

To: SSU GE Subcommittee and Task Force
From: Nathan Rank, SST representative on GE Subcommittee
Re: Response to Freshman Year Experience draft and ideas
Date: 12 September 2004

I am very excited about the ideas that have been developed during the past few months on revising our first year curriculum to include a Freshman Year Experience that quickly integrates students into our academic community. This proposal, even in its preliminary form, presents many possibilities for us to highlight our identity as a university and as teacher/scholars. As with any substantial revision, I see great opportunities. However, I also see great risks. The final organizational structure should maximize the likelihood that FYE will provide students with the best possible introduction to our community and minimize the risk of reduced engagement by students and reduced retention.

Subcommittee Chair Paul Draper has rightly urged us to uphold a conceptual model while working out details. I wish to articulate goals for the new program. First, it should enhance the GE experience for our undergraduates significantly. Second, it should provide students with a teaching and learning environment that helps them discover their true passions and leads them towards deciding on a major and eventual direction in life. Third, it should enhance major's programs and avoid lowering their quality. Students who know what they want to do in college will be motivated to develop and implement life goals, and the FYE could become an excellent mechanism to encourage them to follow their path to graduation and beyond.

First, I wish to make two major points. Two other issues will follow.

- The FYE should comprise a significant portion of each student's first year course requirements, without compromising the ability of students who arrive with a declared major to complete their studies within four years.
- The lecture series should be integrated very closely with the small seminar-based courses, so that students feel that they are participating in a single, unified learning experience. Additionally, the course should articulate closely with SSU academic programs so that undeclared students can use it to discover their life goals.

Relationship of FYE to university curriculum

FYE should constitute a large portion of a typical student's first year requirements and engage them in GE at the beginning of their university experience. However, it should not interfere with their progress towards graduation in four years. A program that requires 5 units during fall and 4 units during spring (described by Suzanne Toczyski during meeting on 9 Sept 2004) would be greatly preferred over one that would require 9 units during fall and 3-4 units during spring. The final unit number should be determined after consultation with departments across campus. For example, the School of Science and Technology GE Committee submitted a response to the University GE Subcommittee in April 2004 listing requirements for each major¹. A 5 unit Fall/4 Unit spring program would fit within some degree programs (e.g. Biology and Chemistry), but not in others. Faculty members in each program in SST and in other schools must recognize that changes may be required to accommodate FYE, but the integrity of their programs must be maintained.

I am convinced that FYE *can* be made compatible with *all* majors at SSU. I was very reassured about this when I examined the Biology and Chemistry requirements of the 11 comparison institutions with

¹ See attached document.

innovative FYE programs examined by the SSU GE subcommittee.² Catalog copy or a list of majors' requirements was easily accessible to me online. With only one exception³, the Biology and Chemistry curricula were structured in a vertical major format similar to ours at SSU. Participation in introductory majors courses and science support courses in the first year was either directly stated⁴ or strongly implied⁵. In addition, all Chemistry and Biology programs required additional science support courses in Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry (for Biology majors), or Geology. Several institutions provided a typical four-year plan to graduation on their web pages, and these often included a FYE alongside science and mathematics requirements.

Integration of lecture series with learning community seminars

The draft proposal presented on 9 September includes a weekly lecture series bracketed by small learning community seminars led by a faculty member and a peer mentor. My understanding is that the lecture series would explore broad topics of academic importance and relevance to our lives. I applaud this proposal and would be very interested in participating in this exciting program. However, I will make some concrete suggestions that differ in some ways from the version we examined on 9 September. I suggest that

- Each course be broken up into three units that each last five weeks (1/3 of a semester), with a single individual giving most or all weekly lectures;
- Weekly lectures be held by SSU faculty members in an area related to their professional expertise;
- Lecture speakers participate in a learning community seminar throughout the semester;
- Lecture speakers coordinate closely with seminar leaders through weekly meetings during the semester and planning meetings before the semester about all aspects of the FYE course, including lecture topics, course readings, assignments and assessment expectations of students.

I base my suggestions on the principle that FYE must be a dynamic learning experience that inspires students and teachers alike and sets the tone for expectations of our students. Since 1996, I have participated in team teaching in the Biology lower division, and I have found through experience that close coordination among *all* instructors is essential for an effective and exciting course. I see six advantages of this structure.

