

## **The Charge from the General Education Curriculum Process Committee to the General Education Curriculum Review Committee, Dated April 6, 2018.**

The mission statement of the University of Richmond's new strategic plan envisions a Richmond education that "prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world." This requires that we "ensure that our curriculum provides students with the best possible preparation for lifelong learning, success in their chosen profession, and meaningful contributions to addressing the world's problems." With a new strategic plan just underway, we have an opportunity to consider what type of general education curriculum (GEC) can best support a distinctive Richmond education in the years ahead.

This committee will review our GEC and make recommendations on whether our current GEC is best suited to fulfill Richmond's mission in light of the University's strengths. The committee will produce a final report of its findings by the end of March 2019 to the full Senate. It will present interim reports as needed.

**The Product.** The Committee will prepare a report of their findings and recommendations, with respect to the questions outlined in this charge. To the extent the current GEC does not serve the objectives of a Richmond education, the committee report to the Senate will include a suggested charge for a new committee that will work to generate possible revisions/reform of the GEC. This committee will build on the best practices outlined in the GEC Process Committee's final report in the spring of 2018.

**The Questions.** The committee should address the questions below:

1. What are the fundamental skills, abilities, and perspectives that every student should develop during the course of a Richmond education?
2. How does the current GEC serve the objectives of a Richmond education, as articulated in the current UR mission statement, values statement, and in the outcomes of question 1? The current GEC is understood to include today's First-Year Seminars, six fields of study, second language, oral communication, and wellness.
3. Among the GEC models this committee examines in the course of its work (including UR's current model), the committee is asked to make note of which models might best serve our mission and support the outcomes of question 1 above.

## **Report to Faculty Senate on General Education Curriculum Review, March 21, 2019**

Presented by the ad hoc General Education Curriculum Review Committee (GECRC):

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Prepared for the Faculty Senate meeting on March 29, 2019

### **Executive Summary**

The ad hoc General Education Curriculum Review Committee evaluated University of Richmond's General Education Curriculum over ten months from May 2018 to March 2019. The review covered the First-Year Seminar, Fields of Study, Wellness, and Second Language requirements. We sought to determine if the requirements fulfilled the university's mission statement and if they taught essential skills, abilities, and perspectives to our undergraduate students. The committee read extensive literature on general education, met with directors of general education programs, held discussions with the vast majority of departments on campus, spoke with and invited leaders of reform efforts at nearby institutions of higher education, gathered data on our own general education curriculum and that of 25 other institutions, and elicited opinions from faculty, staff, and students. The committee determined that our general education curriculum contained a number of weaknesses, particularly in teaching writing, numeracy, and wellness. In addition, the curriculum is fragmented, with each portion not well integrated with other portions and with the rest of the university. We advocate that a new committee be assembled for the 2019-20 year to sculpt a proposed curriculum. That new curriculum should bring purpose, coherence, and integration to the curriculum and address the specific weakness of the current curriculum.

### **I. The Purposes and Goals of a General Education Curriculum**

The general education curriculum (GEC) of an institution of higher education is the required portion of a student's academic courses that is shared by all undergraduates at the institution. Typically the general education curriculum constitutes one-quarter to one-third of the courses that an undergraduate student takes during a four-year college career. The general education curriculum establishes essential skills, abilities, and perspectives important for success after graduation. In addition, courses slotted early in the curriculum (i.e. first year) can form the foundation for student success during college.

What are those essential skills and abilities, and to what perspectives must students be exposed? These questions must be answered in the context of the strengths and identity of the college or university that asks them. When asked about what abilities are important in their lives five years after graduation, large majorities of University of Richmond alumni (classes of 2010 & 2013) reply that the abilities to write and speak effectively, to collaborate with diverse teams, and to apply knowledge to solve problems are most important (2015 & 2018 Alumni Outcomes Surveys; Appendix I). The vast majority of the hundreds of higher educational institutions belonging to the American Association of College & Universities (AAC&U) reported writing skills, critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, and quantitative reasoning skills as learning outcomes for their students ([Hart Research Associates, 2016](#)). The same report showed that most colleges and universities want students to graduate with knowledge of science, mathematics, humanities, global world cultures, social sciences, and the arts. It is incumbent on the general education curriculum to ensure that students graduate with these skills and perspectives.

At many colleges and universities, the general education curriculum pushes students to take a broad set of courses in disparate fields. Many, though not all, liberal arts colleges use a general education curriculum based on a traditional liberal arts curriculum. “Liberal arts” was coined by the Greeks and Romans for education appropriate of a “free” person. A liberal arts education has evolved over the past century to encompass a broad selection of courses ranging from the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and languages. Students are generally required to take at least a class from each primary discipline, although the definitions of the disciplines differ slightly from institution to institution. The majority of AAC&U institutions employ this “distribution” model to provide breadth of knowledge in their students’ curricula, but most add elements such as capstones or common intellectual experiences to round out their GECs. Such a broad collection of knowledge is meant “not to teach that which is peculiar to any one of the professions; but to lay the foundation which is common to them all.” ([Yale Report of 1828](#)) Thus, an ideal liberal arts education imparts essential skills and abilities by showing students how they can be applied in any of the major disciplines of academic scholarship.

General education can also be, in some ways, defined by what it is not. Because general education is required of all undergraduates, regardless of their chosen majors, it does not belong to any one field or discipline. Its core purpose is not to train students in the practices of a particular field; that is the role of a major curriculum. “The ability to conduct scholarly research using methods in your field of study” ranked last in both aforementioned alumni surveys in importance for alumni five years after graduation. Some departments and programs want general education courses to lead undecided students toward selecting their majors, but that is not a core purpose of general education. Instead, that is a by-product of a well-taught and interesting general education course. In addition, general education is distinguished from general electives, which also comprise up to approximately a third of a UR student’s required units. General education, therefore, must be focused on imparting essential skills and abilities through a broad, but well-defined, curriculum.

