

GENERAL EDUCATION AND RELATED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

General Education

Overview

The general education curriculum is consistent with the University's Strategic Plan with a direct link to Strategy Four, which calls for a definition of a common vision for student learning outcomes. The University's General Studies Program (GSP) is the primary means by which the University addresses general education. The rationale for this is that the GSP, implemented in 2001, was designed to ensure that NJCU students would both acquire a set of academic skills that are the foundation of a liberal arts education (namely: oral and written communication, critical analysis and reasoning, scientific and quantitative reasoning, and technological competency) and also demonstrate a command of these skills commensurate with college level work. Students were also expected to apply the knowledge and skills acquired through the general education curriculum in the major or particular area of concentration.

Analysis

The General Studies Program

An analysis took place to determine the extent to which the current General Studies Program was meeting 1) the stated goals and objectives of the program when it was created; and 2) the broader goals and objectives of the University as expressed through its *Vision 2010* plan.

The University's General Studies Program is housed within the William J. Maxwell College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), and all NJCU undergraduate students are required to complete the program in order to graduate. As described in the University Undergraduate Catalogue http://www.njcu.edu/academics/pdf/ugcat_0507.pdf, the General Studies Program is a 66-credit program divided into two related components: All University Requirements (AUR), consisting of 18 credits in courses geared primarily to incoming freshmen; and General Studies Areas (GSA), comprising 48 credits taken from among 123 courses in 21 academic departments that are allocated according to a prescribed formula (**Appendix XX**). In other words, the General Studies Program, representing over half of the 128-credit graduation requirement, is structured to serve two purposes: the All University Requirements component functions as a skill building program intended to ensure that incoming freshmen have the requisite academic foundation to successfully pursue higher education; and the General Studies Areas component functions as a broad introduction to the liberal arts (**Appendix –Academic Planning Sheet**).

To fulfil the 18-credit All University Requirements component, all students are required to take courses in English Composition, a First-Year Experience course, a Math course, and a two-semester course sequence serving as a general introduction to the liberal arts. This level of the General Studies Program is ideally completed in two years. Students are enrolled into the writing and math sections based on results of a basic skills placement test administered by the University Advisement Center. Students whose results indicate additional support work is necessary enter the Academic Foundations Program (AFP). According to the Undergraduate

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Catalogue (p. 20), “The purpose of the Academic Foundations Program is to provide special assistance to students who need additional background work in mathematics, reading, and/or writing. The courses in this program carry college credit, but only those numbered 100-level or higher count toward the 128 credit hours needed for graduation.”

http://www.njcu.edu/academics/pdf/ugcat_0507.pdf

A full description of the courses required in the Academic Foundations Program are outlined in the undergraduate catalogue, http://www.njcu.edu/academics/pdf/ugcat_0507.pdf. According to the most recent Institutional Profile (2008), the vast majority of our students take at least one course in the Academic Foundations Program, with 92% of all FTFT freshmen enrolled in one or more of the three skill areas: reading, writing, or math (2008 Institutional Profile, p. 4).

The First Year Experience courses are offered through the various academic departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. According to the Undergraduate Catalog (page 42),

http://www.njcu.edu/academics/pdf/ugcat_0507.pdf, students take a First Year Experience course in either the first or second semester of enrollment, and in these seminar style courses, students “explore an intellectually challenging topic with other first-year students. First Year Experience topics are based on research or other intellectual themes selected by the instructor. The emphasis in the course is on student participation with a focus on improving the student’s critical thinking, written communication, and public speaking skills. First Year Experience allows students to involve themselves during their first year in rigorous and intellectually challenging inquiry within an area of personal interest.” According to guidelines established in the creation of the General Studies Program, First Year Experience courses are required to address the following competencies: critical thinking, writing, research, and public speaking (including presentation and debate skills). These courses are also required to include: one, 750-1000 word revised critical thinking essay assignment; one debate, group, or individual oral project; and one research project utilizing the library and the internet, which is then orally presented to the class.

To fulfil the 48-credit sequence in the General Studies Area (GSA), students are required to take at least 6 credits in each of six liberal arts areas, including the natural sciences, the social sciences, art and media, multicultural studies and languages, and quantitative and computer literacy skills as outlined in the Academic Planning Sheet (**Appendix XX**). With the exception of Area F, each department may offer up to five courses for inclusion in the General Studies Area. To receive a General Studies Area designation, courses were required to demonstrate that they would meet specific criteria: reading and writing and two of the four remaining Universitywide competencies (i.e., critical thinking/creativity, quantitative and computer literacy, oral presentation, and information literacy).

At the inception of the program, a committee was established to review representative syllabi for courses applying for GSA designation, and sponsoring faculty were required to indicate where and how these competencies were being addressed in their proposed course. Courses were approved for inclusion when these criteria were satisfied.

