

Survey & Review of General Education Tier One Courses, Spring 2010

With Findings and Recommendations, 9/27/10

By the University-wide General Education Committee (UWGEC)

Background and Procedure

The University -wide General Education Committee (UWGEC) was charged by the former Office of Instruction and later by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs to annually review a subset of Tier One General Education courses. Since the original charge recommended that each course be reviewed every five years, 1/5 of the courses were randomly selected. The first review was conducted in 2007-08. It consisted of a review of syllabi gathered from the instructors and TCE data from the TCE office. For various reasons, the Committee took a one-year hiatus from course reviews.

In Fall 2009 the Vice Provost requested that UWGEC resume the review in Spring 2010 with some alterations. It was agreed that the review was not to “police” the courses but to find out how Tier One instructors have implemented the Tier One criteria and to document best practices. Members interviewed the selected instructors using a standardized list of questions. Each interview was conducted by two members during February-March 2010, and the combined interview notes were submitted and collated into one report. The following **21 courses** were reviewed:

INDV102	11	PERSONAL MORALITY	PHIL	094	Mark Timmons
INDV102	18	E EUROPE CINEMA/SCL CONT	RSSS	094	George Gutsche
INDV102	05	GENDER+CONTEMP SOCIETY	SOC	094	Mary Speidel
INDV103	06	PHIL PERSPECT ON SOCIETY	PHIL	094	Marc Johansen
INDV103	15	ROLE/MARKETS+INCENTIVES	AREC	081	Pullen
INDV103	13	POP CULT/MEDIA+LATIN ID	MAS	081	Broyles-Gonzalez
NATS101	03	INTRO TO GLOBAL CHANGE	HWR	094	Katherine Hirschboeck
NATS101	05	INTRO WEATHER+CLIMATE	ATMO	094	Xubin Zeng
NATS 101	05	INTRO WEATHER+CLIMATE	ATMO	094	Charles Weidman
NATS101	05	INTRO WEATHER+CLIMATE	ATMO	094	Emil Kursinski
NATS101	04	BASC CNCPT+WATR REL APPL	ABE	094	William Rasmussen
NATS102	06	AERONAUTICS:SCI+PEOPLE	AME	094	Ryan Randall
NATS104	08	LIFE ON EARTH	GEOS	094	Owen Davis
NATS104	01	EVOL OF MODERN BIOLOGY	MCB	084	Deb Tomanek
TRAD101	06	COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA	HIST	094	Kevin Gosner
TRAD101	15	THE AFRICANA EXPERIENCE	AFAS	094	Bayo Ijagbemi
TRAD103	04	ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY	ARC	094	Anne Nequette
TRAD103	05	MAKING AM CULT:1600- 1877	HIST	094	Michael Bonner
TRAD104	01	COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS	RELI	094	Robert Burns
TRAD104	13	ORIGINS OF HUM DIVERSITY	ANTH	091	Steven Kuhn
TRAD 104	19	HUM+ANML INTERL DOM-PRES	VSC	094	Elaine Marchello (demo)

General Findings from the Interviews

Most courses were taught using regular lecture format, with some supplemented by breakout or smaller discussion sections. One used collaborative learning groups within the large lecture, and others utilized demonstrations, take-home labs and review sessions to enrich the lectures. Many used online activities through D2L. All but 2 of the instructors had assistance from graduate teaching assistants, preceptors or both. The assistants helped with everything from grading to organizing the take-home labs, proctoring exams, tutoring writing, holding office hours, and preparing exams or written assignments.

Teaching critical and evaluative thinking meant various things to different instructors. Some felt it was taught by maintaining an open, non-judgmental atmosphere in the class; more often it entailed problem-solving, written assignments, discussion, debate, and/or essay exam questions. Methods included clickers, weekly homework, or in-class material to solve everyday problems. Creative and interactive learning was incorporated in a variety of ways. Examples ranged from online materials via D2L to the use of guest speakers, demonstrations, narrative writing and sharing, and changing lesson plans based on student feedback. Some instructors encouraged interaction by making themselves more accessible and walking around the classroom.

Most instructors used some type of technology, with Power Point being the most common tool. Many also utilized videos, the Internet, ELMO, and clickers. One obstacle was that not all classrooms are updated for these kinds of technology. On the other hand, some rooms with the latest technology lack black- or white-boards, which can be very useful as well.

Most instructors agreed that the writing component was important, and most required writing of some type. It was noted that the NATS courses did not lend themselves to prose, so those instructors were very creative with writing assignments. About half of the instructors gave their students an opportunity to revise one written assignment. In some classes, a revision was available but optional for students. Most instructors identified a lack of funding and time for grading as limitations on written assignments. One instructor said that he could not find a GTA who was well-versed enough to grade written work to his standards. This instructor did not allow revisions, as he felt the students lacked ability and preparation.

All but one instructor offered either an Honors contract or section. For some, the Honors contract/section meant an extra paper, but for others, the Honors component involved a special project, additional meeting times or more advanced assignments to challenge the students.

Almost all instructors felt they gave enough feedback to the students by the drop deadline (the 40% guideline) so students could make informed decisions as to whether or not they should complete the class. Those with more flexible grading systems commented that they gave students weekly feedback on their performance.

With regard to the Tier One course goals, most of the courses met the criteria. A couple classes did not meet one or more of the guidelines but fulfilled the majority. One criterion missing from a couple NATS courses was the "hands-on" activities. Those instructors noted that this was due to lack of resources and funding.