An ideal general education curriculum should produce a knowledgeable global citizen who is

capable of applying critical, analytical, and/or quantitative reasoning skills to complex problems and communicating their solutions. A surprisingly large proportion of college graduates with baccalaureate degrees do not work in the field in which they are trained ([Plumer 2013](#)). For many of our students, general education, not their majors, provides the main preparation for future employment. When UR's student leaders (e.g. members of Richmond College and Westhampton College student government associations) told us about what they thought of as the purpose of UR's general education curriculum, they used the words "holistic," "liberal arts," and "well-rounded" (Survey for Students on UR's General Education, Appendix I). The University's mission statement calls for "the holistic development of students" through a Richmond education that "prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world." ([Strategic Plan Mission and Values Statements](#)). This report, produced by the GECRC, assesses whether our curriculum is achieving the goals laid out in the preceding paragraphs, and documents where we are falling short.

## II. The current GEC at University of Richmond

According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, University of Richmond (UR) is a 4-year, private not-for-profit university with high undergraduate enrollment and Arts & Science Focus. UR is also classified as a Community Engagement institution, which points to the University's efforts to reach out to its local and global communities and incorporate those communities into the educational experience. *U.S. News & World Report*, publishers of a popular college ranking list, classifies University of Richmond as a "national liberal arts college," which follows the Carnegie Classification, Baccalaureate College—Arts & Science Focus, and denotes a school's emphasis on undergraduate education. UR's [Office of Institutional Effectiveness](#) lists Barnard College, Colgate University, College of William & Mary, Davidson College, Elon University, Furman University, Oberlin College, Rice University, and Washington & Lee University, among others as schools with similar size, scope, and resources, and University of Virginia, Boston College, UNC-Chapel Hill, Wake Forest University, and Georgetown University, among others, as institutions that compete with UR for undergraduate admissions.

At UR, the GEC is a combination of required courses in different disciplines (Fields of Study, or FS), First-Year Seminars (FYS), a second language (COM II), and Wellness. When undergraduate students enroll, they start as students in the School of Arts & Sciences. First-Year Seminars are taken in the Fall and Spring semesters of the first year as part of general education requirements. The FYS program, established in 2009, aims to establish foundational skills in critical reading and thinking and information literacy and to offer ample opportunities for students to sharpen their written and oral communication skills in a small class setting with close faculty contact. The other components of the GEC can be taken anytime during a student's career prior to graduation, except for the WELL 085 URAWARE course on alcohol consumption, which must be taken during the first two years.

We commissioned a recent alumna, Jane Schmidt, to collect structural information and opinions about 25 peer and competitive colleges and universities as a basis for comparison to our own curriculum (Appendix II). A majority of these institutions require courses in (in order of popularity from most to least) natural sciences, writing, social sciences, foreign language (competency requirement) visual & performing arts, mathematics, humanities, diverse perspectives, and history. Likewise, UR's GEC requires Fields of Study courses in Natural Sciences (FSNS), Social Analysis (FSSA), Visual & Performing Arts (FSVP), Symbolic Reasoning (FSSR), Literary Studies (FSLT), and Historical Studies (FSHT) in addition to the second language requirement and a writing-intensive First-Year Seminar. Ms. Schmidt's analysis indicates that our own general education curriculum is a mainstream curriculum, similar to those of our peers and competitors.

Descriptions of our general education curriculum can be found on the UR [Registrar's Office website](#).

### III. Methods

Members of the GECRC met regularly from late-April 2018 through March 2019. Over the summer of 2018 members familiarized themselves with the committee's charge, learned UR's General Education Curriculum and policies, read reports from previous GE curricular revisions that had not garnered approval, studied recommended publications on best practices for undertaking GE revisions (passed on by the previous committee), and read books on historical, theoretical, and practical approaches to liberal arts curricula in the U.S. Members of the committee also participated in a summer retreat to sketch out the goals for the coming school year. The committee further commissioned recent alumna, Jane Schmidt, to collect information and opinions from 25 peer and competitive colleges and universities (see Appendix II). Additionally, they invited Chad Wellmon from the University of Virginia to present a keynote on curricular histories during the opening faculty Colloquy of the 2018-2019 school year.

The committee met bi-weekly throughout the fall 2018 and spring 2019 semesters and maintained ongoing correspondence through Blackboard forums and email discussions. As noted throughout this report, they worked to collect as much information as they could from a variety of sources, including institutional data sets and verbal and written feedback from faculty, students, staff and alumni. Accordingly, enrollment numbers, course offerings, and assessment outcomes were collected for each of the four areas of the GEC with the help of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Lori Schuyler, Vice President of Planning and Priorities. Individual members of the committee met or exchanged email correspondence with faculty and staff from every campus department and program invested in the GE curriculum. Student feedback was solicited through various "listening tours" with the Westhampton College and Richmond College Student Government Associations, freshmen focus groups in the Lora Robins and Marsh Hall, and invitations to participate in an online survey. Alumni input was aggregated from survey responses collected from the "Alumni Outcomes Surveys" sent by the institution to graduates over the past ten years.