The structure of the General Studies Area maximizes the students’ exposure to the greatest number of departments. At a minimum, the guidelines ensure that students cannot fulfil an area requirement within a single department. Depending on the specific choices made in scheduling,

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students can sample as many as 16, or as few as 11, of the 22 departments and programs of the College of Arts and Sciences. In either case, the design of the GSA ensures that students will be broadly exposed to the liberal arts in general and to the faculties and departments of the College of Arts and Sciences in particular. Specifically, the General Studies Program was structured with the following student learning outcomes:

“If the General Studies Program is successful, by its conclusion students will be able to:

- Analyze, synthesize, and evaluate readings in various disciplines.

- Express complex ideas orally and in Standard Written English.
- Demonstrate skills in critical thinking and creativity, information gathering and literacy, and quantitative and computer literacy.
- Demonstrate an ability to use the methods of analysis appropriate to the AUR and the areas in the General Studies program.
- Reveal their familiarity with certain basic knowledge in a variety of fields.
- Relate the ideas and knowledge of one area to another.
- Demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of disciplines outside their major.
- Evaluate their experience in the General Studies Program.”

(General Studies Proposal; see **Appendix XX**)

The General Studies Program was conceived and implemented prior to the adoption of *Vision 2010* (which was finalized in August 2005). Furthermore, to some extent *Vision 2010* expanded on the goals and objectives of the General Studies Proposal. This was most evident in Strategy Four where the “Intellectual Outcomes” described are essentially those of the General Studies Program (**Appendix-Student Learning Outcomes**).

To ensure that the goals of the General Studies Program were being attained, the *Proposal for a Revised General Studies Program* (**Appendix XX**) was adopted. It included a provision for the creation of an Outcomes and Evaluation Committee (OEC, see Appendix C, pp. 23-24) to be comprised of a representative from the College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s office, representatives from each of the components of the General Studies Program, and the Director of Institutional Research. Additionally, the proposal included a provisional evaluation and assessment protocol (Appendix C, pp. 24-26).

Nonetheless, attempts to determine the extent to which the General Studies Program as implemented is fulfilling the stated goals and objectives for the program was significantly hampered by the lack of available assessment data. For instance, while the protocol and organizational structure for assessment was included in the General Studies Proposal, the University has not fully completed significant parts of that assessment.

Transitions in Administration

The College of Arts and Sciences had a new Dean, a new Associate Dean, and a new Assistant Dean appointed by the start of AY 2001-02, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs, who guided the creation and implementation of the GSP, retired to the faculty in Spring 2004. This turnover essentially meant that the individuals responsible for overseeing the creation and

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implementation of the General Studies Program were no longer in positions of administrative oversight once that oversight was to take place. In particular, while the Outcomes and Evaluation Committee was convened and charged by the original College of Arts and Sciences Dean in 2000, that committee was disbanded (or allowed to dissolve) when the new Dean took office. A new Outcomes and Assessment Committee was never constituted, thus never convened, and thus never received a charge to assess the General Studies Program. This influenced the second handicap identified in the University’s assessment of its General Studies Program, namely the structure of the committee responsible for outcomes and evaluation assessment.

Outcomes and Evaluation Committee Reincarnated

In lieu of creating and convening the Outcomes and Evaluation Committee, the new Dean of the College and Arts and Sciences convened two new committees in Fall 2003: a new General

Studies Coordinating Committee (GSCC) and a First Year Experience Curriculum Committee (FYECC). The new General Studies Coordinating Committee was charged with the tasks of the Outcomes and Evaluation Committee, plus the additional tasks of overseeing the evolution of the General Studies Program (for instance in terms of courses to be added or removed from the General Studies Area). Specifically, the new General Studies Coordinating Committee was given the following charge:

1. To create and implement an assessment plan which would result in relevant data regarding student outcomes and the overall efficacy of the GSP;
2. to make concrete recommendations as to the improvement and/or revision of the GSP based on evidence resulting from the assessment; and
3. to address other GSP curriculum issues, including reviews of requests for GS status and GS-specific faculty development workshops.

The structure of this new committee excluded the First Year Experience courses and the Academic Foundations Program component, which were being handled by their respective committees. It also did not include the Director of Institutional Research (a provision suggested in the original General Studies Program Proposal). This new General Studies Coordinating Committee (i.e., the reconstituted Outcomes and Evaluation Committee) comprised the Chair plus ten faculty members serving on a rotating and staggered term basis. It had no dedicated support staff to assist in its work. While the decision to constitute the committee in this fashion may have been based in part on easing the logistics of scheduling and convening meetings, this structure also undermined the efficiency of the committee. For instance, the smaller size of the committee obviously meant greater responsibilities for individual members, which, in turn, meant increased weight on the participation of each member.

The rationale for the staggered terms may have been to increase participation on the committee, but here, too, the overall effect was to negatively impact the overall efficiency of the committee. From its inception through fall 2008, only one member has served for the full duration. A high turnover rate virtually ensured that progress towards assessment would be slow. New members needed to become familiar with previous actions and ongoing plans, and the new members brought new ideas and new concerns that the committee then explored.

