

General Education in an International Context.

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In 2003 it was decided that my institution, the American University of Rome, would restructure its General Education program. This was certainly needed. The university was founded in 1969 and the General Education program had not been changed much since its initiation. Before the recent changes the program comprised 12 Humanities credits, 9 Social Science credits, 9 Science & Math credits and 30 electives from any discipline. It was a smorgasbord or Chinese dinner menu model - a bit here and a bit there – and typical of many General Education programs of the late 20th century. It had the advantage of being flexible, bureaucratically simple and easy for transfer students to slot into, but did not in any way define the institution.

There was no doubt that the program was lacking any distinctive quality and did not meet the needs of the 21st century. On January 1st 2004 I was appointed to a position in the Art History department and, as a part of my administrative responsibilities, charged with reforming the General Education program with a view to modernizing it and implementing the new program in the Fall of 2004.

At this point I should say a few words about the American University of Rome itself. It is a small institution, just over 500 students and 70 faculty. It has 6 departments and focuses on Liberal Arts. The departments are Arts & Humanities, Business Studies, Communications & English, International Relations, Italian Studies and Math & Science. Institutionally we are aiming to have 50:50 ratio of study abroad to resident students but, at present, we are still heavily weighted towards study abroad. 58% of resident students are American and the rest predominantly European with a particular emphasis on Italians and Europeans from former Communist countries.

My first task, like any good academic, was to read everything I could lay my hands on and then I came to this conference a year ago. At this point I have to thank all the people who spoke last year. The quality of the papers was very high and I learnt a great deal from them. There were many excellent papers, but I have to single out Earlham College. Not so much for program content (which I think one can read), but for the how rather than the why. The organizers of this conference sent out an email sometime ago urging contributors at this conference to focus on this and I would agree that this is the most valuable thing one can learn from conferences such as these. As I think everyone here will know, the common story of General Education reform is a horror tale of divided faculty, irretrievably fractured relationships and general chaos. How does one introduce such a reform without destroying the balance of the community?

For those of you who aren't familiar, Earlham is a Quaker university where consensus is required to move ahead. They gave me many excellent ideas on how one moves towards consensus and engagement. On returning to Rome, I attempted to put the spirit of their ideas into practice.

The framework of AUR's new General Education program was put together in a faculty development exercise at which certain key administrators were also present. In this we are fortunate because we are a small community and we can all come together in ways that probably larger institutions cannot. I began the exercise by outlining the trends and the reasons for change. In his article in the Fall edition of *Peer Review* Jerry Gaff emphasizes the importance of this, otherwise you will hear "if it isn't broke don't fix it" – a proper appreciation of the issue is the essential first step. The salient points in this discussion were those of the *Greater Expectations Report*.

Changes in university population:

- 75% high school graduates attend university or college within 2 years of graduation, 90% of high school seniors expect to – but education practices designed when only an elite group went to university. As a result 53% students take remedial classes in university.
- most don't go on to get a degree – because public policy has focused on getting them into university but not what they are supposed to do when they are there
- 60% students get their degree from two or more institutions
- more student diversity – different ethnic groups etc.

Changes in society:

- great range of jobs need graduates
- technology changing so fast that the jobs our graduates will end up working in don't even exist at the moment
- move from an industrial to a knowledge based society

The faculty then divided into small groups with only one person from each department present in each group. Each group was given a pack containing information on 5 models of General Education programs and asked to analyze them with regard to what they might contribute to AUR. The purpose was not to slavishly follow any one model but to use them as springboards to think creatively about our own approach. The models chosen were:

a) Colgate. Colgate has a fairly traditional core curriculum and in many ways is similar in its subject emphasis to AUR.

b) University of Michigan. The Intergroup Relations (IGR), element which focuses on communication between individuals traditionally opposed to each other by virtue of race, sexuality, religion etc. might potentially provide us with ideas for tackling the divide that we have on campus between resident students and study abroad students. The two groups

do not mix well and thereby miss out on the potentially valuable experience of learning about diversity first hand.

c). Colby Sawyer College. The ‘Pathways Program’ which explores themes that draw together all General Education subjects. Could we focus our General Education program in such a way?

d). Wagner College. Also based on Learning Communities, but including an experiential component linked by a reflective tutorial. Could we potentially use this to link the university more into the local community? At present the students, by virtue of language and culture, do not fully integrate into the Rome community.

e) University of Delaware. Learning Integrated Freshman Experience (LIFE). Learning Communities who also share residential accommodation and have a program of co-curricular activities. Could we use this idea to get the study abroad and resident students to integrate better?

At the end each group then wrote down answers to the following questions (some gave them in the week following the exercise):

- What is the philosophy of AUR that we want to embody in our General Education Program?
- What themes could we employ if we wanted to link the courses?
- What could we use from the models presented here?

On the first two points there was a remarkable agreement between all groups – on the third point no consensus whatsoever!

- What is the philosophy of AUR that we want to embody in our General Education Program?
Intercultural, international, meeting of US & Europe.
- What themes could we employ if we wanted to link the courses?
Diversity, multiculturalism, globalization, self & society, individual and relationship to community.
- What could we use from the models presented here?
No consensus!!

The consensus that was achieved on the first two points became the guiding principles of the new General Education program. I believe that the high level of agreement on

principles resulted from our particular situation as an American institution in Rome and also from the fact that talking in small groups on a personal basis emphasized the similarities rather than the differences. Everyone was, in a sense, representing him/herself, no one was charged with representing a department or a discipline. There was no turf to defend.