In February 2019, the committee hosted a town hall that provided an overview of UR's current GE offerings and featured two representatives from The College of William & Mary who explained the challenges and strengths of their own recent curricular changes. Students, staff, and faculty in attendance were invited to ask questions and to fill out surveys addressing their opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the current UR curriculum (see Appendix IV). That same month, the chair of the GECRC, attended the American Association of Colleges and University's national conference and brought back information about nationwide approaches to GE reform.

Throughout the year, the committee invited key staff and faculty to discuss GE processes and governance during their meetings. This included the chair of the General Education Committee, David Brandenberger, the Director of Advising, Anna Young, the Dean of International Education, Martha Merritt, Associate Provost for Student Academic Initiatives, Scott Johnson, Director of First-Year Seminars, Mary Tate, Executive Director of Admissions, Marilyn Hesser, Associate Director of Admissions, Tom Nicholas, and Chair and Member of the GEC Process Committee, Laura Runyen-Janecky and Doug Winiarski.

#### IV. Criteria for evaluation of the GEC

The GECRC is primarily interested in whether UR's GEC is well-suited to educate students about essential skills, abilities, and perspectives in the context of the strengths and characteristics of the university. It is also tasked to determine if the GEC "prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world," as described by UR's mission statement. In order to assess the GEC, the GECRC met with numerous staff and faculty affiliated with the various portions of the GEC, spoke with several thought leaders in higher education outside UR, obtained data and reports from the university administration, and elicited feedback from students, staff, and faculty.

After gathering information, the members of the GECRC created rubrics to assess whether the goals of an excellent GEC were being met by our current GEC and whether each portion of the GEC was performing well. Our two complementary rubrics coalesced into two approaches that provided structure to our assessment.

##### Approach 1: Overall goals of general education

The general education curriculum should:

- prepare students to use common modes of academic inquiry
- help students improve their English verbal communication skills
- help students communicate verbally in a second language
- help students develop skills in basic numeracy (i.e., the ability to understand and work with numbers)
- help students understand one or more modes of artistic expression
- complement the students' courses in their major field of study
- help students identify a suitable major field of study
- provide a common experience that helps unite all UR undergraduate students
- not present an unreasonable impediment to study abroad
- support students' physical, mental, and emotional health

##### Approach 2: Performance of portions of the current GEC

In excellent First-Year Seminars, students:

- demonstrate proficiency in writing through intentional interventions, including revision
- demonstrate critical thinking skills
- have writing assignments vary from descriptive/creative, to argument-based, to synthetic, research-based, to reflective writing about what a student has learned

- engage in interesting topics clustered around themes, big questions, or shared texts
- interact closely on projects with faculty committed to writing across the curriculum
- are assessed using validated instruments
- have ample opportunities for writing as part of the curriculum
- can locate evidence for claims
- demonstrate critical reading and thinking
- explore a variety of topics

Faculty undergo rigorous oversight

An excellent Second Language (Com II) requirement:

- teaches intercultural competency
- students are able to demonstrate fluency (reading, writing, conversation) in a second language
- or students at least achieve a proficiency level that will give them confidence to study abroad in non-English speaking countries
- connects international education with curriculum
- has strong assessment with externally validated tools
- has proficiency testing in all languages upon entry and exit
- has a variety of languages integrated across Gen Ed using C-LAC and CBL components

In an excellent set of Fields of Study courses:

- Courses aren't introductory surveys nor are they gateway courses to a major, but can be appreciated by students at every level.
- Courses focus on developing ways of knowing and modes of inquiry
- Students learn in an integrative manner, connecting content from disparate fields
- Students are able to reflect on their learning
- Courses take advantage of breadth and talents of faculty
- Faculty and students are deeply engaged
- Students see intersections between arts, sciences, humanities, and their own lives
- Courses provide moral/ethical foundation

- Courses teach skills in intercultural literacy and numeracy across the disciplines
- Courses are assessed using validated tools
- Students learn oral and written communication skills throughout
- Courses provide breadth of fields
- Students enjoy courses in fields they otherwise would not take
- Courses define a mode of inquiry that cannot be easily translated into “the history class” or “the calculus class”

An excellent set of Wellness courses:

- Connects students with campus resources
- Contains impactful teaching on key problems (e.g. sexual assault, alcohol abuse, time management)
- Student engage deeply with topics of import to their lives
- Includes practicum and experiential learning to model mindful practices and habits for healthy and thriving lifestyles
- Meets requirement for accreditation
- Connected with the rest of the general education curriculum

## V. Evaluation of UR’s general education curriculum

### **a. An Identity for the General Education Curriculum**

Using the approaches developed in the previous section of this report, the committee evaluated the four component parts of the General Education Curriculum. We formed our conclusions after drawing on a wide range of data and a variety of opinions. Our discussions focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum within its component parts: 1) FYS, 2) Fields of Study, 3) COM-2/Second Language, and 4) Wellness.

As discussed in Section II, our four-component curriculum is a functional structure and not atypical of similar institutions, but that does not mean it is best-suited for UR. The committee consensus is that overall, the current GEC is not meeting the needs of our students in some specific areas, particularly in regards to written communication, numeracy, and wellness. Furthermore, there are numerous opportunities for improvement in all areas of the GEC, for an institution that aspires to academic excellence as defined in the Strategic Plan: “to stimulate intellectual and personal growth, connect theory with practice, and offer the inspiration of the

liberal arts and the ability to approach problems thoughtfully, critically, ethically, and creatively.”

The GEC comprises roughly one-third of the graduation requirements for the University of Richmond undergraduate degree programs. When the unit system was implemented, the total number of courses students need for graduation was reduced, but the number of courses in the GEC was not reduced proportionally. Students have less opportunity for the exploration that a liberal arts education should provide. The committee considered each required component in the GEC as “valuable real estate,” and evaluated the contribution of each GEC unit versus potential alternative uses of faculty resources and focus of our students’ efforts.

