

# A Review of the General Education Program at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

## Background and Introduction

As part of our institutional accreditation self-study, our required reporting to UW System, and our essential focus on maintaining standards of excellence in our academic programs, UWSP is asking the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to help constitute a team of colleagues from AASCU member institutions to perform an independent review and analysis of our General Education Program. The format and focus of this review (hereafter referred to as the AASCU Team Review, or ATR) has been determined by an *ad hoc* committee formed by representatives from standing committees of the Faculty Senate. The ATR is to take place in October of 2006.

## General Format

The *ad hoc* committee has generated the questions that will focus the activities of the ATR; the questions follow later in this document. The ATR will be given these questions well in advance of their review and will be free to ask for documents and meetings that will help them during their site visit. Additionally, open discussion forums for the campus will be hosted by the *ad hoc* committee in order to provide more input and perspective for the ATR. Two such meetings will be held in September 2006 and possibly one will be held for the benefit of the ATR team members, pending their request.

The outcome of the ATR will be a team report that analyzes our general education program and provides recommendations from the visiting team. The report will be directed to the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate and the Provost and will be available for the institutional accreditation self-study committee for possible inclusion into the self-study document. The ATR report will certainly be available to the entire campus community and an open campus meeting will be held in February or March of 2007. During this meeting, the ATR report will be discussed with a view to responding to the recommendations. The Executive Committee, in consultation with the Provost, will decide the best action to take in response to the report. This may include referring the report to an appropriate governance committee or forming an *ad hoc* task force.

## Synopsis of the General Education Program at UWSP

The general education program at UWSP is best pictured as a three tiered plan. At the foundation, the faculty have identified skills and knowledge that are consistent with our institutional mission and goals. These skills and knowledge are encapsulated in thirteen statements of what students should be able to demonstrate upon graduation. Tier two is a series of careful statements of objectives and expected outcomes. These statements define our general degree requirement categories and provide the framework for general education graduation requirements. The final tier is what is commonly understood to be the general degree requirements, the GDRs. These are the public face of our general education program, the courses that have been crafted to meet the goals and objectives of the statements. Courses must be approved through a well-defined governance procedure in order to be listed as satisfying GDR category requirements.

The first two tiers listed above are described in our University Handbook, the procedures for approving courses for GDR credit are in our governance policy documents (available in the public folders), and the listing of courses which have been approved is given in each semester's timetable. The listing is also conveniently available in the online registration pages as a searchable database.

## Guiding Questions for the ATR

These questions will provide the framework and the focus for the ATR process. They are not given in prioritized order.

1. Are our GDRs an appropriate array for general education in today's context?
  - a. Are the desired outcomes clear and measurable? Are there more appropriate outcomes that we should include? What do our GDR courses reflect in terms of our educational or institutional values?
  - b. How does UWSP compare with other institutions, especially in the amount of course work devoted to the general education program?
  - c. Are there redundancies in our GDR courses?
  - d. Are there specific deficiencies in our general education requirements? For instance, are our foreign language requirements appropriate?
  - e. How does our general education program mesh with the growing career focus for higher education in Wisconsin? Do business leaders support a strong liberal education?
  
2. Are we "going about" general education in the right way or are we locked into a system that could be improved? For instance, our program focuses on specific courses to produce the desired outcomes.
  - a. Would it be better for our students if we were to infuse all courses with specific general education outcomes?

- b. Are general education outcomes being exploited to good effect in later courses in the curriculum? Are disciplinary courses articulated with the goals and objectives of the general education program?
  - c. Does our general education program foster cross-disciplinary thinking in our students?
3. Do our students understand and value the purposes of our general education program?
- a. How clearly are the goals and objectives communicated in the classroom?
  - b. What connection is made between our GDRs, a liberal education, and life-long learning and “citizenship?”
  - c. To what extent do the GDR courses function as a broad foundation for a liberal education?
4. Are the GDR courses themselves appropriate?
- a. Is the review process rigorous? Is it too restrictive?
  - b. Do our GDR courses map onto the statements of goals and objectives?
  - c. Is the level of academic challenge in the courses appropriate for helping our students achieve a deeper appreciation of their liberal education?
  - d. Are courses that meet disciplinary prerequisites appropriate for the general education program?
  - e. Is there evidence that the general education component receives adequate focus in the course?
5. Is SCH production too much of a driver for our program? What is the effect of the general education program on time-to-degree for our students?

More guiding questions may be added to this list after the open campus discussions.

### A Few Specifics

The AASCU team must be invited to perform the review by the Chancellor. The team will be chosen from a list of over 70 participating institutional leaders and will have a team leader who will be the chief contact between the team and UWSP. Typically, a two day campus visit is necessary for such a review and the team will request materials in advance and access to certain documents or individuals while on campus.