

**Backgrounder: How and Why the GEC
Has Proposed New Goals for the Program**
September 1, 2011

“[G]eneral education is the vehicle in higher education specifically focused on introducing students to ways of knowing, integrative knowledge, appreciation of historical context and common themes of human experience, social responsibility, civic (global and local) engagement, and the development of practical skills and reflective habits of mind.”

—Center for Studies in Higher Education,
General Education in the 21st Century,
UC, Berkeley, 2007: p. 7.

The General Education Committee (GEC) has been considering revisions to the program for the past four years, largely in response to conversations arising from past FTLC conferences and best represented by two publications from the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U).

Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College (2002) draws on a mix of academic, employer, and community perspectives to identify the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that successful adults need and use in their home, work, and civic lives. It’s no coincidence that these phrases come in threes: recent trends in higher education follow from the long-established triad of core purposes of liberal education:

the *epistemic* (coming to know, discovery, and the advancing of knowledge and understanding); the *eudemonic* (the fuller realization of the learner, the actualizing of the person’s potential—classically to achieve individual well-being and happiness); and the *civic* (the understanding that learning puts the learner in relation to what is other, to community and its diversity in the broadest sense, as well as the responsibility that comes from sustaining the community and the civic qualities that make both open inquiry and self-realization possible). (Donald W. Harward, “Engaged Learning and the Core Purposes of Liberal Education,” *Liberal Education* [Winter 2007]: pp. 6-7)

The model here is not learning for its own sake; rather, it is a model for practical wisdom, following in the broad tradition of “civic virtue” espoused by Isocrates in ancient Athens and

Cicero in ancient Rome. It represents a commitment to theory *and* practice, to learning in context, and to the cultivation of what might best be called a democratic disposition. To put it in the terms of cognitive psychologist and educational theorist Jerome Bruner, the model represents a shift from an information-processing model of mind to a meaning-making model of mind. It aims toward an active, inquiry-based, verb-oriented development of *capabilities*. Its ultimate aims are not purely academic, or vocational, or civic: it is a model that aims to develop the whole person.

Grand Valley long ago committed itself to this broad model of general education when it established a “distribution” requirement rather than a core curriculum. A core curriculum privileges knowledge, or content, as the basis for personal growth. In contrast, a distribution requirement de-emphasizes *particular* disciplinary knowledge in favor of methodologies, ways of knowing, and skills. Our GE program balances “knowledge goals” and “skills goals,” and the introductory descriptions of our GE categories clearly emphasize *kinds* of knowledge and *ways* of knowing as opposed to particular bodies of knowledge. Our GE program does not require Chemistry or Physics; it requires a course in the Physical Sciences. It does not require Plato or Shakespeare; it requires a course in Philosophy and Literature.

Consider the “Historical Perspectives” category of our GE program. It lists 11 courses from four different departments covering a range of geographic regions and time-periods. After fulfilling this category requirement, our students have no *particular* knowledge of history. Instead, they have been exposed to “the study of history,” which, according to the introductory description of the category:

enables societies to share memories of where they have been, what their core values are, and what decisions in the past account for present circumstances. It helps to create an informed, discriminating citizenry educated in democratic processes of governance,

appreciative of their fragility and rarity, and capable of employing them productively. In addition, the study of history nurtures the individual by providing one of the keys to self-identity within the context of shared communities. Finally, history allows one to see both the differences among cultures and the universality of the human subject. (*General Education Program*, 2011-12 Handbook, p. 25)

The broad “outcomes” of our Historical Perspectives category, written and refined by our own GVSU faculty, compare well with the kinds of outcomes we see in the national conversation about liberal education. Carol Geary Schneider, the long-time president of the AAC&U, identifies four sets of outcomes that define a well and broadly educated person:

- A solid knowledge of disciplines that explore the physical and social realms—together with a grasp of their characteristic modes of inquiry and findings;
- Strong analytical, communication, and practical skills—acquired and applied through study in a range of fields and through experiential learning;
- An examined framework of ethical, civic and social responsibilities—and of their implications for democratic and global citizenship;
- “Intentional” and integrative capacities that support continuous learning. (Carol Geary Schneider, “Preparing Students for What? School-Age Alignment in an Era of Greater Expectations,” *peerReview* [Winter 2003]: pp. 15-16)

Our entire GE program, not just the HP category, clearly embraces and pursues all four sets of these outcomes. We have the distribution requirements that give students exposure to a range of disciplinary knowledge and ways of knowing. We have skills goals embedded in all GE courses. We have a program-wide knowledge goal focusing on “the tradition of humane inquiry,” the Cultures categories, and many Theme courses that highlight issues of citizenship and democracy. And we have the “integration” goal within the upper-level Theme component.

As we consider the proposed revisions, then, it is important that we understand what our *current* GE program is and is not. It is not a core curriculum. It is also not a collection of introductory courses to the majors. The primary aim of a GE course is not to prepare students for the rigors and demands of a major course of study. Indeed, it is better to think of GE courses as

the *last* course our students will take in a particular field, not the first. The primary aim of a GE course is to prepare students for the demands and opportunities of democratic living.

