

General Education Task Force

“Categories of Knowledge: What students should know when they graduate from NSU”

2007-08 Task Force Report (Submitted 05/06/08)

The General Education Task Force (GETF) was assembled in the fall of 2007 by Dr. Dalton Bigbee, vice president of Academic Affairs, to evaluate and consider the purpose and requirements of the GE program at Northeastern State University. It is believed that the GE requirements at NSU have not been formally reviewed in nearly 20 years.

The GETF assessed student, faculty, and alumni knowledge and opinions of general education in a survey conducted at the beginning of the spring 2008 semester. Overall it offered a positive evaluation of NSU's general education, with a 64% of the 663 surveyed giving NSU's general education core curriculum a grade of B or better. Many specific comments from the survey were reviewed and will prove especially helpful when the GETF consider specific courses next year.

In addition to the survey, the GETF reviewed Regent's requirements, looked at the requirements of other Oklahoma regional universities, and discussed the skills and/or knowledge any student graduating from Northeastern State University should ideally possess. From these, the recommended findings of the task force were generated. The categories of knowledge we list in this report, with some subtle differences, are commensurate with our sister regional institutions in Oklahoma. These categories of knowledge will also fulfill all the Oklahoma Regent's requirements for General Education.

Upon graduation from NSU, the GETF believes our students should be skillful in

- Leadership Development;
- Collaboration;
- Creativity and Imagination (both individual and collaborative);
- Social Awareness (includes civic engagement and community service);
- Integration of Skills and Knowledge;
- Tolerance for Ambiguity;
- Improved Written Communication;
- Adaptation to Changing Environments;
- General Research (with or without technology);
- Critical Thinking;
- Problem Solving; and
- Understanding One's Culture and the Culture of Others

Many of the outcomes listed above will warrant a recommendation for maintaining, altering, or creating a new GE requirement. (Recommendations for specific GE courses to meet the following skills/categories will be the charge of the GETF when it reconvenes in the fall of

2008). Other skills were broad enough to garner inclusion in more than one of the following GE categories. Generally, the previously mentioned outcomes are those essential for academic and personal success, a base for future scholastic and co-curricular experience.

The task force believes that these skills can be acquired if our students take general education courses in the following categories:

- Written and Oral Communication;
- Social and Behavioral Sciences;
- Global Perspectives and Cultures;
- Life Skills;
- Visual and Performance Art Forms;
- Western Civilization and Culture;
- Natural Sciences; and
- Quantitative Analysis (Mathematics).

I. Written and Oral Communication

Perhaps no skill is as important to a university education and professional success as the ability to communicate effectively. Since so much knowledge is transmitted through the written word both in the university and the workplace, every student should learn to communicate effectively in writing. The ability to speak well and to make presentations before an audience is also a critical skill for any future success. In learning these essential skills, students are also learning how to think critically. They learn how to consider the ideas of others, and they learn how to develop and organize their own thoughts in the most effective fashion.

Specific objectives for Written and Oral Communication include:

- Using standard vocabulary, punctuation, and grammatical constructions;
- Learning to read closely, note agreements and disagreements, and make application in his/her own work;
- Performing audience analysis;
- Communicating effectively with people from other cultures and backgrounds;
- Learning basic research skill and how to write a research essay; and
- Learning how to employ one's own writing or speaking voice effectively.

II. Social and Behavioral Sciences

Courses in the Social and Behavioral Sciences are designed to provide students with a variety of methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, to investigate human and social behavior. Courses in this area can focus on the anthropological, social, political, economic, or psychological approaches to understanding human behavior.

Specific objectives for Social and Behavioral Sciences:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the scientific methodology and analytic process as it is applied to human behavior;
- Develop an understanding of the structure of political/economic systems and how they work;
- Develop the skills to analyze and evaluate political/economic systems; and
- Develop an analytical understanding of human behavior from a variety of psychological, economic, or political perspectives.

III. Global Perspectives and Cultures

People from different times, locations, and cultures can have different perspectives and interpretations of the same event. Success in our increasingly interconnected world requires an understanding of others around the world—a global perspective. Our graduates must have an appreciation of causes and consequences and interrelationships. A college-educated person must understand the cultural context (including political, economic, philosophical, and religious underpinnings), location (geography), languages (second language study), time (history), interactions (globalization) of current events and systems.

Specific objectives for Global Perspectives and Cultures include:

- Ability to understand current events and societal problems in a broader context;
- Communicate and interact effectively with people from other cultures/backgrounds;
- Appreciation of the power of multiple perspectives;
- Spatial analysis skills;
- Critical thinking skills; and
- Tolerance for ambiguity.

IV. Life Skills

Students must have a foundation for making lifestyle choices that will affect their futures in a positive manner. The GETF believes this can be accomplished by offering courses in financial management, technology, health, and nutrition. Additionally, many of these topics should continue to be addressed in the university's college strategies course.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke stressed in a recent speech that young people must sharpen their financial knowledge so they are in a better position to make sound investment decisions throughout their lives. Students need to understand the long and short term impact of financial decisions.

