Challenges to General Education Reform

2018 - 2019 GEAC Report

In the Fall of 2018 the General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) was given a daunting charge: Implement some form of the GERTF model for general education reform while simultaneously taking into account the recommendations of that summer's GERAC review of the model. We failed to complete our charge, and all indications are that the reform effort is now, at best, quiescent.

Rather than launch immediately into a blow-by-blow account of this year's activities, it seems to me more constructive to summarize the entire effort, start to finish. Thus, though the current reform effort has not been officially declared "dead" by any real authority, I intend to write this report in the form of a post-mortem. To be useful, such a report must be more than "just the facts", and while I have attempted to do justice to positions I do not myself hold, there are many examples of my own personal analysis of what occurred and why. Reasonable people may well disagree with some of the positions I set out here.

I will discuss the two main proposed reform models and the corresponding challenges associated to them. Then I will discuss this past year's failed effort, and finally offer some lessons on what I've learned from this experience. I am certain that, sooner or later, there will be another attempt at reform. My hope is that this report may inform that future process.

1 The GERTF Model

The reform effort began where it appears to have ended, in GEAC. In 2013 GEAC received a number of proposals for changes to OIT's general education requirements. There had been no serious evaluation of our Gen Ed model for decades, so rather than address the individual issues, GEAC decided that there should be a complete reconsideration of OIT's general education requirements. As this was clearly too large a task for GEAC alone, Provost Brad Burda formed the General Education Reform Task Force (GERTF). The GERTF was composed of faculty members passionately dedicated to the idea of general education reform.

The GERTF spent an enormous amount of time and effort coming up with a completely new model for general education. They spent three years researching, discussing, and engaging with the broader faculty. The model was extremely ambitious. The reader is encouraged to read the full GERTF final report for themselves, but I will summarize their effort here. The idea was that an OIT education—not just general education, but the entire OIT educational experience—would holistically introduce, and systematically reinforce six Essential Student Learning Outcomes (ESLOs). Students would still have majors and major-specific classes, but there would be courses, both in and out of the major, which address and reinforce each of the ESLOs. Moreover, all of the courses addressing a particular ESLO would support each other. For instance, the general education communication courses (in the Communication Department) would support the Communication ESLO. Courses which had an emphasis on communication in a particular program—let's say Civil Engineering for example—would build on the general education communication classes while also supporting the Communication ESLO in the context of Civil Engineering.

The GERTF also proposed a new type of course that would be cross-disciplinary and associated to no specific department. They called this type of class an Essential Studies Synthesis Experience (ESSE). It would draw students and instructors from a diverse set of disciplines and address all six ESLOs in the context of some large group project. And it would be required of every student.

The GERTF model was, in short, an attempt to significantly de-emphasize the compartmentalization that is characteristic of modern higher education. There would still be departments and programs, but they would be integrated together to support the institution's broader educational goals as set out in the ESLOs.

In effect, though, this model was not quite as radical a proposal as it first appeared. The model required that non-programmatic ESLO classes must be taught by a "content expert", a problematic term that essentially meant "by faculty within the traditional department". This meant, for instance, that a psychology professor could not teach the foundational Quantitative Literacy (QL) statistics course—even if their course covered the criteria described in the QL ESLO—because the designated "content experts" were mathematics professors. (Psychology professors could teach a psychology programmatic QL statistics class that built on the foundation material. In fact, they were encouraged to do so.) Similarly, a biology professor could not teach a foundational Ethics ESLO course, as the designated content experts for the Ethics ESLO are Humanities faculty. This had the effect of keeping the required general education classes more or less where they'd always been, thus quieting—but not entirely dispelling—fears of sharp drops in workload for the service departments. The requirement for programmatic ESLO classes was also, for the most part, not particularly burdensome, as most programs could find existing programmatic classes that could be re-branded as programmatic ESLO courses with minimal changes to the existing content. In fact, this aspect of the reform eventually came under criticism as being little more than a "re-naming exercise".

Another aspect of the GERTF model that really was radical, in both conception and implementation, was the pedagogically unimpeachable idea that classes addressing a particular ESLO should build on one another. This aspect was referred to as "vertical integration". The model achieved this by first having a relatively basic, non-programmatic "foundational" course in each ESLO. There would then be several, more advanced "practicing" courses (both programmatic and non-programmatic) that built on that foundational course. Finally, there would be a programmatic "capstone" course which brought all the ESLOs together in the context of the student's major. In many cases, it was envisioned that an existing senior project or similar experience would serve this purpose.

It really is a very beautiful model. Actually implementing it was problematic.

2   The GERAC Model

The GERTF final report included not only a description of their model, but also suggestions on how to implement it. An Office of Academic Excellence was formed. Under the authority of the director of that office, Seth Anthony, are three committees: GEAC, the Assessment Commission, and the Commission on College Teaching (CCT). This has so far proven to be an effective administrative structure, and seems likely to survive regardless of the fate of general education reform.

The GERTF also formed subcommittees for each ESLO. These subcommittees adjusted the wording and specific requirements (criteria) for their ESLOs. They advised the GERTF

on appropriate course requirements for their ESLO. They would also determine whether a specific course actually supported their ESLO, and if so at what level. This brought into the reform effort a large number of faculty who were, if not passionate, at least sympathetic to the idea of general education reform (including your author). The GERTF also organized a number of outreach efforts to the broader faculty, including a large "mapping exercise" during convocation in which all of OIT's programs produced a "draft implementation" of their program into the model.