The LEAP Goals

The proposed revisions seek not to break from these goals but to extend and enrich them. The AAC&U itself, which produced the *Greater Expectations* vision in 2002, moved in the middle of this past decade to identify the specific outcomes required of a twenty-first-century university education. *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007) introduced what we have come to call the LEAP (Liberal Education & America's Promise) goals—12 essential learning outcomes of a liberal education:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

Intellectual and Practical Skills:

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Personal and Social Responsibility:

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Integrative Learning

(*College Learning for the New Global Century* 3)

Some of these goals were already a part of our program, but some were not, so the General Education Committee took the publication of *College Learning for the New Global Century* as an opportunity to reflect on and consider changes to the specific content and skills goals of our general education curriculum.

The GEC began reflecting on the LEAP goals in 2007. We surveyed GVSU faculty and EAP staff, asking them to prioritize the 12 essential learning outcomes from the LEAP report.

We also surveyed recent GE faculty, asking them to prioritize the outcomes in relation to their particular courses. In August 2008, we held a two-day workshop during which faculty from across campus imagined ways to align the LEAP goals with GE program goals. By March 2009, the GEC floated an initial and very informal proposal to add several of the goals here at GVSU.

Those spring 2009 discussions led the GEC to survey all departments and programs in Fall 2009 to see how many of the LEAP goals were already a part of major-curriculum offerings around campus. We found that existing GE goals (written communication, information literacy, etc.) are nearly unanimously taught as part of major curricula here at GVSU. The proposed goals are widely taught but not to the same degree as our existing goals. From these data, the GEC learned that the AAC&U's essential learning outcomes, or LEAP goals, are widely supported around campus, and we became even more convinced that the GE program and the major curricula must work together to emphasize the same goals. Some may see this as "duplication," but we see it as reinforcement. And it is important that these key learning outcomes are taught from various perspectives, inside and outside the majors, in order for students to prepare for a world in which they interact with people both inside and outside their fields, professions, and cultures.

Goal Distribution

By Fall 2009, the GEC had become committed to the idea of adding four new goals to the GE program: teamwork, problem-solving, civic engagement, and ethical reasoning. Ethical reasoning was really a revision of the "tradition of humane inquiry" knowledge goal already in the program, so in effect we were working toward adding just three new goals. We knew, however, that adding any number of goals would require a plan for distributing the teaching and assessing of the goals in the program. Currently, courses in all Foundations and Cultures

categories are responsible for teaching and assessing just three skills goals: written *or* oral communication, critical and creative thinking, and information literacy. In order to add goals and still ensure that students had a reasonable chance to receive instruction in and experience with each goal, we would have to develop some systematic way to distribute the goals through the GE curriculum.

In Fall 2010, we surveyed all department with courses in GE, asking them to rank the relative ease with which they could integrate the new goals into each of their GE courses. Based on that information, the GEC drafted a distribution plan that would assign three goals to each GE category, ensuring that students gained an appropriate number of exposures to each goal. That distribution plan became a part of the January 2011 draft proposal for discussion. There was not, however, universal acceptance of the goals assigned to each category, so the GEC realized that we would either have to work more with units to find appropriate goals for each category or find a way to provide more choice and flexibility to faculty while still assuring ourselves that each new goal would be taught and assessed within the program. That is where we stand today.

The Upper-level Component

In addition to the conversation about adding new goals, the GEC has for several years been considering ways to revise the upper-level component of the program. Implemented in 2000 as part of the last major revision of the GE program, the Themes expanded the GE program from an essentially lower-division program to a four-year program, with required advanced coursework outside the major, and added “integration” as a skills goal. In Fall 2009, the GEC deliberated on the Themes and affirmed these aspects as important to our GE program. A four-year GE program underscores the notion that students develop major-related and general-education goals over their entire academic careers. General education is not something to be

“gotten out of the way” so that career preparation can begin; rather, the two strands support and reinforce one another. Advanced coursework outside the major creates opportunities for students to apply and broaden their major-specific knowledge and skills. The multi-disciplinary student population of an upper-level GE course encourages students to listen to and learn about perspectives other than their own. And the integration goal promotes a synoptic view of past and current learning, asking students to reflect on how their prior courses and experiences, as well as the prior courses and experiences of their classmates, inform their understanding of new course material and new disciplinary perspectives. In sum, the GEC was unanimous in wishing to continue offering an upper-level GE component that got students outside their major, mixed them with classmates from across the disciplines, and focused on the integration of prior and new knowledge and perspectives.

