

General Education Review – Findings and Recommendations
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CHARGE

In March 2007, the General Education Review Steering Committee produced its final report to the faculty, entitled *Liberal Arts Core Curriculum at ACU: Building a 21st Century Education*. This document was ratified by a full faculty vote on May 17, 2007. Faculty worked for the next three years to construct a sequence of courses that would actualize the ideals set forth in the document, specifically the learning outcomes that form our current general education. The first Cornerstone class, taught in Fall 2010, ushered in a new era of general education at ACU – one shaped by the essential learning outcomes and high-impact practices articulated by *LEAP* (Liberal Education and America's Promise), sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

The final objective in the *Liberal Arts Core Curriculum at ACU* document articulated the following systematic review of general education:

12. Implement an on-going review of the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum.

Because the world changes, professors' methods of teaching change, knowledge of disciplines changes, and the nature of the student body changes, students will be best served by an on-going review process that includes at least the following considerations:

- The nature, experiences, knowledge, and skills of our incoming students.
- The best practices and current research on student learning.
- A straightforward and sustainable assessment system that supports a consistent focus on student learning outcomes, measurement of our success in achieving the outcomes, and thoughtful and continual response to assessment data.
- Annual review of assessment data.
- Comprehensive review of curriculum every three years.

These five points formed the basis of the current General Education Review Committee's charge, specifically: to review ACU's general education and CORE courses with a specific reference to the above criteria and also with respect to:

- cost of delivery – both human resources and financial resources, with attention to potential cost-saving strategies
- transferability of credit – with attention to pressures faced by students transferring more and more hours to ACU, with a goal to offer more "transfer friendly" options

- reduction of hours – with a goal to provide strategies by which General Education might aid in a plan to reduce the hours of an ACU degree from 128 to as low as 120
 - NOTE: this committee will work in tandem with staff in the Provost's Office
- how data from various outcomes and artifacts (annual analyses, Pursuit, Board End Statements) and student satisfaction point to trends and evidence for overall effectiveness

PROCESS

The Review Committee hosted a number of conversations with faculty – both at large and in key groups – as well as administrators and students. General faculty meetings were held in the Adams Center on October 21 and 27; additionally, faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences engaged in a SWOT analysis of ACU's General Education on October 7. A focus group of ten students was engaged on October 28, followed by a survey of 512 students taking CORE 210 or BCOR classes in the Fall 2014 semester; 70 students responded (13.7%). Finally, the Provost's Cabinet included a lengthy discussion of general education on their October 1 meeting.

All of these meetings were framed in a similar fashion: the current five general education outcomes were outlined, followed by a discussion of their propriety for students, the strengths and weaknesses of the current system/distribution of courses, and suggestions for changes.

CONTEXTS

The committee notes several key commendations that mark both the maturity of the current general education system and its embodiment of LEAP practices. Descriptions such as “enduring relevance” ([Hechinger Report](#)), “America's future” ([Council of Independent Colleges](#)), “real value” ([US News and World Report](#)), and “immense power” ([Fareed Zakaria, CNN](#)) appear in numerous recent articles regarding the liberal arts. Indeed, for all the concerns over the “value of a college education,” the conversation regarding liberal arts in specific has trended more positively, thanks in part to the broader adoption of [LEAP standards](#) as well as a [national report](#) that shows the long-term professional success and earnings power of liberal arts graduates.

In 2006, the Texas Coordinating Board for Higher Education convened the Undergraduate Education Advisory Committee and charged it with reviewing the state's core curriculum. In 2011, the Advisory Committee produced its white paper, “[Revising the State Core Curriculum: A Focus on 21st Century Competencies](#),” where it noted that the core curriculum in place since the mid-1990s did not “adequately address the kinds of knowledge and skills students need to be successful in the 21st Century” (1). Central recommendations include the adoption of six “Core Curriculum Objectives” that would replace the cafeteria-style system in place for decades: critical thinking skills, communication skills, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, social responsibility, and personal responsibility (12). Additionally, the Committee recommended that campuses “should use the AAC&U VALUE rubrics as guidelines for core objective assessment” (11). These are the same assessment rubrics that ACU uses in the assessment of our core classes and competencies. In January 2014, Texas became one of ten

designated “[LEAP States](#)” by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and as such, created “a capacity for inter-institutional collaboration in robust and authentic assessment, and embedding high-impact practices in the undergraduate curriculum.” It is important for ACU to recognize this context in making changes to its core curriculum. Put simply, the State of Texas core now looks more like ours, and will continue to do so as subsequent phases are implemented; we should not radically alter the competencies of our core curriculum.

COMMENDATIONS

The General Education Review Committee notes several commendations that are worth recognizing and celebrating. These represent the work of faculty to provide high-level, meaningful, and rigorous instruction to students.

