

## Issues for Gen Ed Reform

Here we'll address some feedback we have heard from faculty regarding Gen Ed reform.

- Some faculty don't see the value in Gen Ed and think of it mainly as just something we need to do for accreditation.
- Some faculty fear that reform will involve a good deal of effort, perhaps commit us to more work, and remain meaningless in terms of providing educational value for students.
- Some faculty are skeptical about being able to define our Gen Ed outcomes in meaningful ways.
- Some Faculty worry about the potential impacts on enrollment that may come with making sure meaningful Gen Eds reach students.

These are largely worries about General Education rather than specific concerns about the TILT model that has been proposed. The TILT model isn't intended to resolve these worries. The TILT model does afford a good deal of flexibility regarding how we address these and other issues, both through the reform process and beyond the implementation of a new program of General Education. But for the most part, these four issues are matters we will have to work through regardless of what sort of model we implement or what outcomes we adopt. **Given our history with Gen Ed, skepticism about the value and potential effectiveness of Gen Ed is understandable. At the same time, there is a risk for skepticism about the possibility of an effective Gen Ed program to itself become an obstacle to effective Gen Ed reform. We'd emphasize that we can't reasonably hold that Gen Ed is pointless without first trying to make it meaningful.**

### Why do we need a Gen Ed program at all?

We are doing Gen Ed reform with the aim of better serving our students. Our Gen Ed program provides an opportunity for us to make clear to our students, their future employers, policy makers, and the community at large what it means to get an education at BC. Done well, it gives us a means of delivering on this promise.

The DTA (Direct Transfer Agreement) is not a program of General Education. It specifies some parameters in the form of Math and English competency and some currently robust distribution requirements. The DTA provides no rationale for why students should take 15 credits each of humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The DTA does not make clear what students should get out of meeting these requirements or why meeting them will be of value to them as employees, citizens, or in their personal lives. That work is left for us to do at the institutional level through our program of General Education. If we don't do that work well, we will have little grounds for complaint should the state legislature decide to cut costs and tuition expenses for students by scaling back Gen Ed distribution requirements. The value of a liberal arts education is routinely challenged in the public sphere. Now is the time for us to make the case for its value and our program of General Education can provide an institutional foundation for doing so.

### Why are we doing Gen Ed reform?

Assessment of Gen Ed outcomes is not just an accountability exercise for accreditation. Thinking of Gen Ed and assessment as a mere accountability exercise has earned us a steady stream of recommendations and this will continue as long as we take this approach. Accreditation wants to see how we are holding ourselves accountable for doing what we say we are doing.

Our old program of Gen Ed doesn't work. We lack shared conceptions of our 18 outcomes. For this reason, we aren't clear among ourselves or with students about just what the content of our Gen Ed program is. We can't, under this condition, hold ourselves accountable in meaningful ways for what we say we are doing.

Further, we just aren't doing what we say we are doing. When we claim a Gen Ed outcome for a course, we attest to the CAC that we are devoting 30% of the course to teaching that outcome (not merely applying or practicing it). We also attest that were a student to take only this course, they would be getting adequate instruction on the claimed outcomes. This very rarely happens.

There are some basic lessons here:

- Let's be clear about what we are going to do.
- Let's not overpromise.
- Let's deliver on what we say we are going to do.

If we can do these things, we can hold ourselves accountable in ways that will please accreditation and continually inform our efforts to improve. More importantly, we can better serve our students through being clear and deliberate in delivering a meaningful liberal arts education at BC.

[But we can't even define Gen Ed outcomes like critical thinking or cultural diversity.](#)

If we can't define a Gen Ed outcome, then we don't really have one. If critical thinking, say, or cultural diversity is fundamentally many different things to many different people, then there is no one thing we can claim as a General Education outcome or ever hope to measure in a meaningful way. However, if we are prepared to think critically about potential Gen Ed outcomes, we should regard our varying prior opinions about a Gen Ed area as bits of evidence to be examined, added to or reconciled with other bits of evidence where appropriate, or revised in light of further inquiry.

Our past practice has been to first pick a label for a Gen Ed outcome, then wrangle until we are exhausted over how to define it, and finally to "map" loosely related course outcomes we already have to our Gen Eds, which we then assess according to our own custom-tailored rubrics. This is a top-down approach. The top-down approach rarely yields much clarity at the higher levels, and it invites prevarication, exploiting ambiguity and vagueness, at the more applied levels.

We'd recommend trying a bottom-up approach where we first think about the specific KSAs (knowledge skills and abilities) we'd like all of our students to cultivate in a general outcome area, then identify appropriate curricular standards for these, and only then define that outcome area in terms of our more specific KSAs and curricular standards. Formulating one or two sentence definitions of our Gen Ed outcomes would be the last step in this process. On this bottom-up approach, we commit ourselves to first learning from each other about the Gen Eds we value, and then defining them in terms of our developed expertise rather than in terms of our prior opinions.

## [Impacts on Enrollment](#)

Whether our new program of General Education has any significant impact on enrollment is entirely up to us as faculty. The TILT model would have no impact on enrollment if we set our curricular standards loosely enough. Even if we set more robust curricular standards, the degree to which the TILT model would impact enrollment patterns depends on how willing we are to adopt those curricular standards across a broad range of our offerings. In any case, there is a natural upper bound to any impacts on enrollment of a few percentage points per outcome. The TILT model does not require entire courses be

dedicated to specific Gen Ed outcomes as a core curriculum model would. And most of our students are already taking courses that would ultimately adopt the curricular standards we are likely to set. In any case, the TILT model remains flexible and adaptive even after implementation. It remains open to Gen Ed committees, with the approval or guidance of the CAC, to adjust curricular standards either to ensure robust instruction in a Gen Ed or to facilitate broader adoption and infusion. Implementation of degree requirements for Gen Eds can wait until we have found the right balance.