1. The lecture speaker has the opportunity to develop a series of ideas over several lectures and summarize previous weeks in a final concluding lecture. This offers continuity from week to week and provides students depth in exploration of each topic.
2. A SSU lecture speaker can capture imagination of all students by describing an area that motivated his or her own desire to learn, and provide students with an idea of possible lines of inquiry associated with a particular discipline.
3. Students would get to know SSU faculty members across campus and have the opportunity to discuss ideas presented during the lecture with the lecturer during his or her office hours.
4. By participating in a learning community seminar, lecture speakers directly experience the relationship between lecture material and seminar discussions based on lectures.

²10 institutions were listed in the 5 August minutes of the SSU GE task force: CSU Dominguez Hills, Evergreen College, Northern Michigan University, Otterbein College, Portland State University, Reed College, University of Rochester, Stanford University, Susquehanna University, Wagner College, Wesleyan University. At the 9 September meeting, Elaine Sundberg mentioned Rensselaer Polytechnic University and I examined its curriculum too.

³ Evergreen College, whose curricular structure was unique and very difficult to decipher from its web pages.

⁴ 6 Chemistry, 3 Biology

⁵ Through the number of lower division courses described as prerequisites for the upper division.

5. Lecture speakers can guide seminar leaders as to the significance of their lecture material and provide discussion and learning strategies in the seminar format.
6. Having SSU faculty members hold lectures enhances communication among faculty working in diverse disciplines and enhances buy-in by faculty members into the new FYE program.

In contrast, I see many potential pitfalls associated with having guest lecturers present the lectures. Recruiting outside speakers can be difficult, and many may not wish to return for several years. Some outside speakers may not adhere to the course topic or their lecture title. Outside speakers cannot be expected to coordinate with SSU faculty members in a significant way. Course readings may not articulate well with lecture topics. Some lecturers may fail to appear. Seminar leaders may not understand the relationship of a lecture to the larger course topic, and the lecturer would not be available for questions about significance of lecture points. I fear that the outside lecture series may not integrate well with learning community seminars, and that they may not integrate well with each other. Students may well become very confused about what's expected of them in their first year, and a loosely organized, very large class may leave them with a mistakenly negative impression about the SSU learning experience.

Integration of FYE with existing SSU academic programs

A great appeal of the FYE developed by the GE task force is that it offers students opportunities to relate GE to their personal lives and learning goals, while providing them with information about campus life and opportunities to enhance oral and written expression of ideas. A beneficial next step would present information in an interdisciplinary framework while integrating FEY closely with existing programs. This approach is very challenging, because we as teachers and scholars gravitate towards a few areas of inquiry and civic engagement among the many available to us. I propose the following mechanisms to face this challenge:

- Structure each course in a truly interdisciplinary way, so that foundational knowledge involved in each 5 week unit within each 15 week course lies in a different area (arts, humanities, social science, natural science);
- Offer three FYE lecture series each semester (each consisting of about 1/3 of the freshman class of approximately 500 students);
- Engage faculty members from all schools in the learning community seminars, but offer faculty members a choice among lecture series in which to participate.

The best way I can think of to describe my concept of an interdisciplinary course with three divergent subunits is to provide examples. These examples derive in part from discussions I have had with SSU faculty members in different schools.

- Relationships between humanity and the natural world (Unit 1: artistic and literary representations of nature; Unit 2: history of the conservation movement in the U.S. and/or globally; Unit 3: human impacts on the atmosphere and biosphere).
- Foundations of human behavior and culture (Unit 1: historical perspective on development of language and settled civilizations; Unit 2: the human experience revealed in artistic expressions from the Paleolithic to the present; Unit 3: human behavior and its relationships to animal behavior and communication)
- Development of an American nation and identity (Unit 1: Resource utilization (water, land, biotic resources) from prehistory to the present; Unit 2: American politics and its origins; Unit 3: Development of American mass culture)

- Concepts of human races (Unit 1: Social/historical constructs of race; Unit 2: evolutionary diversification of humans and relationships to racial categories; Unit 3: representations of race in literature)

I consider these examples to be extremely interdisciplinary. I can imagine interesting collaborations among SSU faculty members who work in divergent areas, but share primary or secondary interests, through FYE courses. SSU faculty members who plan and execute FYE courses in areas of their interest will likely be very motivated and excited to teach them, which will in turn motivate students.