CORE Classes: The perception, delivery, reception, and assessment of Cornerstone is significantly improved. This is important as it reflects a major shift away from the early concerns that noted inconsistent sections, lack of coherent focus, and seeming irrelevance to the work done in majors. While there is always room for improvement, the focus on the steps and process of critical thinking form a respected and relevant foundation to support the work in majors. Faculty are to be commended for their commitment to supporting a well-crafted curriculum and for providing assessment artifacts that support the Pursuit Initiative. Subsequent CORE classes were praised for their engagement in reflective critical thinking, especially in ways that relate to identifying and posing solutions to social issues. It is important to note that the final approval for the CORE 210 course took place in May 2012, following the faculty vote to combine the 120 (Identity) and 220 (Community) courses into a single class; while the final approval for BCOR only took place in October 2013.

Faculty Relationships: The ability for faculty to get to know students, especially in first-year classes, was noted on several occasions. Additionally, the use of peer-leaders in Cornerstone was highlighted as a good way to create community among students. Cultivating faculty/student relationships is central to the Cornerstone experience, though it should be noted that fewer full-time faculty are teaching the course than originally planned.¹ In addition, because of the large student-faculty ratio of Bible courses, the committee notes that it is exceptionally difficult to nourish such relationships with most students. This will be addressed in the recommendation section.

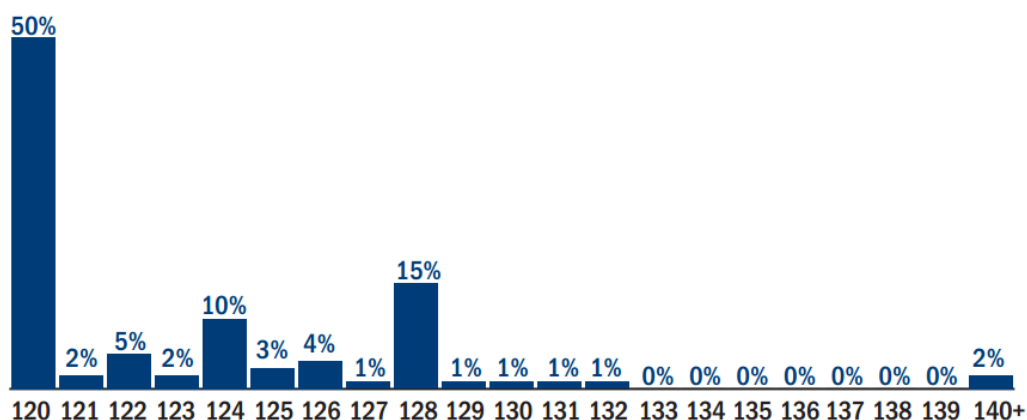
Owning our 128 hours: Several times throughout the discussions, faculty recommended that we do a better job of making the “extra” courses in our 128-hour degrees a marketable, value add. In essence, we should better recognize that our general education curriculum includes 15 hours of Bible, and we should “sell” this to parents and students as a significant feature of an education at ACU. This is especially true in the context of our Block Tuition Model, which does

¹ In Fall 2010, 37 Cornerstone sections were offered: 35 (94%) were taught by full-time faculty; 1 (3%) by staff; 1 (3%) by adjunct faculty. In Fall 2014, 36 sections were offered: 14 (39%) were taught by full-time faculty; 3 (8%) by staff; 19 (53%) by adjuncts. This represents a 55% decrease in the number of sections taught by full time faculty in the four year period from 2010 to 2014.

not translate direct cost to the student; in essence, we bill for 144 hours (36 hours per year x 4 years) but have a 128 hour degree plan, making 16 hours unnecessarily billed. A reduction in hours in combination with the increase in the average hours taken, an effect of the Block Tuition model, should create a very attractive and marketable strategy for students to move more rapidly through their coursework.

It is important to recognize that the SACS minimum expectation for undergraduate degrees is 120 hours. As we continue to construct 3+1 or 4+1 combination programs (such as the Masters in Education), we will need to attend to the total number of undergraduate hours as a fraction of the overall program. According to the [2012 Complete College America survey](#), half of the 85 programs from the 310 universities surveyed require only the 120-hour minimum. And while the survey is weighted toward public institutions, it does provide context for our decision making, given how often we compete with public institutions for students.

Bachelor's Degree Credit-Hour Program Requirements



RECOMMENDATIONS

Timing of Changes: The Review Committee recognizes that the implementation of any change to General Education represents a significant alteration of degree plans throughout the university. Therefore, the first recommendation is to set a deadline of the last day of school in the Fall Semester to be the date by which any general education changes should be voted on for inclusion in the catalog. This means that they will have undergone previous discussion and approval by the UGEC, UUAC, and (when appropriate) the full faculty. This provides ample time for discussion as well as the entire Spring semester for departments to implement necessary changes to degree plans.