The committee found a consistent theme that too often, faculty and students do not understand the purpose of the GEC. We found the need to address, in a deliberate and purposeful way, how our general education program is packaged, implemented, and disseminated to students and faculty. This in short would form a clear identity for the GEC.

Our GEC, as a whole, does not offer ways for students to see the purpose for their learning, to explore various areas of knowledge, habits of mind, and ways of seeing, as well as to acquire a set of basic competencies. There are few opportunities for students to integrate their learning from one course to another outside of their major. We have consistently heard the complaint that students see the curriculum as a something “to get out of the way” or as a “series of boxes to check,” comments that describe curricular fragmentation and incoherence. An incoherent curriculum may have parts that make sense, but those parts do not fit together, and the large variety of courses becomes an unrelated jumble ([Green 2018](#)). Bringing a clear purpose, a strong identity, and intentionality to our fragmented curriculum can increase the level of student and faculty engagement in our general education courses and better lead students toward the “lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership” described in our mission statement.

The following evaluation of each component part of the GEC summarizes the committee’s review of input from faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Supporting detail is found in the Appendices to this report.

## **b. First-Year Seminars**

Goals for the GEC:

Our committee evaluated the FYS on the basis of the following goals for the GEC from our Section IV of this report:

- The general education curriculum should help students improve their English verbal communication skills. The first-year seminars are the only existing general education courses that include explicit writing and oral communication components, although other courses in the Fields of Study and majors develop communication skills as well.
- The general education curriculum should provide a common experience that helps unite all UR undergraduate students. FYS should inculcate students to the close interactions and discussions with faculty and fellow students central to the UR experience.

## Strengths:

The FYS Program is a disciplinary-based, writing-intensive general education program for first year students. Instructors are drawn from across the University. Students have some flexibility in choosing their seminars. According to student evaluations of instruction (Fall 2010-Spring 2013), the courses are generally well-liked by students, with high opinions of their instructors and the in-class discussions. Students also indicated that the courses stimulated their critical and analytical thinking. An external review of FYS by Professors Elizabeth Ciner (Carleton College) and Lindsay Whaley (Dartmouth College) in 2014 noted the high level of faculty engagement in the FYS courses they teach.

## Challenges:

Reiterating the conclusion of the 2018 report of the FYS Committee to the UR Faculty Senate, the FYS program is not designed solely to be a writing program. In multiple departmental feedback sessions, faculty expressed dissatisfaction with students' current formal writing skills. Some current first-year students want a more interesting selection of FYS, particularly those with interests in the sciences. Student feedback from Fall 2010 to Spring 2013 indicated only moderate success in achieving the five pillars of the FYS experience: Expand and deepen students' understanding of the world and of themselves, enhance their ability to read and think critically, enhance their ability to communicate effectively, in writing, speech, and other appropriate forms, develop the fundamentals of information literacy and library research, and provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor. Internal (2018) and external (2014) reviews noted a lack of consistency across FYS sections and a lack of scaffolding from first to second semester of FYS. Students were not able to articulate the difference between the first and second semesters of FYS. Opinions expressed in multiple departments included:

- The quality of student writing has declined.
- While developing writing skills is not the sole goal of the FYS Program, it is a key goal.
- The GEC needs a writing course taught by qualified faculty.
- FYS is not meeting the writing needs of many students.
- FYS does not take into account the different writing levels of students as they arrive on campus (unlike course options for students studying foreign languages or mathematics).
- The present program does not provide the first-year class with any unifying experience, such as reading common texts.
- FYS does not encourage (or is not integrated with) ongoing development of writing skills after the first year.
- The variability of student experiences in FYS results in variable outcomes.
- Fully staffing FYS courses remains difficult (also noted in 2018 internal review). Several departments indicated challenges with staffing their own courses given student demand, implying that FYS is lower on the priority list.

Furthermore, the 2015 and 2018 alumni survey identified writing proficiency as the most important skill for post-graduate success, underscoring the importance of instilling a “culture of writing,” especially at an early stage.

#### Potential Reforms:

The committee sees a need, and significant interest in, a University commitment to a thorough reform of the writing requirements. This commitment to writing should not be limited to the FYS program, but should be integrated at all levels of the curriculum. Courses designated as “writing intensive” should be taught by professors committed to seeing students develop habits to improve writing skills through a combination of assignments, implemented uniformly across FYS, Fields of Study, and the majors. Writing intensive courses are especially needed at the upper-division where students should be writing longer pieces that demand greater organization, topical focus, library research (where appropriate) and elements of style. The University needs to commit resources to develop a culture of writing.

Several options for reforming FYS that were mentioned in discussions with the academic departments and within the committee are listed in Section VI.

#### c. **Wellness**

##### Goals for the GEC:

The committee considered input about whether and how the non-credit Wellness requirement in the GEC is fulfilling the following goals set forth in the assessment criteria:

- The general education curriculum should support students’ physical, mental, and emotional health.
- The general education curriculum should provide a common experience that helps unite all UR undergraduate students.
- Wellness courses must continue to meet accreditation requirements
- Ideally, Wellness courses should engage students in topics important to student well-being and connect students to campus resources and the rest of the curriculum.

##### Strengths:

Students are required to learn about alcohol awareness and other important aspects of the college experience that would otherwise be difficult to communicate to all students.

