Response from the General Education Council’s Program Committee regarding the comments and concerns expressed during the Open Faculty Forum, with excerpts from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education’s new accreditation standards.

In an effort to inform the faculty across the campus regarding the need for general education reform and to consider its concerns about such action, the General Education Council (GEC) held an open faculty forum with two face-to-face sessions on October 2nd and October 8th, followed by one digital session (November 4 – 16). The GEC’s Program Committee was subsequently tasked with reviewing the comments and concerns expressed during the open forums; archiving the comments from the digital open forum and the notes taken at the face-to-face forums (with individual names redacted) on the GEC website, and writing this response.

The GEC appreciates the feedback it received from the faculty (thank you!). This feedback will be valuable as we work toward a plan for general education program renewal that considers the existing strengths of our campus and the needs of our students. It also recognizes the importance of moving toward a General Education program that embraces our liberal arts tradition, prepares students for meaningful citizenship and careers, meets the new standards for accreditation, and establishes a framework for continual program assessment and revision.

General Education program renewal is being discussed not only because continual review and revision of curriculum is essential to providing students with the best educational opportunities, but changes in the academic and political climate have increased pressure to assess and demonstrate appropriate responsiveness to assessment on many levels. There is new pressure on accreditors as well as on educational institutions to show their value. A press release from the U.S. Department of Education (11/06/15) pointed to increased attention on the accreditation process.

“Accreditation’s historic function serves as an important protection for both students and taxpayers by assuring the quality of our postsecondary educational system. Since accreditation is a prerequisite for schools’ participation in the federal student aid programs, it plays a ‘gatekeeping’ role in institutional access to the annual $150 billion investment in federal student aid. ... However, there is broad agreement and a sense of urgency about the need for significant improvement in both the rigor and flexibility of accreditation. Secretary Duncan emphasized the importance of a new focus on outcomes and greater transparency in higher education. He noted particularly that accreditors have provided little accountability for some poor-performing institutions and ... that the Department must do more to hold accreditors responsible for their work.”

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education recently released the 13th edition of their Standards for Accreditation, and with the increasing pressures, the GEC is particularly interested in ensuring that Shippensburg University’s General Education program meets those standards. Excerpts from the new standards that are particularly relevant to our discussion of general education reform are included below. Shown in bold within the excerpts are points that emphasize the importance of transparent and meaningful assessment as well as competency areas that our current general education program does not fully address. Specific items requested by faculty members are indicated (*) below, including: a bulleted list showing the range of potential negative accreditation actions is provided with standard terminology for those actions highlighted in bold; and information on the Middle States website that summarizes accreditation actions since 2001 that shows an upward trend in the number of warnings issued by the commission. Additional references and links to websites are also given below.
The major themes that emerged during the forum:

**Theme One: New Middle States Standards.**

Middle States’ goal is that educational programs should be intentional and thoughtful about student learning objectives and outcomes. Our current program does not include all of the Middle States’ standards (see Additional Document). Minimally, the current program needs to be updated to include those new requirements (competencies). To the question, “Are the competencies being generated internally or externally?” is the answer, Middle States.

This brought up the concern that if national standards were driving the train and national instruments such as the AACU’s Values Rubrics were used for assessment, wasn’t there a threat to discipline-specific standards? Conversation turned to the idea that departments who wanted to participate in offering classes under a specific competency (i.e., oral or written communication) could create and standardize the assessment tool – working from scratch or from something like the Values Rubrics.

**Theme Two: A Program Problem or an Assessment Problem?**

The argument presented by the GEC Program Committee was that one of the major needs for reform was assessment. It was suggested that before changing the program, a better assessment of our current program should be done. However, as Theme One points out, the current program does not address the new Middle States Standards. In the 2009 assessment of Gen Ed, which received praise by Middle States, the discovery was that the learning objectives for the Categories of Knowledge were muddled, extraordinarily burdensome for departments/faculty to assess, and many of the learning objectives could not be assessed in a consistent way across departments. That was the finding of the 2009 assessment exercise.

The question was asked whether the current objectives could be simplified/streamlined/ pared down in lieu of big program changes, but in itself that does not address the problem that the current program does not meet new Middle States objectives. Adding new objectives onto an already cumbersome (in terms of assessment) program may be something faculty wish to avoid when assessment comes around. As some pointed out, many departments already assess some of the new standards, for example the use of technology. However, this is not intentionally assessed in a way useful to the assessment of General Education as a whole. The GEC Program Committee believes restructuring the program is a best option as it would provide the opportunity to intentionally streamline the program, add in the new learning objectives, and to reconsider purging those objectives that are cumbersome or nearly impossible to assess.