At the same time, the GEC recognized problems with the Themes. As faculty, we had to admit that the “linkages” envisioned when the Themes were implemented never developed as intended. Most Theme courses exist in isolation from one another, connected only by their inclusion in a common thematic grouping. Many students didn’t “get” the idea behind the thematic groupings in the first place, and they wondered how exactly three courses in, say, “Continuity and Change in the Americas” or “Sport and Life” added to their overall curriculum. Didn’t interesting thematic connections exist between *any* three upper-level courses? A 2009 Student Senate proposal suggested that we count minors and double-majors as substitutes for Themes, since they included *more* than three courses, and those courses were by definition outside the major. If the *particular* thematic groupings were so important, some students wondered if it might be a good idea to create a transcript notation identifying the Theme they’d completed, but this raised questions about the “marketability” of the Theme titles to outside

audiences. And finally, some students simply questioned the need for three more required courses in an overall curriculum that was already packed with basic-skills courses, GE courses, and major courses.

So in 2009 and 2010, the GEC discussed a revision plan with an upper-level component whose academic and professional value would be more readily apparent and whose structure would not depend on “linkages” that we could not readily achieve. Based in large part on our reading of the AAC&U “Shared Futures” initiative, which emphasizes global learning and civic responsibility, we proposed replacing the Theme categories with “Global Issues” categories. The idea was to invite students to take courses bound not by a common theme but by a common concern for an issue of broad importance in our local and global society. These Global Issues courses would retain much of what we like about Theme courses: they would be pitched to an upper-division student population, they would mix students from various majors, and they would feature “integration” as a guiding pedagogical goal.

Our Winter 2011 draft proposal called for six or seven “Global Issues” categories to replace the 22 Themes. We felt that having 22 separate upper-level categories added to the perception that the thematic groupings were random or haphazard. We believed that our academic community could agree on a small number of overarching issues facing our world and touching most or all of our disciplines—issues like sustainability, globalization, and health care. Based on some of the feedback we received, however, it may be difficult to arrive at a consensus on these overarching issues, and if a consensus cannot be reached, we might be tempted once again to increase the number of categories and end up with 20 or 22—which we don’t want to do. As a committee and then as a campus community, we need to decide what binds the upper-level component. “Themes” suggests that the courses are held together by academic ideas.

“Global Issues” suggests that they are held together by social and political concerns. Of course, these are not the only two possibilities. We are continuing to work on this.

Our 2011 draft proposal also identified three skills goals that would animate the Global Issue courses: problem-solving, teamwork, and integration. Like Theme courses, each Global Issues course would retain a departmental prefix and a disciplinary focus, but to fulfill its function within the GE program, the course content would be oriented around a global issue, and students would practice problem-solving strategies in multi-disciplinary teams, drawing on prior knowledge (from their major and elsewhere) and integrating it with new course content. Skills goals such as these could themselves be the defining feature of the upper-level component, with or without content-based categories of courses.

Finally, our draft proposal called for the reduction of the upper-level requirement from three courses to two—a reduction that the provost and UAS made official, separate from our proposal, in February 2011. As of now, the upper-level component is a two-course requirement, and students are able to take courses with any two prefixes, including courses from their own major. Over the past couple of years, the GEC occasionally discussed the possibility of reducing the requirement even further, to a single course, with the understanding that students would not be able to use a course that counts in their major. In other words, if we had a single-course requirement, all upper-level GE courses could be designed for non-majors. Naturally, such a reduction would minimize any emphasis on content as such; it would make little sense to require a single “Themes” course, for example. Instead, the defining feature of a one-course upper-level requirement would likely be on integration—a course that brings students from various disciplines together to learn new material while reflecting on and refining past knowledge and experience.

Key Decisions

Assuming a continuing commitment to the proposed LEAP goals, the GEC begins the 2011-12 academic year facing two key decisions about the evolving proposal:

- 1) How can we distribute as many as eight skills goals through courses in the Foundations and Cultures categories in a way that both engages faculty and ensures that students gain sufficient exposure to each goal?
- 2) What should be the defining feature of the upper-level component, and how does that affect the number of courses that should be required?

In addition to addressing these decisions, the GEC needs to facilitate a broader understanding and appreciation of the proposed LEAP goals. This past summer, several teams of faculty, including members of GEC, worked to develop materials about each of the proposed goals, and we have scheduled a series of September FTLC workshops for all faculty with the goal of sharing these materials and creating a solid base of understanding among faculty prior to the finalizing of our proposal.

As a result of the summer work, two changes have already been made to the evolving proposal. On the recommendation of the faculty working on the goal, the GEC has removed “civic responsibility” from the list of new skills goals under consideration. The goal may be recast as a knowledge goal, perhaps integrated into the revised upper-level component, but it will not be proposed as a skills goal for any Foundations or Cultures courses. Also, the group working on “teamwork” recommended that the goal be called “collaboration.” This change reflects the group’s desire to define the goal as an academic and civic goal as well as a useful workplace goal. This is in keeping with the aim of the overall proposal: to ensure that the GE program is meaningful and useful to students as they develop as academics, professionals, and citizens.

We scheduled the FTLC workshops in September because we wanted faculty to have a solid understanding of the goals before we finalized our proposal in October or November. The conversation is ongoing, and we look forward to hearing from as many people as possible as we continue to deliberate on these important changes.