##### Challenges:

Inconsistency and scheduling of Wellness courses are challenges. Few faculty expressed much familiarity with or support for the “PLUS2” (WELL 090) Wellness courses. Many (but not all) students expressed dissatisfaction with the current Wellness courses. Student engagement is low,

and Wellness courses are entirely disconnected with any other part of the curriculum. Students build their academic schedule first, and place priority on their graded courses.

Potential Reforms:

The ad hoc First-Year Experience Committee, headed by Associate Provost Scott Johnson is gathering input on how to improve Wellness courses in conjunction with efforts to better transition students into the college experience at UR.

#### **d. Fields of Study**

Goals for the GEC:

The committee gathered substantial data and information to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Fields of Study (FS) requirements. This included examining aggregated data from the past 10 years that included enrollment numbers, course offerings, and assessment outcomes. Committee members also consulted with faculty, students, staff and alumni to solicit feedback through surveys, small group meetings, and a town hall meeting. Additionally, the committee invited various key players to discuss the FS processes and governance, including the chair of the General Education Committee, David Brandenberger, the Director of Advising, Anna Young, and the Dean of International Education, Martha Merritt.

The collected information demonstrated that the FS did have strengths, including the variety and breadth of course offerings within certain areas. However, there was also a general consensus that specific aspects of the FS requirements necessitate revision. These ranged between department and program areas and sizes. Refer to Appendix V for a list of specific suggestions.

The committee evaluated the Fields of Study as currently defined in terms of each FS contribution to the following goals in our criteria in Section IV:

- The general education curriculum should prepare students to use common modes of academic inquiry.
- The general education curriculum should help students understand one or more modes of artistic expression.
- The general education curriculum should help students identify a suitable major field of study.
- The general education curriculum should help students develop skills in basic numeracy (i.e., the ability to understand and work with numbers).
- The general education curriculum should complement the students' courses in their major field of study.
- The general education curriculum should not present an unreasonable impediment to study abroad.
- Students should learn in an integrative manner, connecting content from disparate fields to their own lives

- Students should reflect on their learning
- Courses should take advantage of breadth and talents of faculty
- Faculty and students are deeply engaged
- Courses should provide moral/ethical foundation
- Courses teach skills in intercultural literacy
- Students should learn and practice oral and written communication skills throughout
- Courses are assessed using validated tools

#### Strengths:

We did not hear widespread demand to eliminate any of the existing field of study requirements or add any new field of study requirements. The existing field of study requirements expose students to at least six modes of academic inquiry:

- Observing physical phenomena (natural science)
- Reading texts (literary studies)
- Considering what happened in the past (historical studies)
- Building models (symbolic reasoning)
- Studying how other people think and behave (social analysis)
- Developing and practicing modes of artistic expression (visual and performing arts)

#### Challenges:

The current Fields of Study structure essentially was designed 30 years ago. The committee received input from multiple faculty in multiple departments that the boundaries or definitions between different fields of study are either too broad or too restrictive. Multiple departments recommended that the Fields of Study allow exploration of fields that now are more porous and interdisciplinary, and allow all forms of creativity.

Specifically, the existing FSSR requirement emphasizes symbolic reasoning, but not necessarily numeracy. Linguistics and logic courses currently qualify for FSSR credit; statistics courses do not. Expansion/change of this requirement to a numeracy or data analytics requirement is indicated, to prepare graduates in all majors for problem-solving using data and data visualization.

Staffing Fields of Study courses has also become difficult for some departments. While many of the courses of some departments and programs also count for Fields of Study credit, some departments must devote teaching units to teaching “non-majors” classes while staffing their own major. These non-majors courses, while engaging, are often filled entirely by seniors during registration. This is a particular problem with Field of Study Natural Science courses.

Departments understandably prioritize staffing their own majors, but this leaves few teaching units for Field of Study courses.

The 2015 alumni survey asked respondents to rank 12 abilities according to how well UR had prepared them to perform each ability. “The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics” received the lowest score among the 12 abilities. There was a sizeable gap of 0.6 between the perceived importance of being able to work with numbers (4.1) and the perceived ability gained at UR (3.5).

Potential Reforms:

The definitions and boundaries of the Fields of Study should be examined in detail to provide the appropriate breadth and scope for learning in the 21st Century. Inclusion of statistics courses in the GEC, and other options, are listed in Section VI.

#### **e. Communications Skills II – Second Language.**

Goals for the GEC:

Language study has traditionally been an important component of a liberal arts education, for it inspires in our students empathy and cultural insight, in addition to offering substantial intellectual and cognitive benefits. Second language proficiency is also valuable preparation for students who study abroad, which constitutes the majority of UR undergraduates. UR’s programs in languages, literatures, and cultural studies (offered by in the departments of Classical Studies; English; Languages, Literatures & Cultures; and Latin American, Latino & Iberian Studies) already uphold many of the core values of our current strategic plan; namely, “inclusivity and equity,” as well as “diversity and educational opportunity.” Languages are the crucial medium that enables us to think globally; indeed, they are the very lifeline through which globalization is achieved. It is our obligation to prepare our students to thrive in a world that is increasingly multilingual and globalized. The study of languages thus empowers our students as emancipated individuals; it endows them with the ability to respond to the needs of others with compassion, understanding, empathy, and creativity. Monolingualism, in contrast, encourages ethnocentrism and isolationism. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously put it, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, “Language learning has been shown to greatly enhance student performance across the curriculum,” improving cognitive functions that include, but are not limited to:

- Enhanced problem solving skills
- Improved verbal and spatial abilities
- Improved memory function (long & short-term)
- Enhanced creative thinking capacity
- More flexible and creative thinking
- Improved attitude toward the target culture

In general terms, the Com II requirement at UR is a proficiency-based requirement and, as such, is not tied to any specific number of class hours, semesters, seat time, or course credit. The minimum accepted level for fulfillment of the requirement is a score of “medium-low,” as per the proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Students at UR are able to fulfill the requirement through several ways, including AP scores and other forms of testing.