Another issue along this line was the emphasis by Middle States to introduce cross-discipline learning in the General Education program. The question was brought up, if competencies are cross-disciplinary, how is it possible to assess them? (i.e., reasoning in Sociology vs. Art History vs. Biology). It was discussed how all arts, for example, share in the act of analyzing, describing, etc even if the subject of the analysis varies. A rubric, then, could be designed by all departments sharing in that competency based on commonalities.

There was a question about the place for core courses – for example WIFYS or Mathematics – as they taught a specific skill. Conversations ensued and it was the impression of the note taker that a distinction could be made in the use of rubrics that assessed the introduction of a competency (i.e., learning to write correctly) that was department specific (i.e., English) as opposed to the practice of the competency that could be assessed in Gen Ed courses with a ‘Written Communication’ tag. This would allow departments to ensure disciplinary standards were protected/advanced while aiding other departments in raising the level of student attainment in those competencies.
Theme Three: Implementation

The first step would be to develop a skeleton/framework based on learning objectives, then create the process for periodic assessment of student learning associated with those objectives. The next step would be to populate the program with courses whose learning objectives align with expectations.

The question arose, “Who designates which courses receive which tag?” Past practice suggests that departments would populate the new program by applying to position their courses as they see fit. In essence, first a department conversation would have to take place as to which competency faculty would assess in their Gen Ed courses, after which the course would find its placement in the proper competency category by demonstrating to the GEC how the course meets the associated objectives.

The point was made that if/when a new program goes through, the GEC Assessment and Program Committee had to provide extremely clear guidance on how to assess; including instruments, time frames, etc. GEC responded that best practice is to assess one or a very few learning objectives each semester, program-wide. This practice allows the campus community to collaboratively seek clarification and guidance (and the GEC to provide both), and to normalize expectations about baseline, above average, average, and below average competency levels across General Education. Ideally, time frames would be linked with our normal 5-year and 1-year program review cycles (Note: Not every department/class is assessed each year.)

Over both sessions was the very strongly stated point: If/when new program comes out, the Tags/Objectives must be very very clearly laid out and each and every step about grandfathering in courses, mechanism for how the program is to be populated, assessment rotations, etc. must be explicit.

Theme Four: Retrenchment and General Education Reform

In the face of what was a perception of General Education reform and retrenchment was the comment: Two faculty members of my department were retrenched and relocated from other PASSHE campuses due in part to GE redesign. When the GEC began the process of reform many years ago a letter was on the table signed by President Ruud and Provost Lyman that said “no faculty would be retrenched as a result of General Education reform.” There was a suggestion that another letter should be requested from President Harpster and Provost Lyman as it is unclear whether the commitment under the previous letter still stands.

Theme Five: The Mixed Bag

First, a great deal of frustration was expressed in that everyone kept hearing that something was coming but no program draft emerged and it was difficult (even a waste of time) to have a discussion when nothing was on the table. Faculty stated they wanted to see alternative programs/proposals. There are several reasons for the time lag: first, the initial ‘draft’ that many saw several years ago can no longer stand as Middle States changed its accreditation standards; second, the issuance of the retrenchment letter made movement on the issue very problematic; lastly, meetings held with a large number of departments provided important information to the Program Committee that caused a rethinking of the model. It is the aim of the Program Committee to have before the GEC a draft program in the Spring 2016.

Following on the frustration point is this: it was noted by faculty and GEC that PASSHE and Middle States standards are now largely incompatible. PASSHE standards remain content driven while Middle States moved to a
competency based one. The Program Committee is aware and has been looking for guidance on how to resolve the issue, yet another reason for delay.

Lastly, there was a suggestion that instead of operating in the dark about program reform, we should bring a Middle States representative to campus to serve as a consultant. It is unclear whether a Service for Fee that Middle States offers is appropriate to this context. However, six (6) individuals from GEC Assessment Committee and Program Committee attended a Middle States conference in 2014 and brought back information received there. One point emphasized at the Middle States conference and in subsequent articles about Middle States and accreditation agencies in general is that accreditation agencies are strengthening the oversight/accreditation process in the attempt to stave off what appears to be an effort by the federal government to take over the process. In other words, accreditation agencies are working to prove that the peer review process can be meaningful. Shippensburg, in the 2018-2019 Middle States review will be assessed under the new standards and climate.