The program went through several stages of refinement and regrettably some of the most innovative ideas had to be abandoned for practical reasons (mostly to do with the number of credits) but we still ended up with a distinctive signature program that has a natural route for expansion when we have the resources. In the Fall edition of *Peer Review* Trainor describes the 4 stage Ruggiero model used at Salve Regina to restructure the General Education program. This model stresses the importance of not setting the criteria first because then one always comes up with the status quo, but allowing models to be designed creatively before imposing the practical considerations.

The model that was finally implemented has a strong emphasis on foundational skills which are introduced in dedicated courses taken in freshman and sophomore years. Writing is then continued in the disciplines with all majors having requirements within their area of specialization. Information literacy and oral presentation skills are developed by means of embedded skills requirements: all students have to take a minimum number of courses which require them to utilize these skills as part of their grade.

In addition to the Foundational Skills program there are three programs which can be taken at any point of their studies. The Individual in the Multicultural Society comprises three courses exploring the impact of the multicultural society in which we live today on groups and individuals. All courses in this section emphasize the issue of diversity and students must take at least one which overtly discusses questions of ethics (in reality almost all courses contain this element). New courses are being developed which approach these issues on an interdisciplinary way. For example, a course on 'Globalization' has been introduced which is team taught by an anthropologist and an economist.

US Government and society ensures that all graduates have knowledge of the US political system and some other aspect of culture and society. Rome Caput Mundi is a requirement for all students to take at least one course which is not on campus, but out in the city of Rome exploring either the cultural and artistic heritage of the city or the sociological issues such as immigration and marginalization associated with contemporary city life.

It is envisaged that 'The Individual in the Multicultural Society' will ultimately become an integrated pathway of three courses that will form a capstone experience that will ensure that our graduates benefit to the full from the microcosm of modern society that is on campus.

REVISED GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

A. FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS PROGRAM

(up to 23 credits)

Taught Courses	Embedded Skills
Writing Skills: 2 Writing Workshop courses	Technology Skills: covered in Freshman Orientation Seminar.
Quantitative & Scientific Reasoning: 1 math course, 1 lab science course & 1 other math/science.	Information Literacy Skills: <u>Level 1:</u> Freshman Orientation Seminar. <u>Level 2:</u> Dedicated workshop <u>Level 3:</u> Independent use obtained by taking 2 courses (as part of the major or as part of gen ed) which require these skills.
Italian language: Italian 101, 101 lab, 102.	Oral Presentation Skills: <u>Level 1:</u> Freshman Orientation Seminar <u>Level 2:</u> Independent use obtained by taking 3 courses (as part of the major or as part of gen ed) which require these skills.

B. THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

(9 credits)

All students will take 3 courses that explore aspects of social, economic and cultural diversity, international relations (particularly as pertaining to Italy and Europe), the interaction of the individual in society and his/her personal development. At least one of the courses taken must be tagged as containing an ethical element meaning that in classroom discussions and/or written papers the students have to discuss the ethical and moral implications of actions and behavior. Students must take courses in at least two different disciplines.

C. U.S. GOVERNMENT & SOCIETY

(6 credits)

Every student should deepen his/her understanding of US government and society by taking one course in US government and one other course in US society, culture or history.

D. ROMA: CAPUT MUNDI

(3 credits)

Rome has a unique position in western culture and the modern city of Rome reflects more than 2,500 years of urban development. The archaeology and art of Rome are its greatest resources but also present many challenges for a modern capital city that needs to maintain a vibrant economy. All students will take one course which is conducted outside of the campus in the city itself.

REVIEW AFTER ONE SEMESTER.

The program was approved by a meeting of the faculty at the end of the spring semester 2004 and was implemented in Fall 2004 and so is now one semester old and I can review some of the problems that we have had.

1. Perhaps the biggest issue has been in the Registrar's Office. The new program is more complex and especially the embedded elements. The problem here is that these change every year and not merely from course to course, but depending on who teaches the course or even section of a course. This requires more complex record keeping. The quick-fix solution would be to designate the courses, but some faculty perceived this as an infringement of academic freedom and valuable experience learnt at this conference last year, suggested that faculty resistance is not overcome in this way.
2. Another problem has been that we found that many of the faculty were not fully prepared for administering some of the embedded elements, in particular information literacy. Overall everyone was very generous about swapping rubrics and even the most rubric-resistant faculty were won over on that point, but it was plain that there were very varying levels of expertise and expectation from the students. In fact training exercises on information literacy have now moved the emphasis over a little to the faculty from the students.
3. The third issue concerns transfer students. Obviously it isn't as easy now as it was. Any university that is going to have a strong identity cannot, at the same time, be everything to everyone, but initially there is a perception that students who transfer and lose credits because of the new General Education requirement have lost out - instead of seeing those who did not fully participate as the ones who lost out! Orientation seminars for transfer students have begun and my ultimately provide a solution to this

Overall, the new General Education program has been successful in promoting foundational skills and giving a strong sense of focus to the other studies. The main problems at present revolve around practical issues and in particular policing the embedded elements.

There are two challenges for the future:

1. The emphasis has, up to this point, been on winning over the faculty. This has been at the expense of the students. The program has not been actively promoted amongst the student body - it is still seen as something to be got out of the way rather than something which will provide them with essential skills and round out their education. Student engagement is the next key challenge that is essential to the ultimate success of the program.
2. How to assess the program as a whole rather than the individual elements? In the future this might be resolved by making the Individual in the Multicultural

Society a capstone experience, but an interim solution will also have to be developed.

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