### Strengths:

The effectiveness of second language education is assessed using externally validated instruments (the Standards-based Measure of Proficiency (STAMPS 4S) or ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages). As our [assessment data](#) indicate, we are currently meeting the standard of “medium low” (on the ACTFL scale) in all the modern languages, with the exception of Arabic. Students also passed the Classical Studies Department’s internal assessment.

### Challenges:

Despite the success of our language programs, a substantial portion of the committee expressed concerns that fulfillment of the Com II requirement may, for some students, amount to coursework in as many as four units (i.e., 10% of their coursework at UR). For some, such a weighty requirement is difficult to justify in light of other curricular priorities. Still, in practice, relatively few students enroll in a full four units of coursework at the Com II level. Recent data obtained from the Office of the Registrar with regard to the study of Spanish (the most popular language choice at UR), demonstrate that during the five year span of 2013 to 2018:

- 1965 students completed 2 units of Spanish in fulfillment of Com II (on average: 393 students per year),
- 480 students completed 3 units of Spanish in fulfillment of Com II (on average: 96 students per year), and
- only 191 students completed 4 units of Spanish in fulfillment of Com II (on average: only 38.2 students per year).

Although the target of two-thirds of students attaining medium-low proficiency overall is achieved by most languages, “sub-scores” from the external assessments, or scores broken into proficiencies in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, indicate that the target for listening proficiency is not regularly being met by most of the language programs.

Education in a second language can provide critical insights into the national and cultural perspectives of peoples communicating in other languages. The Com II requirement, however, requires no assessment of student learning about the cultural practices of people speaking that language. It is difficult, therefore, to determine the effectiveness of Com II in regards to intercultural competency.

### Potential Reforms:

Given the foregoing observations, the majority members of the General Education Review Committee believe that the Com II requirement plays an essential role in our general education program and is important to the identity of the University as a leader in international education. Thus, its structure need not be altered. A minority of members believe that second language proficiency is not essential for all students and that departments and programs with curricula in which proficiency in a second language is critical adopt a specific requirement for their majors.

A small cosmetic modification has been suggested in the form of a name change; that is, for improved accuracy, we might change the name “Com II” to “Second-Language Proficiency” or “Second-Language Acquisition.” The name “Communications II” was predicated on the existence of “Communications I,” a requirement that no longer exists, and such a change would thus represent an improvement in clarity.

Adding an assessment in intercultural competency to the second language requirement could improve our understanding of the positive outcomes of learning a second language. These data would be useful for future debates on the merits of Com II.

#### **e. General Education and its connections outside of the curriculum**

UR’s general education curriculum exists as an important entity in the academic careers of all its undergraduates, but does not exist as an important entity outside of the curriculum. Despite its outsized stature as the centerpiece of undergraduate education, very little attention is paid to it by faculty, staff, students, and prospective students who aren’t directly participating in the courses. From Admissions, to Orientation, to Academic Advising, the General Education Curriculum serves as a forgettable backdrop to an otherwise excellent university.

A student’s interaction with the University begins prior to enrollment, during the application and admissions process. Students are attracted to UR’s excellent academic reputation as a top national liberal arts college, to our beautiful campus, and to the wide array of extracurricular activities, but general education is not among the top items students ask about with admissions staff when they visit, according to multiple admissions staff members we spoke with. The Admissions Office displays fact sheets about every major on campus, but offers no equivalent information on our general education curriculum, despite the fact that each of those students will take general education classes upon enrollment. Prospective students do not think much of the broad education they will receive here, despite our identity as a liberal arts college.

Once a student enrolls at UR, the attention paid to helping students understand the purpose and importance of general education on their academic careers is insufficient. As far as we could tell, the GEC is not addressed during student orientation, leaving the task of explaining the GEC to academic advisors. While advisors are generally well-versed in the curricula of their own departments and programs, they might not explain general education to undeclared undergraduates. According to our survey of student leaders, only approximately half of respondents thought that the GEC’s purpose, methods, and requirements are effectively understood

and communicated (Appendix II). The lack of understanding about our GEC leads to apathy and some antipathy. Of the 19 respondents to our student survey, dissatisfied students outnumbered satisfied students, and nearly all of them wanted to see the GEC changed. Students commonly complain about taking classes in fields have no interest and view them as “just boxes to check” (Appendix II). This “checkbox mentality” was a common refrain encountered at the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ 2019 “Creating a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century General Education: Responding to Seismic Shifts” conference and certainly not unique to UR.

Our GEC is generally assessed through rubrics designed around competencies and then assessed by the faculty who teach them. These assessments almost uniformly indicate that ~90% of students are competent in all of the skills tested in Fields of Studies courses (competencies are described in accreditation materials in Appendix IV; the assessment scores can be obtained from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness). FYS also employs similar rubrics, which students pass with flying colors, but the internal FYS review from 2018 also takes a dim view of these rubrics:

*“When one hundred professors a year assess their own students based on largely independent criteria (determined by those same professors), the data have little objective value (a failing that would be true even if every professor took the assessment with utmost seriousness and rigor, which many FYS instructors privately admit that they do not).”*

FYS did undergo an external review in 2013-14, which also noted the need for better assessments. The weakness of our assessment tools may also contribute to the inconsistencies from course to course seen in FYS, as stated above. The Second Language requirement stands in contrast in that language proficiency is based on an external (ACTFL) set of guidelines. Our GEC is in need of stronger, more informative assessments than those currently in use if we are to use them to improve the curriculum and the courses in the curriculum.

