

# Why do we need to revise our General Education Program?

*And why now for Pete's sake?*

## Introduction

Shippensburg University maintains its General Education program with respect to two PASSHE Board of Governor (PASSHE BOG, 1993, 1990) policies: *General Education at State System of Higher Education Universities (1993-01)* provides the context and guidance for providing all undergraduate students with a shared experience that fits squarely into the broad concept of liberal education<sup>1</sup>; and *Academic Degrees (1990-06-A)* requires students in all Baccalaureate degree programs to successfully complete “at least 40 semester credit hours” of study “focused on competencies consistent with the liberal education learning outcomes as defined in Policy 1993-01.”

## The need for program revision is now: presented in four arguments

Shippensburg University's current General Education program is aligned with the two PASSHE BOG policies described above, but it must now revise its program to reflect major changes to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (MSCHE, 2014) *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*, to program changes made by other PASSHE intuitions, and to changes occurring across the landscape of higher education.

### **Argument #1: Middle States expects all of its institutions to assess student learning**

The Middle States Commission for Higher Education (MSCHE) issued new accreditation standards in 2014 that become effective for all MSCHE institutions, including PASSHE institutions, starting with those that have self-studies due during the 2017-18 academic year (e.g., Shippensburg). Notably, MSCHE eliminated its General Education standard (formerly Standard 12) and placed some former parts of it into *Standard 3: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience*. According to the new standards document and the MSCHE representatives that spoke at the 2014 MSCHE Annual Meeting, an accredited institution possesses or demonstrates:

- A. student learning experiences that are designed, delivered and assessed by faculty ... who are rigorous and effective in: 1) teaching, 2) assessment of student learning, 3) scholarly inquiry, and 4) service;
- B. organized and systematic assessments, conducted by faculty or appropriate professionals using defined and meaningful curricular goals with defensible standards for evaluating whether [or not] students are achieving those goals.
- C. a general education curriculum that helps students to develop competency in *at least*:
  - ⇒ Oral communication
  - ⇒ Written communication
  - ⇒ Scientific and quantitative reasoning
  - ⇒ Critical analysis and reasoning
  - ⇒ Technological competency
  - ⇒ Information literacy
  - ⇒ Study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives

It is clear that MSCHE expects Shippensburg to place assessment of student learning on par with teaching, service, and scholarly growth and that it considers core competencies to be cross-disciplinary in nature. The omission of competencies associated with reading and creative expression is sad, surprising and short-sighted, but the list above is not a complete checklist; rather, a list of minimum (“*at least*”) requirements. Our General Education program needs to be reorganized around clear goals and cross-disciplinary objectives to foster periodic assessment of student learning, periodic program assessment, and sustainable faculty workloads.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘liberal education’ does not draw its meaning from the current political connotation of the word ‘liberal’; rather, it represents the time-tested approach to learning that “provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world” [i.e., a general education] and “in-depth study in a specific area of interest” [i.e., each student’s chosen major](Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2014).

### **Argument #2: Assessment is good reflective teaching practice**

Assessment is a reflective process that professional educators use to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in their programs, teaching practices, and student learning. In the past, reflective assessments, if done at all, could be informal; rigor varied widely by program and educator. Today, assessments are recognized nationally as formal peer-review processes that normalize expectations across curricula, focus on measurable learning outcomes, and reveal strengths, weaknesses, and tacit assumptions (Berrett, 2015). Assessments are earnest attempts to answer questions like:

- Are we communicating clearly with students about what they are expected to learn and why they are expected learn it?
- Are we communicating clearly with students about how their work will be evaluated?
- Do our assignments, quizzes, exams, etc., evaluate students on the material they are expected to learn or on other material that we tacitly assume they know or should know?
- Are we providing our students with ample and sufficient opportunities to learn what they are expected to learn?
- Are we providing our students with ample and sufficient opportunities to demonstrate that they've learned what they are expected to learn?
- What have our students learned and how well have they learned it?

The answers to such questions, if acted upon, prompt and guide valuable improvements to student learning, teaching practice, the quality of interaction between student and educator, and the quality of the institution.

### **Argument #3: The structure of our program makes it impossible to assess student learning sustainably**

The structure of our General Education program reflects the list of recommended cross-disciplinary competencies in PASSHE BOG policy (PASSHE BOG, 1993), yet many of our program goals and learning objectives are not cross-disciplinary. Also, most of our learning objective statements actually contain vague or nested sets of objectives, which makes assessing student learning cumbersome and onerous to do. Since Shippensburg last tried to evaluate its program (2006-2008), it has become unavoidably clear that we are unable to conduct meaningful periodic assessments of the program and all of its participating courses, nor can we demonstrate consistently and clearly what our students are learning. These fatal flaws stem not from the tremendous efforts that faculty members put into teaching and helping students learn, but from the structure of the program itself. If our General Education program was reorganized around clear goals and cross-disciplinary objectives, then that new structure would foster periodic assessment of student learning, periodic program assessment, and sustainable faculty workloads.

### **Argument #4: Our program is growing too large by staying the same**

Our program should better reflect the PASSHE BOG *Academic Passport and Student Transfer Policy (1999-01)*, which allows students to transfer up to 45 general education course credits from qualifying institutions. Most PASSHE institutions that have revised their general education programs since 2009 have reduced the minimum credit requirement of their core programs to 45 credits or fewer and, hence, prompted our program to grow comparatively large (and old). If Shippensburg also reduced its minimum credit requirement (to 45 or 42 credits), then it could align its program with the transfer policy and compete better for transfer students (SU, 2013: AMP Strategy B.4). A smaller credit requirement would also provide Shippensburg students with much needed flexibility to pursue dual-major, minor, and certificate programs and it would dampen the impact of the amended *Academic Degrees Policy (2012-13)*, which identifies a new subtype of course called "directed general education."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A 'directed general education' course is any general education course that is "prescribed" or "required" by a major program. Directed general education courses may still be used to satisfy the content requirements of major programs, but any credits associated with such courses must be counted toward the general education credit requirement only and not counted toward the major credit requirement. This policy took effect August 15, 2015.

## The plan to move forward

APSCUF leadership and the Provost, in 2009 and in anticipation of changes to the MSCHE accreditation standards, collaboratively formed the Academic Master Plan Task Force to develop new visions for the division of Academic Affairs and the academic future of the university. The Academic Master Plan (AMP)(SU, 2013) describes these new visions and identifies desired General Education Program reforms. The new MSCHE accreditation standards are, in parts, reflected by the tactics listed in AMP Strategy E:

- Establish a process and mechanism for the *periodic review and revision* of the general education curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of 21st- century students and workers
- Create and support a process to identify, develop, and implement *core experiences and cross-curricular initiatives*.
- Develop strategies for the *continual emphasis of core competencies* (writing, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, developing habits of the mind, and global understanding) *throughout the curriculum*.

## Summary

New MSCHE accreditation standards, new PASSHE BOG policies, trends across the landscape of higher education, and our own master plan point to a strategy of General Education program reform that includes:

1. Changing the minimum credit requirement of the program to 42 or 45 credits.
2. Simplifying the program and reorganizing it around a few cross-curricular program goals, each with a few clear learning objectives.
3. Revising the program in a way that allows periodic assessments of student learning and the program itself to be accomplished sustainably.
4. Using assessment results to improve student learning, teaching practice, the quality of interaction between our students and educators, and the quality of the institution.

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