Assessment: There is not a clear and consistent assessment plan for courses populating the various menus within general education (i.e. Sciences; Social Sciences; Fine Arts/Humanities; Cultural Competency). The committee recommends broadening the existing assessment plan so that, for each course used to fulfill a general education requirement, there is an articulation

of the specific artifacts that will be collected, the parties responsible for assembling and analyzing the artifacts, and the mechanism by which those results will be communicated to the General Education Office. Both the Pursuit Initiative and the University's reporting to SACS of its general education outcomes rely on data from courses in these menus; therefore, a penalty for non-compliance should be implemented (e.g. reducing the Academic Enrichment and Technology [AET] funds for departments that do not provide the expected assessment data).

Faith Integration in the Discipline: As a leader in Christian Higher Education, ACU has long embraced the practice of integrating faith and learning. We recognize that there is nothing to be feared from pursuing truth, creativity, learning, industry, theory, or pedagogy under the lordship of Jesus Christ. However, our curriculum should better reflect this serious intent. The current capstone requirement includes "an assignment that demonstrates the student's ability to think critically about faith and vocation as it is expressed in a particular discipline." We should build on this beginning by capturing artifacts from Capstone classes and developing university-wide rubrics for assessment. Further, key faculty and administrators should advance the national conversation about faith and learning.

Transfer Credit: The need to be "transfer friendly" has been raised many times over the last several years – from the strategic planning task force conversations to the ad hoc group led by the Provost and Executive Vice President to consider and implement transfer strategies. One of the key strategies implemented recently was the development of CORE 115 as a "combination" of Cornerstone and CORE 210 courses for students bringing in 24 or more hours. This has facilitated community building among transfer students, a parallel to the function of Cornerstone for first-time full-time students. Additionally, BIBL 103 was developed to serve as a survey of the New Testament, combining BIBL 101 and 102 courses for transfer students bringing in 24 or more hours.

In terms of general education, the committee recognizes the need for ACU to align with common expectations of courses throughout Texas.

- The university should resist the temptation of removing the "general education elective" in order to reduce hours. Instead, that elective could be specified for a particular use, especially among the social sciences or humanities.
- Greater flexibility is needed awarding credit for communication courses; this could be achieved by accepting all of the Texas common core courses. Additionally, developing some specializations within our COMS 211 that would broadly serve different disciplines would be helpful.
- Likewise, accepting more of the Texas common core courses in mathematics would provide a measure of flexibility for students in various non-science related degree programs.

Historical Literacy: Throughout the committee's conversations, the lack of a consistent approach to the study of history was noted as a significant concern. It is important to recognize that history was not the only area to see its "protected menu" of offerings altered in the adoption of our current general education model; the Fine Arts requirement was merged with

social sciences/humanities menu, and the Kinesiology requirement has been reduced by half (what was 4 hours is now 2). The committee recommends converting the general education elective to a three-hour historical literacy requirement that could be satisfied by a menu of courses that require engagement with appropriate historical outcomes to be determined and approved by the UGEC in conjunction with the Department of History and Global Studies (e.g. engagement with primary sources, assessment of influence and change over time or space). Including courses such as Church History, Art History, Music History, History and Philosophy of the Sciences, or History of the English Language as well as HIST-prefix courses will facilitate the incorporation of this requirement in degree plans; survey courses in American History and Western Civilization should also be included in this menu in order to maintain transfer flexibility. The committee also recognizes the value in encouraging students to be knowledgeable of World and American history.

POSSIBLE HOUR REDUCTIONS:

Based on the factors listed in the Charge and Commendation sections of this report, the committee makes the following recommendations related to reductions.

CORE class reduction (3 hours)

Currently, there are nine hours of CORE classes: CORE 110-Cornerstone; CORE 210-Human Identity and Community; BCOR 310-The Search for Meaning (the last of which serves also as part of the 15 hours of Bible courses required of each student). The student-faculty ratio in the Core classes is 30:1, and this ratio should be maintained moving forward. CORE can be reduced by three hours in one of two ways:

- 1) Make each of the three courses 2-credits each;
- 2) Remove one of the classes from the curriculum.

The former preserves the sequential nature of the classes; one of the best practices outlined in the LEAP standards. It also minimizes the reduction of Bible courses and the difficulties inherent in such a decision.

The latter preserves the three-hour heft of courses but would impact the gathering of artifacts for the Pursuit Initiative by eliminating BCOR. This impact might be mitigated by the timing of implementation, namely that the change would not take place until Fall 2016, and there would still be BCOR classes taught to help students complete degrees. The completion of the Pursuit initiative would be during the 2016-17 academic year. However, if BCOR is eliminated, a significant reduction in Bible courses would also happen. Solutions to mitigate this impact might again requiring a fifth Bible course, including a more robust faith/learning component included in Capstone, or having a graded chapel experience that requires reflective writing based on a chapel curriculum (for example, we might expand on Pepperdine's model).

