

## **General Education**

### **Vision**

The newly reconceptualized General Education program will develop skills, habits of thought, breadth of understanding, and an appreciation for major 21<sup>st</sup> century societal issues that will prepare students for success both in their academic programs and in their professional, civic, and personal lives long after graduation. In addition to enhanced training in communication and mathematics, the program will ensure experience with different modes of thinking and different traditional approaches to knowledge and creativity. This experience will be embedded in courses and educational activities that, although anchored within disciplines, will confront complex, relevant issues that cut across disciplinary boundaries. Through this General Education program students will learn to think and reason across disciplines and both inside and outside the academic world.

The new program replaces what previously was known as Distributive Studies with a new conceptual structure. Each course or other activity that will be a part of the program will be characterized along three dimensions, called, respectively, Pathways to Knowledge and Creativity; Ways of Thinking; and 2020 Perspectives. The “Pathways” dimension identifies the particular approach to knowledge taken, which might be studies and/or practice in one or more of the broad areas: Natural Sciences and Technology; Human Behavior, Societies, and Institutions; and Literature and the Arts. The “Ways” dimension identifies the kind of thinking that is emphasized, which might be one or more of critical thinking; integrative thinking; and creative thinking. These first two dimensions characterize the scope of the disciplinary content of the course or activity. The third, 2020 Perspectives, is the signature of the proposed program; each course or activity will focus on one or more current topic(s), bringing its particular approaches and modes of thinking to bear on broad societal issues.

The topics selected for the 2020 Perspectives will highlight the existing strengths of the institution. This third dimension will be dynamic, making the plan sufficiently flexible that faculty may address new critical issues as they develop. *See the full committee report for a much more complete description of the program structure, including a listing of proposed initial 2020 Perspectives topics.*

Because the requirements are more broadly defined, courses from a much wider range of disciplines will be available for General Education than is now the case, and many more faculty will participate. At present General Education is almost exclusively the province of five colleges; all thirteen colleges and schools will contribute to the new program implementation, greatly increasing both its richness and its inclusiveness.

### **Goals**

1. Develop this conceptual plan into a fully fleshed-out General Education program that fulfills its vision. Initiate the program with a limited cohort of the Fall 2009 entering class of freshmen. Move to complete implementation for the Fall 2013 entering class of freshmen.
2. The General Education program will have smaller class sizes than at present. Classes will feature innovative and improved teaching methods and will generally involve additional writing in depth. Tenured and tenure track faculty member will be expected to participate in the General Education program. The Provost will set required participation levels for each college or school.
3. Develop a robust system of assessment to determine how well the program fulfills its educational goals and to make changes as required.

## Strategies

- The Provost and Senate will jointly appoint a committee to develop a specific plan for the initial implementation of the recommended General Education structure. This plan should be completed by February 2009 to enable initial implementation in the subsequent Fall. It will include specific requirements for numbers and types of courses to be taken and/or other activities pursued. It may include modifications of the current Fundamental Studies requirements. It will include a specific recommendation concerning the role of the Advanced Studies portion of the current program within the new structure. It will be designed to be accommodated within the current credit limits of existing baccalaureate programs.
- The plan will be data driven. It will be based on the following categories of information:
  - a. An inventory of existing courses with regard to how they do, or might be modified so as to, fit within the three dimensional framework of acceptable General Education courses.
  - b. An analysis of the numbers and types of courses that would have to be developed in order to offer the proposed programs to the entire undergraduate student body.
  - c. An analysis of the current fit of General Education requirements within existing programs, used to ensure that the new structure fits at least as well.
  - d. An analysis of General Education courses typically covered through transfer and Advanced Placement or similar credits, to determine how they might be accommodated within the new structure.
  - e. An understanding of potential software and training issues related to advisement and registration.
- The plan will be flexible, so as to accommodate the needs of transfer students and of students entering the university with Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or other pre-college credits, at least in early stages of implementation. The implementation committee will consult with representatives of other USM institutions and Community Colleges in this regard.
- The new structure deviates from the standard state prescription for General Education, but is acceptable under sections 13B.02.02.16D(2)(b)-(c) and 13B.06.01.03 of the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). Approval requires that it be “An integrated and structured general education experience required of all students, adopted by the governing board of the institution, which shall be demonstrated to the (Maryland Higher Education) Commission at the time of initial approval or reaffirmation of approval, to achieve the goals of general education as defined in §D(1) of this regulation. Section D(1) defines these goals as “a general education that is designed to provide the student with the skills and knowledge necessary to: (a) Communicate effectively in oral and written English; (b) Read with comprehension; (c) Reason abstractly and think critically; (d) Understand and interpret numerical data; (e) Understand the scientific method; (f) Recognize and appreciate cultural diversity; and (g) Understand the nature and value of the fine and performing arts.” The initial implementation committee will prepare the documentation necessary to achieve this approval.
- The implementation committee will be asked to evaluate the following recommendations:
  - a. Allow entering University Honors students to be the pilot cohort for initial plan implementation.
  - b. Define different pathways for students majoring in specific groupings of colleges.
  - c. Develop a set of thematic, optional, “cluster curricula,” each with a limited set of choices within the cluster, designed to satisfy a substantial part of the course requirements. Clusters

- should provide students with a more coordinated approach to their curriculum, in contrast to the less constrained selection from a menu.
- d. Allow a well structured research experience to count for a pathway and/or a way of thinking.
  - e. Allow a disciplinary course with a robust writing component to count for freshman or professional writing, or insist that there be at least one disciplinary course with robust writing taken in addition to professional writing.
  - f. Enhance the Math Fundamental Studies requirement to include a substantive introduction to the application of elementary statistical methods to the interpretation of data and its use in decision-making.
  - g. Require that at least one out-of-the-classroom activity be a part of each student's General Education program. Encourage students to pursue this activity at an off campus location or abroad.
  - h. Lower-level Living/Learning programs should realign their curricula so that students who participate will have fulfilled a portion of their General Education requirements.
- After the implementation planning stage is complete, the continuing oversight of the General Education program, including maintaining the evolving list of 2020 topics and approving the characterization of individual courses within the conceptual matrix will become the responsibility of the Office of Undergraduate Studies. The Provost and Senate will jointly appoint a Council, including students and a majority of faculty representing all the colleges and schools, to advise the Dean for Undergraduate Studies concerning this oversight role.