-Respectfully submitted by Cynthia Botteron with GEC Program Committee
Excerpts from Middle States Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation, Thirteenth edition (2014)

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

**Standard III.2.** student learning experiences that are designed, delivered, and **assessed by faculty** (full-time or part-time) and/or other appropriate professionals who are:

- rigorous and effective in teaching, **assessment of student learning**, scholarly inquiry, and service, as appropriate to the institution’s mission, goals, and policies.

**Standard III.5.** at institutions that offer undergraduate education, a general education program, free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, that:

- offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field;
- offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, **technological competency, and information literacy**. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the **study of values, ethics**, and diverse perspectives.

**Standard V.2.** **organized and systematic assessments**, conducted by faculty and/or appropriate professionals, evaluating the extent of student achievement of institutional and degree/program goals. Institutions should:

- define meaningful curricular goals with defensible standards for evaluating whether students are achieving those goals;
- articulate how they prepare students in a manner consistent with their mission for successful careers, meaningful lives, and, where appropriate, further education. They should collect and provide data on the extent to which they are meeting these goals;
- support and sustain assessment of student achievement and communicate the results of this assessment to stakeholders.

**Standard V.3.** **consideration and use of assessment results for the improvement of educational effectiveness.** Consistent with the institution’s mission, such uses include some combination of the following:

- assisting students in improving their learning;
- improving pedagogy and curriculum;
- reviewing and revising academic programs and support services;
- planning, conducting, and supporting a range of professional development activities;
- planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services;
- informing appropriate constituents about the institution and its programs;
- improving key indicators of student success, such as retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates;
- implementing other processes and procedures designed to improve educational programs and services.
MSCHE Policy Statements on Accreditation Actions *

- The Commission warns an institution that its accreditation may be in jeopardy when the institution is not in compliance with one or more accreditation standards and requirements of affiliation. A monitoring report and a small team visit are required to demonstrate that the institution has made appropriate improvements to bring itself into compliance.

- The Commission may place the institution on probation at any time if it determines that the institution has failed to address satisfactorily the Commission’s concerns regarding non-compliance with accreditation standards and requirements of affiliation in a prior action. This action is accompanied by a request for a monitoring report and a visit follows.

- Probation may, but need not always, precede an action of show cause. Show cause is a non-compliance action requiring an institution to demonstrate why its accreditation should not be withdrawn. The Commission may require an institution to show cause at any time if the Commission determines that the institution no longer meets one or more of the accreditation standards and requirements of affiliation. A show cause action requires an institution to present its case to the Commission for continued accreditation by means of a show cause report and an on-site visit/evaluation. The institution is required to submit a teach-out plan with the show cause report.

- Show cause may or may not result in an adverse action. The Commission may take the following adverse actions:
  - Deny candidate status – An institution is denied candidate for accreditation status.
  - Deny accreditation – An institution is denied (initial) accreditation. The institution may be permitted to remain in candidate status until it is ready for a new evaluation within the allowable five-year period of candidacy.
  - Withdrawal of candidate status – An institution’s candidate for accreditation status is withdrawn. The institution must wait two years to reapply.
  - Withdrawal of accreditation – An institution’s accredited status is withdrawn. If the institution appeals this action, its accreditation remains in effect until the appeal is completed or until the effective date of the withdrawal of accreditation. The institution must wait two years to reapply.

- The Commission must determine whether compliance has been achieved no later than 24 months after the initial non-compliance action was taken. At any time during the 24 month period of non-compliance, the Commission may, at its discretion, continue the institution’s non-compliance status and extend accreditation for good cause beyond the original 24 month period. The Commission may extend accreditation for good cause only once and for a maximum of twelve months.

- Adverse actions are subject to appeal in accordance with due process as delineated in the procedures Appeals from Adverse Accrediting Actions. An institution retains its accreditation during the appeal. The Commission, in its sole discretion, shall fix the effective date of the withdrawal of accreditation status. The effective date of an adverse accreditation action is not an appealable decision.
**MSCHE Literature Promoting Educational Excellence and Improvement** *

During 2014, the Middle States Commission actions included 39 reaffirmations of accreditation via self-study; 46 reaffirmations of accreditation via Periodic Review Report; 14 warnings issued or continued; three probations issued or continued; one show cause issued; and one withdrawal of accreditation. During 2015, “about 11% of institutions required follow-up related to their GenEd program after completing self-study, which is up from 4% ten years ago” (statement by Sean McKitrick, Ph.D., VP at MSCHE at the 2015 MSCHE annual meeting).

**References and websites**