The responsibility of overseeing UR’s GEC lies with the General Education Committee, a university-level committee. The General Education Committee, under the purview of the Faculty Senate, consists of faculty across all five schools, and is mainly responsible for maintaining the general education curriculum and resolving requests or conflicts that relate to the curriculum. It has the ability to recommend changes to the curriculum, but that ability is rarely exercised. Curricular committees, instead of driving innovation, serve to maintain the status quo, and this problem is not unique to UR nor new ([Green 2018](#), p. 6) While each department and program is in charge of its own curriculum, the general education curriculum belongs to no single department or school, making review and revision considerably more difficult. General education also has no ability to staff its own curriculum, in contrast to departments, and staffing problems are spread throughout the curriculum, from FYS to Fields of Studies courses.

## **VI. Recommendation to the Faculty Senate**

In light of the numerous discussions the GEC Review Committee had with departments and directors of programs and internally, we crafted and discussed a motion that distills our collective opinions about UR's current general education curriculum. The motion is as follows:

“We, the General Education Curriculum (GEC) Review Committee, after having done a thorough review, have determined that the University of Richmond's current undergraduate GEC is not well suited to teach essential skills, abilities, and perspectives for undergraduates, or to fulfill our university's mission. Therefore, we recommend that the Faculty Senate form a new committee that will revise the general education curriculum.”

The motion passed unanimously, 6-0, with three members absent.

## **VI. Recommended revisions and suggestions for the GEC revision committee**

### **LIST OF SUGGESTIONS/CHANGES RECEIVING CONSENSUS SUPPORT**

1. Wellness requirement should be changed to make it more relevant to students.
2. Consider disallowing or capping the number of Advanced Placement credits for general education requirements. The committee as a whole does not consider high school courses to be good substitutes for college courses. It is therefore critical that the experiences offered courses in general education be distinctive of the content taught in high school courses.
3. Increase the number of required writing-intensive courses. The National Survey of Student Engagement data (available from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness) indicates that while first-year students at UR have more writing assignments than at other liberal arts colleges, seniors at UR have fewer writing assignments than LAC peers, suggesting that our commitment to writing throughout the curriculum drops off after FYS. The committee advocates designating some Field of Study courses as “writing-intensive”, and requiring a certain number of those courses for graduation.
4. Replace Field of Study Symbolic Reasoning with a required course on math, statistics, or data analysis to improve numeracy. Students should be able to handle numbers and organize data for future employment in many different fields. Alumni surveys from 2010 and 2013 indicated that there existed a gap between how important the ability to work with numbers and understand statistics and how well UR prepared them to do those things.
5. Decrease First-Year Seminar requirement from two units to one unit. This would reduce redundancy, as the goals and implementation of first and second semesters of FYS are substantially different, and make FYS easier to staff.
6. Strengthen oversight of FYS. Both faculty and students are dissatisfied with the variation

between FYS sections in implementation. The 2018 internal FYS review revealed that there's little accountability for faculty teaching FYS.

7. Revisit guidelines for Fields of Study courses.
8. Consider allowing FYS courses to count for an appropriate Field of Study.

### **SUGGESTIONS/CHANGES RECEIVING STRONG, BUT NOT CONSENSUS SUPPORT**

1. Wellness should be a for-credit course folded in the First-Year Experience.
2. Add a senior capstone for general education so students can reflect on their college experience.
3. Offer FYS courses in different languages.
4. Align or cluster Fields of Study courses around common themes or texts.
5. Improve communication of goals and value of general education.

### **BRAINSTORMING IDEAS FOR IMPROVING GENERAL EDUCATION FROM INDIVIDUALS ON THE COMMITTEE**

1. Improve advising and First Year Experience to better perception of Gen Ed
2. Reduce or eliminate the COM2 requirement and encourage relevant majors to adopt it instead
3. Explore ways to improve students' English verbal skills
4. Look for opportunities to use the general education curriculum to unite the students through a common experience
5. Consider alternative means to promote students' physical, mental, and emotional health
6. Look for ways to help undecided students explore multiple subject early in their studies
7. Revamp Writing Center with full-time staff hired as experts in pedagogy of writing, perhaps aligned with proposal for "The Hub" from the Teaching and Scholarship Initiative Committee
8. Establish faculty writing fellows with the goal of improving writing pedagogy
9. Develop a more rigorous FYS program assessment that includes 1) regular submission and review of syllabi, 2) a more incisive student evaluation instrument that reviews the number and type of writing assignments in a given course, and 3) an entry (pre-test) and exit (post-test) assessment of student writing to see where students have met certain learning outcomes.
10. Encourage intellectual risk-taking by students through general education
11. Allow more interdisciplinary courses to count for general education
12. Improve and strengthen oversight of GEC by placing under the purview of the School of Arts & Sciences
13. Reclassify distribution courses as "experiences" or "perspectives" instead of "Fields of Study"
14. No longer allow study abroad credit for Fields of Study requirements

15. Add a composition course to the Gen Ed requirements (e.g. ENG 103)
16. Create groups of field of study courses that complement popular majors
17. Deliberately delay some of the general education courses until the third or fourth year
18. Create a cohort system that requires FS earlier so that students are exposed to a range of disciplines before they declare a major
19. Implement a placement exam for FYS so that students' writing experience can be tailored to their initial abilities
20. Develop a first year course on planning, organization, and time management that includes training in cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness.
21. Provide all students with wellness apps like Calm or Headspace or CBT apps, and training them how to use them

