

Report of the Task Force on General Education Issues March 2, 2011

BACKGROUND

The Task Force on General Education Issues was charged by the Faculty Senate Executive Committee to make recommendations about our General Education policies for native and transfer students in light of the changes in General Education and Transfer policies enacted by the Board of Trustees in 2009/2010. As explained in the letter to the faculty of October 7, 2010 from the Chair of the Faculty Senate, the transitional plan put forward by Provost Mary Ann Swain on June 24, 2010 was meant to be a temporary plan for the 2010/2011 academic year.

SUMMARY OF OUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our general education program was adopted in 1996 before the SUNY mandate and amended to conform with SUNY General Education requirements in 2000. The addition of a third-level foreign language requirement in 2003 was part of unique campus initiatives. Our comprehensive General Education curriculum is intended to help students develop an appreciation of and capacity for effective personal expression; knowledge about various intellectual traditions; an understanding of and respect for different peoples and civilizations; knowledge of and appreciation for the natural world, achieved through active engagement with the methods and philosophy of natural science; logical thinking, balanced skepticism, and tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty; a knowledge of and appreciation for the arts and creative expression; skills needed to locate, evaluate, and synthesize information from a variety of sources; skills needed to understand and use basic research techniques, and skills needed to perform the basic operations of personal computer use (gened.binghamton.edu). The program requires proficiency in foreign language that goes beyond the former minimum SUNY requirement. Rationales for this requirement include preparing students to compete in a global environment, developing competence in a foreign language, becoming culturally literate, understanding how language functions, empowering students to assume positions of leadership, and promoting a campus identity in internationalization (Proposed General Education Program in the Area of Foreign Languages, 2001). The University's current strategic plan continues an emphasis on a global vision and calls for enhancing student's preparation for a global society and increasing student's exposure to global research and scholarship (Strategic Plan 2010).

The faculty maintains a commitment to this vision for a broad-based general education program with an emphasis on globalization. We recommend making no changes to the structure of the General Education policy as currently enacted. However, the foreign language element of the current general education program has not been implemented for transfer students. We recommend that this policy be fully implemented in Fall 2013, or, if implementation proves to be impossible, that the policy be formally amended by the Faculty Senate.

Our third-level foreign language requirement was instituted in 2000. There are program exceptions. Watson Engineering students have no foreign language requirement and Watson Computer Science and Nursing students have a first-level foreign language requirement. Transfer students were required to meet the State general education requirement for foreign language (first-level) and the third-level requirement was initially supposed to go into effect for transfer students in Fall 2004. The Provost waived the requirement for 2004 and in 2005 the Faculty Senate amended its 2002 foreign language policy statement to delay implementation for

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transfer students until Fall 2009. In December 2008, the Provost indicated that the policy could not be implemented for Fall 2009 because of resource issues, and the Provost issued a new temporary policy in June 2010 for Fall 2010 new transfers. The temporary policy has no foreign language requirement for transfer students.

The Foreign Language requirement passed by the Faculty Senate in 2002 remains in effect. It has simply never been fully implemented for transfer students. We recommend that we continue with our efforts to implement the General Education program which applies equally to native and transfer students.

We need to consider how this can be accomplished. This report discusses the difficulties involved in implementing the third-level foreign language requirement for transfer students. We recommend that the Faculty Senate re-affirm commitment to implementing general education for all graduates by Fall 2013. A joint implementation task force should be formed with a charge of reporting to the Faculty Senate by December 2011 on how a third-level foreign language requirement for transfer students can be implemented. We foresee that implementation will involve changing the way that foreign languages courses are structured and scheduled, commitment of faculty and support resources, and development of innovative approaches. If the implementation task force concludes that implementation in Fall 2013 will not be possible, the Faculty Senate should reconsider the foreign language requirement for transfer students. It is not tenable to continue the situation of having a requirement that is never implemented.

The University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee is also recommending a change in the definition of G (Global Interdependency) courses to return to our original (before revisions made to conform with SUNY requirements) conception of the requirement. The suggested language for a revised definition of the G requirement to go into effect in Fall 2011 is:

The primary focus of Global Interdependencies (G) courses is to study how two or more distinctive world regions have influenced and interacted with one another and how such interactions have been informed by their respective cultures or civilizations.