We live in a world where technology develops and changes rapidly. Our graduates must be proficient in the use of ubiquitous technologies as they are essential in virtually every job that

requires a college degree. Additionally, our graduates must understand the beneficial as well as the adverse impacts of ever-changing technology on society and the world.

Besides intellectual health, there are dimensions of physical health which include health education, wellness and nutrition that form the basis of a well rounded citizen. Supportive evidence-based studies about contemporary issues and trends show that obesity, diabetes, dependencies and addictions should be addressed so that our graduates may realistically address positive changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to these issues.

Specific objectives for Life Skills include:

- Describe how lifestyle choices affect the balance between physical, psychosocial and emotional health;
- Discover how health affects longevity;
- Understand personal finance, consumer issues, and fiscal well being;
- Proficiency in the use of ubiquitous technologies – specifically computers and their usage in virtually all work places; and
- Understanding of the impacts of technology on society and the world.

V. Visual and Performance Art Forms

Critical to general education is the encouragement of individual development through the direct experience of the visual (painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, architecture, photography and film) and performance (music, dance, and theater) arts. Art is a form of communication; a direct and powerful means of expressing, revealing, recognizing, addressing, and confronting various issues. In this age of increasing globalization and diversification, students' exposure to a wide variety of arts from different eras and from around the world can provide a type of global cultural literacy that can expose them to concepts outside of themselves, their time, their place, and their culture. Creative works can provide an amazingly effective springboard into social, intellectual, emotional, and ethical concerns that are difficult to quantify and measure, but that are integral to the human condition.

Specific objectives for this Visual and Performance Art Forms include:

- Stimulate emotions, intellect, and imagination as well as help one understand why works can inspire these immediate ideas or reactions;
- Develop visual and listening abilities (observation and critical thinking) in order to analyze and interpret works;
- Offer insights into the beliefs, achievements, customs, and values of the society or period in which they were produced, presenting opportunities for evaluation of such;
- Can result in personal revelations essential in the evolving development and sense of a student's own values and identity; and
- Repeated contact and deeper acquaintance increase the ability to understand and appreciate art works.

VI. Western Civilization and Culture

Courses in Western civilization and culture help students understand and explore the human condition through careful exploration of values and ideas that have shaped the history of Western culture. These ideas and values are both central to shaping and influencing the culture American students now inhabit as well as influencing, often in ways unknown, the values and ethics of each individual student.

Courses in this area explore the aesthetic, economic, ethical, literary, philosophical, and religious ideas that are often at the core of who we are both as individuals and as a society. Because most of these ideas are expressed through texts, students sharpen their critical thinking skills as they work to understand and critique these ideas, and develop their own reflections on the significance of these ideas in their own lives.

Specific objectives for Western Civilization and Culture include:

- Critical reading and writing skills;
- Critical thinking skills;
- Study and understanding of historical foundations;
- Application of historical knowledge to contemporary issues and problems; and
- Ability to define, discuss, and articulate one's own values.

VII. Natural Sciences

Science is the study of the natural world, both biological (living) and physical (non-living) systems. Scientific inquiry involves making measurements, identifying trends in data, drawing appropriate conclusions, and effectively communicating discoveries. Creativity is required to generate new ideas and devise hypotheses. The critical thinking skills required to evaluate scientific hypotheses and to apply scientific knowledge are important abilities for any college-educated individual.

Many of the current problems facing our country require solutions that can only be provided by science (e.g., alternative energy sources, disease treatment/prevention, and natural resource management). Some problems, such as global warming and genetic engineering, are hotly debated on national and international stages and have become heavily politicized. In some instances, these issues have profound environmental, economic, and ethical ramifications. Undoubtedly, scientific discoveries over the next fifty years will challenge our society and require careful thought. Engaged citizens must have a basic understanding of what science is, how scientific inquiry proceeds, and what the current scientific theories are to have an effective voice in the current and future scientific debates.

Specific objectives for Natural Sciences include:

- Establishing causal relationships;

- Making measurements and analyzing data;
- Critical thinking;
- Developing and testing hypotheses/ideas; and
- Effective communication.

VIII. Quantitative Analysis (Mathematics)

Mathematics is the study of numbers, shapes, and patterns. An essential element of mathematics is strict logical reasoning which can be beneficial to any person who wishes to develop a more disciplined mind. The study of mathematics can clarify a student's understanding of the mathematics that is used everyday such as percentages, fractions, and basic arithmetic.

Many fields (including natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, education, and computer science) rely on measurements, comparisons of numerical data, presentation of data, graphs, and formulas. Mathematics provides the universal understanding that fosters communication and interpretation of quantitative data.

Specific objectives for Quantitative Analysis (Mathematics) include:

- Problem solving;
- Abstraction;
- Generalization;
- Representation of concepts; and
- Creativity in applying known results to new situations.

Conclusion

The committee feels that the categories listed above will work well as a structure to guide our work next year. Our plan for the next year includes meeting with faculty from different departments as we consider both new and old courses that would fit into this newly proposed GE structure. We also plan to seek input from students, administration, and other stakeholders as we consider which courses will best meet the needs of NSU students in the 21st century. As we consider different classes and where they fit in the above categories, we understand that some of the current categories may need to be combined or that new categories may be added to the list.

Respectfully submitted by members of the GE Task Force:

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