerging Approaches to General Education

The most credible research on liberal education, general education and assessment has been conducted
by AAC&U and the Lumina Foundation on liberal education. They offer some guidance.

1. Focus on “Essential Learning Outcomes,” which maps to what employers want and what NEASC
describes as the central categories for general education.
   http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm
2. “High impact” practices in both general education and majors
3. Design of general education with clear learning outcomes that don’t end at the 100-200 level
   but which are part of all 4 years (reinforced in majors). (Essentially a tiered-competency
   approach)
   http://www.aacu.org/compass/LEAPDesignPrinciples.cfm

What is a tiered-competency approach to general education?

1. Competencies are clearly defined learning outcomes for selected skills/habits of thinking/modes
   of inquiry
2. Competencies may be embedded in any discipline but must have agreed upon definitions and
   assessment strategies
3. Tiered competencies refer to selected general education (and liberal education) competencies
   that should be encountered by students multiple times with increasing levels of mastery over
time.
Potential Benefits of a Tiered-Competency Approach

1. We can invest time and resources in specific areas that we think our students need the most help with such as writing, critical and analytic thinking, quantitative reasoning and start by giving them a specific emphasis in multiple classes and investing in the support necessary to maintain consistency in the teaching and assessment of these.

2. Embedding competencies in majors as well as non-major courses has the potential to make the connection between general education goals and major goals more visible (valuable).

3. There is potential for a consistent focus on some essential skills and habits of thought as they emerge in all disciplines, making the gen-ed/major connections clear.

Possible Complications

1. If competencies are in any major, how do we know that all students experience the breadth of disciplinary exposure that we associate with a liberal arts degree? Similarly, will we be able to make sure students experience all areas defined as important in NEASC or other accrediting bodies?

2. If we have a lot of competencies, will students be able to figure it out?

3. How do we make sure that we don’t lose essential content?

4. How do students transfer to other schools?

5. How do students transfer to WCSU?

Potential Answers

1. Take a full competency approach to general education, but limit the number of competencies that can be satisfied in the major. Be sure that competencies are not limited to skills/habits of thinking but also modes of inquiry (scientific, historical, social scientific, aesthetic...). Count things up to match with accreditation requirements.

2. Limit the number of competencies (tiered or not), but maintain some breadth requirements. Be sure to define the point of the breadth requirements. Make sure that students are required to take the first-tier competencies as part of an FYE. This should make it easy to navigate.

3. This is a non-issue if we keep some breadth and because students still have majors.

4. Transferring out is easy enough as the students are still in traditional courses. They simply have some assignments that provided data for the assessment of a specified competency.

5. Transferring in will require alignment with TAP or other articulation agreements, but if we still consider the disciplines to have expertise in the competencies we identify, then it is a fairly easy problem to solve.

- Writing will be in many courses at WCSU but generally in Composition courses elsewhere.

- Historical inquiry may take place in several disciplines at WCSU but generally in History courses elsewhere.

- And so on...
The real change will be in our ability to articulate the learning outcomes associated with our general education (which we have to do anyway for NEASC), our ability to articulate a clear purpose for the general education program, and our ability to track its impact through assessment.