The proposed change drops the Western Civilization requirement for G courses. The primary rationale underlying this decision is that students are exposed to Western Civilization issues in much of their curriculum already, making inclusion of Western Civilization issues in the G requirement unnecessary. Moreover, trying to focus both on Western Civilization and global interdependencies in a single course has made it quite difficult for instructors to design courses that meet our current G requirement. Under the newly proposed language for the G requirement, all current G courses would continue to meet the new definition, but additional courses focusing on global interdependencies will meet the new definition, thereby resulting in increased offerings of G courses available to students.

ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE

The General Education Task Force met frequently in Fall 2010. We met with the following individuals and groups: the Interim Provost, Terry Kelley-Wallace and Liz Carter (concerning transfer students), and the advisors from all of the Schools and Colleges that have undergraduate students. This Spring we met with representatives of the Deans and with the General Education Implementation Committee.

We gathered data on general education policies and actions of the local Faculty Senate, the Board of Trustees, and the SUNY Provost's office. We have gathered statistical data on the transfer student population. We conducted a survey of the Binghamton University faculty on General Education policy issues.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE FACULTY SURVEY

The majority of respondents to the faculty survey (65%) were satisfied with the current General Education program for freshmen (native students). An examination of the comments on the current program for native students shows that 52% feel the current program is not sufficiently rigorous, 27% support continuing the status quo, and 15% suggest more flexibility/fewer requirements.

In response to the question about policy alternatives, 72.6% favored continuing our existing General Education program for native students. That group was about evenly split on requiring the same General Education program for all transfer students or providing flexibility for transfer students. When analyzing comments on the policy options, 55% feel that transfer students must meet the same requirements as native students, 29% feel that transfer students should have a more flexible program, and 10% feel that all students should have a reduced general education program.

We will pass along the concerns with the quality and rigor of the current General Education program to the UUC and to Sean McKittrick who oversees Gen Ed assessment.

SUMMARY OF CONCERNS OF THE ADVISORS

Meeting all the general education requirements including third-level foreign language may result in additional time to degree. Several categories (G and P) of general education courses do not have enough sections to make them easy to schedule. Foreign language courses present particular scheduling difficulties as discussed below.

TRANSFER STUDENT STATISTICS

We gathered statistical information about the transfer student population of Binghamton University to help better understand how general education requirements affect transfer students. On average 34% of new students are transfer students and 66% new freshmen. Around 1,200 transfer students enter the University each year. Transfer students are a very significant segment

of our student body. Approximately 60% of transfer students come from SUNY institutions. Arranging appropriate advising and articulation agreements is more feasible for these students than for the 40% who come from other institutions. On average 44% of transfer students enter with sufficient credits to be considered juniors or seniors, 39% sophomores, and 16% freshmen. Meeting additional general education requirements is easier for students entering at an earlier point in their programs. The overall average first semester GPA for new freshmen and new transfer students is not dramatically different but this differs by school and year. Overall average GPAs at time of graduation for transfer students do not differ greatly from the overall averages, although they are lower for Harpur and Watson students. (Source: OIR reports listed in the resources section)

WHY DOES THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT CREATE SUCH A BIG PROBLEM?

Meeting the third-level foreign language requirement can be a problem for several reasons. The first reason relates to scheduling difficulties. The second reason relates to resources.

If a student lacks background in foreign languages, it may take as many as three courses to fulfill the requirement. This is different from other General Education requirements which can be met with a single course. Introductory level foreign language courses typically meet four days a week for five hours of contact time. This makes them difficult to fit into the schedule of transfer students who may be locked into various departmental required courses. Furthermore, few language tracks at Binghamton offer level 1, 2 and 3 courses each semester. Perceived or actual time-to-degree problems resulting from this requirement may impact our ability to attract the best transfer students.

Some transfer students will have fulfilled the third-level foreign language requirement in high school or by taking courses at their transfer institution. An analysis of a sample of transfer student transcripts from 2006/2007 indicates that about 40% of students may fall into this category. Of the remaining students, about half had 85 on a foreign language regents, thus meeting the SUNY foreign language requirement. The other half would not have fulfilled the State requirement, and therefore would have taken a foreign language course (unless a Watson Engineering student). Implementation of a third-level foreign language requirement for these students means that the ones with the SUNY foreign language requirement completed would have to take at least two more foreign language courses and the other students might need three courses.