Reducing each course by one hour allows Spotlight sessions in Cornerstone to continue, though perhaps with somewhat reduced frequency. Further, it facilitates the teaching of subsequent classes in non-traditional times – such as the January inter-semester, or summer semesters.

- One central question that will need to be answered if this option is pursued: What are the ramifications to teaching load if the classes are two-credit hours each?
 - Should faculty receive 3 or 2 teaching load hours per class?
 - Might there be a stipend involved (e.g. receive 3 credits = no stipend; 2 credits includes a stipend; if so, how much of a stipend?)

English Class Reduction (3 hours)

The increase in Freshman students bringing in hours continues and is likely not going to abate as more and more high schools offer dual credit programs. Additionally, the most commonly transferred course is ENGL 111 (Composition and Rhetoric – ENGL 1301 in the Texas Common Course Numbering System). Consider the following:

	Fall 07	Fall 08	Fall 09	Fall 10	Fall 11	Fall 12	Fall 13
Hours Brought in FR Year	5565	6456	7321	8438	7564	8359	8755
Individual FR Bringing in Hours	448	480	525	594	548	569	566
Average Hours Brought in FR Year	12	13	14	14	14	15	15
Individuals bringing in ENGL 111	327	376	386	435	409	430	401
Hours Brought in of ENGL 111	981	1128	1158	1305	1227	1290	1203
ENGL 111 Hours as % of All Hours	17.6%	17.5%	15.8%	15.5%	16.2%	15.4%	13.7%

Approximately 40% of the Freshman class transfers in ENGL 111 each year. This represents, on average, 16% of the hours brought in each year over the last seven years.

If the learning outcomes for ENGL 111 were part of the entrance requirements, three additional hours could be reduced from the overall General Education. To account for the frequency with which the course is brought in by students and to allow students a way to “count” their ENGL 111 hours so as not to delay graduation, the following procedure could be adopted:

- Students bringing in the equivalent of ENGL 111 with a C or better would be allowed to use the Literature class they take at ACU (British, American or World) to satisfy three hours in the Humanities menu.

Scores on the ACT, TOFEL, or COMPASS would still place students into remedial classes. Also, incorporating either an entrance exam or a rising junior exam would allow the university to assess basic written communication proficiency and would provide a mechanism to remediate those not meeting a standard.

Immediate Budgetary Reductions: The Core has never been funded at the level originally approved by faculty; additional cuts were made in the first years that necessitated further changes away from approved plan. Currently, almost all the departments that hired faculty to support their participation in CORE classes are not receiving the transfer of funds expected to cover the new faculty’s salary. While faculty *are* being paid, this means constant budget over-runs in almost every department that teaches CORE classes. Curricular reductions need time to

be discussed, voted on, and incorporated into degree plans, but several immediate changes can be made that will realize budgetary savings.

- Reduce the number of CORE 210 and BCOR offerings. While over the past two years, there have been unfilled seats in each semester the courses are offered, much progress has been made to align available seats with demand. As always, further alignment is possible.
- Reimagine the Assistant Provost for General Education position away from a full-time administrator to a stipend position.
- Reduce the number of team-taught sections and eliminate fourth-hour stipend for these courses (CORE 210 and BCOR 310).

The last recommendation was borne out of conversations that recognized the opportunity to streamline teaching, especially if faculty had participated in team teaching the course previously. While not doing away with team-teaching completely, it would be possible to make significant reductions across many sections. This would have ramifications with the BCOR class, since one of those teachers is required to be a Bible professor. However, those could be solved by:

- Acknowledging that only Bible professors (or professors appropriately credentialed) will teach BCOR, effectively making it a Bible class;
- Or reducing the number of required Bible hours, thereby allowing any faculty to teach BCOR. (A course prefix change such as CORE 310 might help avoid confusion if this is implemented).
- Or eliminating the BCOR course

CONCLUSION

The strategies outlined above offer different strategies for reducing six (6) hours from the General Education at ACU, moving the minimum hours for a degree to 122. If reducing two additional hours is desired, conversations should commence about affecting such reductions within major-specific courses, or considering further reductions in general education, such as the elimination of the 2-hour PEAC requirement.

The committee recognizes that not all the strategies voted on in 2007 were implemented. The recommendations in this report are intended to build on what is currently in practice. This means that items not yet fully implemented, or items that were adapted since the 2007 vote would remain not implemented or adapted, whichever is appropriate.

General Education is a work in progress. The committee thanks the many faculty and administrators who gave input to this document. The work of the UGEC and UUAC will build upon this report and should lead to a resolution for faculty vote sometime in the Fall 2015 semester.