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Assessment

Despite these limitations, the General Studies Coordinating Committee did propose an assessment process that consisted of quantitative and qualitative measures, including: surveys of student perceptions, surveys of faculty perceptions, syllabus review, and competency assessment (see **Appendix D**) that were described and incorporated in the 2005 Middle States Periodic Review Report. At this point, the General Studies Coordinating Committee has completed the syllabus review, the survey of faculty perceptions, and a pilot MAPP (Measures of Academic Proficiency and Progress) test. But with the exception of the two syllabus reviews, the data available in the other instruments are insufficient to determine whether or not the GSP is meeting the objectives described above.

While it is possible to argue that the insufficient data could also be interpreted to mean there is no way to conclusively claim that the GSP is not meeting its goals, at least some problems with the GSP are apparent both to faculty and administration, and perhaps to students. The use of “Program” in referring to General Studies at NJCU is somewhat misleading since it implies a level of cohesion that seems lacking if not absent in the GSP. The syllabus review within the GSCC, for instance, was undertaken to determine the extent to which criteria of the GSA were

being met in the classroom, at least as manifested in the course syllabus distributed to students at the start of the semester. As noted above, to be included in the GSA, all courses were reviewed and approved by a committee to ensure that the objectives of the GSA were being addressed. Yet the most recent review noted, among a number of problems, that it was difficult to determine from the evidence in the syllabus whether or not something as basic as the writing competency (one of the two essential core competencies to be addressed in all GSA courses) was being met in the classroom. The overwhelming majority of the syllabi made no mention of the General Studies Program or that the particular course was part of any such program. The corresponding review by the FYECC showed those courses to be much more consonant with the FYE objectives and goals. With the GSA courses, though, the connection between the objectives of the GSP and the courses are weakened dramatically in most cases.

Another area of concern is the distribution of courses in the General Studies Program. For instance, it was noted that it is possible, perhaps even likely, for a student to complete the entire GSP at the 100-level. Analysis indicated that of the 123 courses in the GSA, 102 are 100-level, with only 17 at the 200-level and 1 at the 300-level, and the remaining being lab sections associated with 100-level courses. Moreover, only 13 of these courses require prerequisites. According to the Dean's report to the Cabinet, the GSCC reported a general consensus that "more advanced courses of greater depth in a subject would benefit student learning." When it is factored in that the 66 credits in the GSP represent over half of the credits required for graduation, and that additional 100- or 200-level courses are frequently required in the introductory stages of the major (and under current policy, major courses, even if part of a department's GSA offerings, are not permitted to count towards GSP credits), it follows that the actual number of 100-level courses completed by students is very likely closer to 66% (depending on the major) of their 128-credit total. Academic departments within the GSA should be encouraged/required to limit the 100-level and include more 200 level offerings in their GSA courses.

Preliminary results of the MAPP instrument were not particularly encouraging: "MAPP data
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shows [sic] little or no growth in the essential skills of reading, writing, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking between first semester students and fourth semester students" (Dean's Report to the Cabinet, 2007). Comparison of NJCU Student Proficiency Levels with National Cohort-Counterparts indicate that NJCU students achieved lower proficiency levels in all skill proficiency areas than those achieved by their cohort-counterparts nationally. It should be noted, however, that NJCU students uniformly gain skill proficiencies and academic area knowledge between their Freshman and Senior years, based on MAPP results. NJCU students achieved equal or higher proficiency increases in many skill proficiency areas than those achieved by their national counterparts. Although some solace can be taken by the fact that the sample size was insufficient to draw any statistically significant conclusions, these tentative (and statistically inconclusive) numbers would lend at least some justification for a critical review of the General Studies Program.

Strengths

- The goals of the General Studies Program support *Vision 2010* with particular emphasis on Strategies Four and Five.
- The design of the General Studies Program, developed in a collaborative manner, exposes students to the liberal arts and to different faculties and departments.

Challenges

- There is not sufficient assessment data to determine if the program objectives and the student learning goals of the GSP have been achieved.
- The rigor of the courses in the General Studies Program needs to be reviewed.
- The committees reviewing the General Studies Program have not met consistently and its members have changed frequently resulting in a lack of continuity in the important work to be accomplished.

Recommendations

1. Reconvene the Committee of Outcomes and Evaluation with the specific charge to:
 - review General Studies Program requirements and curriculum; and
 - create an assessment plan for the General Studies Program.
2. Assess student General Studies Program outcomes.
3. Make programmatic changes based on assessment.
4. Explore the possibility of creating an interdisciplinary capstone project to help students synthesize the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the program. Such a course might also provide an important assessment opportunity to determine the achievement of the university student learning outcomes, as well as the overall impact and success of its General Studies Program.