When one combines these facts with the scheduling issues noted above, it appears that implementation of a third semester foreign language requirement could result in additional time to degree for unprepared transfers. It seems unlikely that this problem can be fully resolved through better advising, which is the approach that has been taken since 2002 with little effect. It is also noted that third-level foreign language courses are not necessarily available at all feeder institutions even if transfer students knew they were coming to Binghamton and wanted to meet our foreign language requirement in advance.

Furthermore, the resource implications can be estimated from the sample study. Typically about 1,200 transfer students come here each year. Forty percent of the students would have met our third-level (freshman) foreign language requirement. Thirty percent of the students would have needed to take a foreign language course to SUNY requirements, so we are already meeting that need. These students and the other 30% who met the SUNY requirement would need to take one or two additional foreign language courses depending on individual background and circumstances. The number of transfer students falling in this category are about 700 students per year. The actual impact would be lower because some of these students are in Watson Engineering, Watson Computer Science or Nursing. Our estimate is that 500 students per year would need to take additional foreign language courses (over and above what is currently required). This would require more sections of second and third semester foreign language courses. To provide some context, we are offering 17 sections of second and third semester foreign language courses in Spring 2011.

WHAT OTHER SOLUTIONS DID THE TASK FORCE CONSIDER?

The task force considered several alternatives to solving the foreign language/transfer problem. One suggestion was to reduce the General Education foreign language requirement to first-level and have third-level foreign language as a School requirement. However, we did not feel that reducing the foreign language requirement was consistent with the importance placed on international education at Binghamton University.

Another alternative that has been proposed in the past is to require third-level foreign language for transfer students entering the University prior to their junior year but not for transfers entering with junior status and above. On average, about 1,200 transfer students come each year. 16.38% are freshmen, 39.3% sophomores, 35.43% juniors and 8.88% seniors. In the past faculty have objected to exempting all transfer students from third-level foreign language requirements based on time to degree considerations because it is assumed that students entering with freshman and sophomore status have time to incorporate the requirement. More than half of transfer students fall into this category. A number of problems arise if we exempt transfer students arriving as juniors and above from third-level foreign language. The advisors indicate that it is difficult to identify precisely at the time they begin here whether students are sophomores or juniors. Many lack final transcripts so there are uncertainties about how many

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credits will transfer, etc. Aside from this practical consideration, many faculty feel strongly that all students getting the same degree should have met the same requirements.

An additional alternative discussed was the compromise of requiring second level foreign language for transfer students. This alternative would require less resource investment and result in fewer time-to-degree problems for transfer students, but it perpetuates the situation that all students receiving the same degree have not met the same basic requirements.

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Supporting Documents, available online:

- Letter to Faculty October 7, 2010 - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-letter-to-faculty-100710.doc>
- Memorandum from Mary Ann Swain June 24, 2010 - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-memo-swain-062410.doc>
- Board of Trustees resolution on Transfers – <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-bot-resolution-trfr-111709.doc>
- Board of Trustees resolution on General Education - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-bot-resolution-gened-011910.pdf>
- May 2010 memorandum from Provost Lavalley - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-memo-lavalley-052810.doc>
- General Education Survey results summary - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-survey-summary-nov2010.xls>
- 2010 Strategic Plan - <http://www2.binghamton.edu/academics/provost/documents/2010-strategic-plan.doc>
- 2001 Proposal on the Foreign Language Requirement - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-2001-foreign-language-proposal.rtf>
- Office of Institutional Research and Assessment Transfer Data:
 - Undergraduate population by term and status - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-term-status.pdf>
 - Undergraduate population by year and level - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-year-level.pdf>
 - Profile of undergraduate transfer students by level and transfer institution type - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-profile-level-institution.pdf>
 - Overall average first semester GPA for new freshmen and new transfer students by school - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-avg-gpa-new.pdf>
 - Average GPA for all students at time of graduation by school - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-avg-gpa-all.pdf>
 - Average GPA for transfer students at time of graduation by school - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-avg-gpa-transfer.pdf>
 - Credit hours transferred in by transfer students - <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/TF-transfer-data-credits-range-revised.pdf>