I recommend dividing FYE into multiple courses because of pragmatic and psychological reasons. A single FYE course of 1500 students involves over 80 faculty members and 80 peer mentors leading the learning community seminars⁶. It is logistically impossible for a lecture series leader to coordinate with 160 individuals! Coordination would work much better in a smaller group of faculty members. Psychologically, I think it will be much more appealing for students to participate in FYE courses that interest them, rather than a single imposed course. In addition, a lecture of 1500 students may feel impossibly large and alienating for many students, and a smaller lecture is that much less so. Similarly, buy-in by faculty members will be enhanced by having a choice of courses to teach. I recommend that the campus community not underestimate this problem. If we want students to experience our positive energy and love of teaching, let's not inflict a FYE on ourselves that covers topics that do not interest us!

I will discuss two other issues below.

- During the beginning phase, appropriate workload credit should be given to instructors for FYE course development. Once the courses have been developed, workload credit should be granted for coordination.
- Student participation and performance should be assessed in a rigorous, consistent way

Integration of FYE into faculty workloads

We should face facts squarely: implementation of FYE will require substantial allocation of University resources. Planning and coordinating these courses will involve enormous amounts of preparation and meeting time. A broad cross section of the faculty will participate, and the small size of learning community seminars requires that departments allocate faculty members to a new assignment. Many departments may need new faculty positions in order to support participation in FYE. If we wish this program to become a centerpiece of an innovative curriculum, to be admired by our comparison institutions and attractive to prospective students, we need to provide adequate support for instructors.

Our goal should be to attract faculty members to participate in FYE, rather than to force their participation. We should be recruiting the most dynamic instructors on campus for this effort. Providing adequate workload compensation for participating in the course(s) would advance the cause greatly. For example, lecture speakers should receive workload credit for lecturing and for coordination with other course participants. By a traditional WTU calculation under my proposed model of five week course units with one lecture hour per week, a lecture speaker would receive a fraction of one WTU for designing and delivering a dynamic series of lectures to an extremely large group of students. This will not suffice and will attract no one to the task. I would argue that lecture speakers should receive 4 WTU for lecture delivery and coordination alone. Additional WTU should be allocated for course development the first time a faculty member teaches a FYE course. Learning

⁶ Based on 15 students/seminar. These problems might be partly ameliorated by increasing section sizes to 18 or 20, at the cost of increased SFR per section.

community instructors should receive teaching credit for coordination and attendance at large lectures (and should be obligated to attend lectures).

If we short change instructors, we will not receive the quality curriculum we all desire, because they will be too stressed with other commitments to devote full energy and attention to FYE. I believe that the full cost of FYE implementation, with reasonable compensation for instructors, should be made clear to administrators and our colleagues before we adopt a plan. We are much more likely to obtain the support we need if the level of support is agreed to in advance.

Assessment of student performance and participation

In past documents, we have described specific areas of learning and skill development that need to be addressed by our GE curriculum, and we will continue to refine these ideas in response to WASC and our stakeholders. One element of a well-integrated course is to apply consistent methods of assessment. Enhancement of writing skills is clearly a major objective of FYE. I believe that we should assign a similar number of papers of similar size, and apply similar standards and criteria when evaluating them. In addition to written work, we should evaluate student skills at oral expression, and we should assess participation. Close coordination among lecturers and faculty will be necessary to balance out assignment load and rigor in assessment.

Finally, we must find a mechanism for tracking attendance in large lectures! We may require a technological solution (ID scanners similar to those in use in the library), or sign-up sheets by learning community section. In any case, students should be counted when they enter and *when they leave* the lecture. I have seen too many cases of students arriving late and/or leaving early in large lecture courses for me to be confident that they will stay only because of interest in the topic, no matter how inspired the lecturer.

I wish to express a personal remark here. Over the past days, I have reflected on my first year experience at Kalamazoo College, a liberal arts institution with 1000 students. When I started college, one of my main fears was that I would not be able to succeed academically in higher education. It helped me a lot that I enrolled in courses with frequent assignments and rapid return of graded tests/quizzes/papers. I felt much more anxiety, during that first year, in courses with vague or infrequent assignments, because I could not assess my own progress well. We should keep these considerations in mind when designing assessment strategies for FYE. It helps place our first year students on a firm academic setting if we inform them how well they are doing, early and often.