## **VIII. The charge for the General Education Curriculum Revision Committee**

### **Draft of the Charge to the General Education Curriculum Improvement Committee prepared by the GEC Review Committee, March 2019**

**The Charge.** The General Education Curriculum (GEC) at University of Richmond is the set of required courses that all undergraduates must pass prior to graduation and currently consists of two units of First-Year Seminars, up to four units of a Second Language (Com II) requirement, up to six units of Fields of Study courses, and zero-unit Wellness courses. After a year-long evaluation, the General Education Curriculum Review Committee determined that the current GEC is not well suited to teach essential skills, abilities, and perspectives for undergraduates, or to fulfill our university's mission of preparing students "for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world." While the structure of the curriculum is functional, the neglected GEC has become a list of boxes to check for students. The GEC contains redundancies and weaknesses in the instruction of writing, numeracy, and wellness.

The General Education Curriculum Improvement Committee is tasked to carefully sculpt and reshape UR's GEC to patch its gaps and bring coherence to the curriculum. Given the GEC's central role in our students' educational experience, a well-designed, intelligible, and intellectually ambitious curriculum can invigorate the university's faculty and students and create a sense of purpose for the university that attracts prospective students.

**The Product.** Building on the suggestions and proposals outlined by the GEC Review Committee's final report, the GEC Improvement Committee will prepare a revised general education curriculum proposal that addresses the shortcomings and incoherence of the current curriculum to present to the Faculty Senate.

**The Process.** The GEC Improvement Committee will identify its chairperson or co-chairs before August 19, 2019. The GEC Review Committee chairperson will make available all documents and data generated by the review during 2018-19, including the review's final report. By December 2019, the GEC Improvement Committee should coalesce around a draft curriculum so that relevant members of the administration (Vice President of Planning & Priority, the university registrar, etc.) can inspect the model and recommend changes. A complete and detailed proposal should be presented to the Faculty Senate, relevant faculty governance bodies, and administrators during Spring 2020 for approval (the committee should be prepared to spend more time shepherding the proposal, if necessary). If approved, the GEC Improvement Committee should create a draft charge for a new committee responsible for implementing the new curriculum.

## **IX. Conclusions**

Our committee finds UR's GEC in an unhealthy state. It has been institutionally neglected, but many faculty, staff, and students care about it deeply. We want to see a better, healthier curriculum. This is curriculum mediocre, and mediocrity should not be good enough for an institution as ambitious and well-resourced as ours.

The problems with the curriculum are numerous, but the GEC Improvement Committee should approach the reform effort with a sense of optimism. The vast majority of faculty that attended our town hall in February 2019 came wanting to see changes made to the GEC, and left feeling even more so. While many of us faculty are overwhelmed by all of our responsibilities, we members of the committee have heard so many encouraging words about the review effort that convince us the faculty stand ready to join us on the reform.

Reform efforts that succeed are the results of careful deliberation, openness to change and input, and a supportive administration. We hope that the next committee is able to take the time to debate the controversial issues and build consensus around their proposed changes. We found that inviting external colleagues that have been through the gauntlet of curricular reform to speak with us was very useful, not just to show us an alternative model, but to show us that reform can be done and to help us reflect on our own curriculum. These discussions and events take time and resources, and thus far, the Provost's Office has been entirely supportive of making time and resources available. Reform efforts that have failed elsewhere stem from discord and apathy among the ranks of the faculty, protectionism by departments, and upheaval or turnover in the administration. To succeed, the next committee must keep the topic of general education front and center and communicate effectively and clearly with the rest of the faculty.

The GEC Review Committee was charged to find the gaps and weaknesses of the curriculum and to see if the GEC was fulfilling UR's mission statement, which is a more holistic approach. A new proposed curriculum should try to do both, as simply filling the gaps and weaknesses does not solve the "checkbox mentality" problem, and creating a more purposeful curriculum could leave existing deficiencies in writing, numeracy, and wellness unsolved. The new committee should keep both approaches in mind to create a proposed curriculum that is as rich and complete as possible prior to presenting it to the faculty. Two members of the committee created different models of the curriculum that might serve as initial frameworks for the next committee (Appendix VI).

All this effort may seem daunting, but the next committee, next year's Faculty Senate, and all of the faculty should remember that the GEC lies at the heart of the educational experience. It deserves our hard work. If done right, a new curriculum can instill a sense of common purpose and identity to our liberal arts university. As one faculty said during one of our department/program visits, when you think of UR, you should "think about liberal arts first!"

Considerations for the next committee:

- The chair of the GEC Improvement Committee should be a tenured faculty member. The chair should request a unit release from teaching. General education curriculum reform is a big job, and takes a lot of time and energy.
- The committee should have representation from all five schools with numbers representative of the size of the faculty of each school. The size of the committee should not exceed 15 so as to not be unwieldy or discourage participation by members.
- Include one member from the GEC Review Committee for continuity and memory.
- Include at least one non-tenure stream director who has been heavily involved in teaching general education
- Students have expressed interest in participating in the reform effort. They can provide valuable insight from a different perspective. Consider inviting a student or two to meetings in a non-voting capacity.
- Read “Revising General Education – And Avoiding the Potholes” by Paul L Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff. This pamphlet contains lots of dos and don’ts during the curriculum reform effort.
- Consider sending a five-member team to the Association of American Colleges & Universities 2019 [Institute on General Education and Assessment](#), June 4-7. The AAC&U Summer Institutes can provide valuable consultation and feedback on curriculum design in a single intensive workshop.

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