Most instructors supported the General Education Evaluative Rubric. A few made suggestions on rewording or altering a couple guidelines. Many reiterated that writing was critical and should always be implemented. One instructor was assigned this course as a new instructor but was never told about the writing requirement.

When asked how the University could better support Tier One instructors (other than with monetary support), the responses focused on more technology support and training, as well as more support for the library. Instructors noted that LTC and UTC were very helpful. One instructor pointed out that the University provides great support programs for faculty, but they are not well advertised.

When asked what else they would like to share with the Committee, many instructors affirmed the importance of and their support for the General Education Curriculum. One instructor said that all faculty should teach a General Education course as part of their teaching responsibilities. As expected, there were some negative comments about a lack of financial support and insufficient GTAs. Regarding the survey, most instructors thought the questions were appropriate and that the interviews would illicit good information. Of special note is the fact that a couple members left an interview very inspired!

For more detailed information regarding the interviews, such as the questions and individual responses, please see the detailed Survey Summary Report.

Recommendations based on the Survey:

Tier One Course Criteria

- **Critical and evaluative thinking** is effectively taught in a variety of ways in Tier One courses (e.g., problem-solving exercises, open discussion of current issues, debates, reflections on readings, etc.). This criterion should be maintained and good practices promoted (see Support for Faculty below).
- There is solid evidence that **creative and/or interactive learning** is happening in Tier One courses (e.g., D2L discussion forums, small group activities and presentations, individual projects, class demonstrations, etc.). Although smaller discussion sections for the larger classes are preferred, instructors use other strategies when these aren't possible. This criterion should not be changed.
- Instructors believe that the **writing criterion** is important, and the vast majority of them require written assignments, although not necessarily to the letter of UWGEC's definition of "writing-intensive courses," (i.e., a variety of assignments adding up to at least 10 pages or 2500 words, including one out-of-class assignment of 500 words and one assignment on which feedback is provided with the expectation of a revision). Large class sizes, lack of GATs or other help with grading, or the nature of the course are some limitations. The writing criterion should be upheld, and creative strategies should be suggested to instructors.
- **The hands-on, inquiry-based experience goal** for NATS courses needs improvement. Since there is no separate laboratory requirement for students, this criterion is important. NATS instructors who have found ways to incorporate a practice component in their classes should share their methods with others. UWGEC will compile a list of methods for each NATS course number. Perhaps a few "NATS mentors" should be designated to coach newer NATS instructors on best practices in the biological sciences or physical sciences.
- Excellent interdisciplinary courses are offered as a result of the current Gen Ed criteria. Instructors do not support lesser or different standards. While some instructors proposed tweaking the criteria, there was no consensus on adding criteria. **UWGEC should continue evaluating course proposals using current standards.**

Support for Gen Ed Faculty

- Many instructors expressed interest in more interaction with other Gen Ed faculty, specifically to share best practices. UWGEC and the OIA will co-sponsor monthly **brown-bag information sessions** or workshops for this purpose. There will be a short presentation on a given topic (e.g., teaching critical thinking) followed by an exchange of ideas. A classroom is reserved in the OIA for these events.

- UWGEC and the OIA will develop a **list of best practices** to be posted on the OIA or UWGEC Web site and available as handouts for Gen Ed instructors. The list will consist of suggestions on “writing in multiple formats” and on ways to meet the other Gen Ed course criteria.
- As part of **OIA’s Teaching Academy** (August 17-18) in connection with New Faculty Orientation, UWGEC should present a couple sessions for Gen Ed instructors—such as a panel presentation on teaching strategies or technology featuring experienced Tier One faculty.
- **Room & Course Scheduling** should give priority to Tier One classes with a minimum of 200 students for classrooms equipped with up-to-date technology. Instructors can’t teach a large class without a microphone and/or internet connections and tools.

Frequency, Format and Objectives of Future Gen Ed Course Reviews

- The survey with a random sample of 21 Tier One course instructors produced findings that are reliably representative. Instead of repeating the survey next year with another sample of Tier One courses, UWGEC should conduct the survey with a random sample of Tier Two courses in 2011. In other words, **Tier One courses should be reviewed every other year**, alternating with the Tier Two review.
- UWGEC members believe that the one-on-one interviews yielded much more useful information than an electronic or hard copy questionnaire. All but one of the instructors contacted for the survey agreed to participate, and they gave the interviewers positive feedback on the survey questions. Therefore, **members recommend future use of this delivery mode and questionnaire**.
- UWGEC should not function as a judge/jury that passes a sentence and removes courses that don’t meet the Gen Ed criteria. Having tried the punitive approach in 2008, **UWGEC recommends the constructive/coaching approach for future course reviews**. Most instructors want their courses to meet the Gen Ed standards, and they are open to expanding their repertoire of teaching strategies (thus the need to identify best practices).

Tier One Course Numbering System--Resolved

- UWGEC was concerned that the generic Tier One course prefixes (i.e., INDV, NATS, and TRAD) and numbers, have confused and frustrated students and have created problems in the UAccess system. Since the course categories serve a worthwhile purpose—ensuring breadth of studies—UWGEC wants to retain those. During the summer, Chair Fleming collaborated with the Mosaic team and Course Scheduling staff to devise another way to designate the multitude of courses with the same generic number. Their solution was to assign a 2-letter code to each Tier One course (e.g., INDV 101-AB, INDV 101-AC) to distinguish one from another. This recommendation was presented to UWGEC and the Undergraduate Council during the week of September 13, 2010, and both groups endorsed it. A group of students will test the new course number system on test screens of the Course Catalog and Schedule of Classes prior to system-wide implementation for Fall 2011 Priority Registration.