Nevertheless, resistance to the model among many faculty was fierce. Many staff were also quietly skeptical of whether the model could actually be implemented. In the summer of 2016 the GERTF delivered its final report and disbanded. In that same year Provost Burda retired, and President Maples departed OIT. With interim leadership not able to provide strong support, and resistance among many faculty and staff still great, the reform effort stalled.

Although the GEAC attempted to consider many of the challenges surrounding implementation during the transitional 2016-17 year, the process did not begin moving again in earnest until President Nagi and Provost Kuleck joined OIT. President Nagi set a number of goals for the first year of his presidency. Among them was the president's "Goal IV", to establish a path forward on general education reform. Nonetheless, the new leadership was understandably cautious about immediately implementing a specific plan. After a year of fits and starts, Provost Kuleck established the General Education Review Ad hoc Committee (GERAC), which would meet over the summer of 2018 to consider all perspectives on potential general education reform. In particular, the GERAC was to decide what aspects of the GERTF model could be implemented and how best to do so.

As opposed to the GERTF, the GERAC included both faculty and staff representatives. It included a person from the Seattle campus as well as several from the Wilsonville campus. Besides some now-hardened veterans of the reform process (such as your author), it included members who were ambivalent about both the GERTF model and general education reform in general. It was very difficult to achieve any sort of consensus among such a group, but quite surprisingly, a reasonable (if conceptual) consensus had emerged by the end of the summer. What came to be called the GERAC model was really a much-reduced version of the original GERTF model.

The most important aspect of the GERTF model that the GERAC removed was the concept of vertical integration. Beautiful as this idea was, there were many problems with it. First, there was a significant administrative challenge in recording and referencing not only what ESLO a given course was supporting, but also at what level (foundational, practicing, capstone).

Vertical integration also presented challenges for programs that used an "inverted curriculum" such as Computer Software Engineering Technology (CSET). In an inverted curriculum, most programmatic classes occur early in the student's career, so that they could use those skills in professional internships. Since the general education requirements are fulfilled late in the students' career, a model including vertical integration would have students taking programmatic practicing course before their ostensible prerequisite foundation courses. That didn't really make any sense.

However, the real death knell for vertical integration came when we considered its effect on transfer students. OIT receives—and a number of programs expect—a significant number of transfer students. Most such students will attempt to receive credit for a number of lower level, general education classes. These classes were almost always classified as "foundational"

rather than "practicing". While the GERTF model required approximately the same number of credit hours of general education courses as the status quo, the fact that a much smaller number of these hours were "foundational" effectively meant that many transfer students lost a significant number of "extra" foundational credits. Earlier objections by faculty had warned about this issue, and a transfer impact analysis conducted by Seth Anthony verified that this was, indeed, the case. The GERAC decided that vertical integration was too onerous a burden for transfer students, and striped it from the model. The GERAC model required classes supporting each ESLO, but has no designation for foundational, practicing, or capstone.

Many members of the GERAC were also extremely skeptical of the ESSE. If an ESSE was to be required of every student, a large number of these classes would have to be taught every year. Since the class was not associated to any academic department, it was not clear how faculty would be assigned to teach them. Conversely, if a large number of faculty volunteered to teach ESSEs, would there still be sufficient faculty left to teach the courses that their department traditionally taught? Even if these issues could be resolved on the main Klamath Falls campus, there were concerns that ESSEs would be difficult or impossible to teach on-line, or on smaller campuses.

GERAC decided that a relatively small number of ESSEs would be offered as "pilots". The pilots would be chosen to investigate these and other concerns. Students would be encouraged to take a pilot ESSE by allowing them to replace some other general education required class with an ESSE. The precise details of this pilot program were never worked out—and the skeptics were still skeptical—but all agreed that no great harm could come of this attempt.

One very important area on which GERAC never could arrive at consensus was the degree to which individual programs would be integrated into the model. Assessment of ESLOs was already happening in each program through OIT's current institutional assessment plan. Further, the ABET and Northwest accrediting agencies already assess many factors which are quite similar to ESLOs. It was hoped that a well-designed general education model might streamline the whole assessment process.

Beyond the required assessment, however, many programs (and GERAC members) were strongly resistant to the idea of general education having any role in determining the material covered in programmatic classes. Even the simple designation of programmatic ESLO courses—with no oversight at all from any ESLO committee—was deemed too much of an imposition on programmatic independence. When it became clear that no consensus was possible, GERAC decided that program integration would just have to occur through the existing assessment process only.

The GERAC did endorse a framework of requirements for each ESLO similar—but not identical—to GERTF's framework. The GERAC did not make changes to the actual ESLOs, so most of the work already done by ESLO committees was still perfectly valid. The GEAC and the Office of Academic Excellence had also done a great deal of work trying to predict the impact of the original GERTF requirements on individual programs, and the GERAC had reason to hope that the relatively minor changes would not change these impacts very much. While GERAC did not work out the details (particularly with respect to the more controversial QL ESLO requirements), there was a clear sense that a broadly acceptable agreement could be arrived at.

3 Failure

By the Fall of 2018, there were still a number of important issues unresolved. The precise requirements for each ESLO had not been settled, nor was the impact on each program completely understood. The Medical Imaging Technology program (MIT), in particular, presented challenges as they have a large number of programmatic requirements, a large number of required hours, and, with their final year devoted to externships, very little scheduling flexibility.

The structure of the ESSE pilot program still had to be determined. Further, if the reform was to go forward in the next academic year, catalog language would have to be written for all of this by the end of the Winter quarter.

The most important issue, though, was whether the revised model would have the support of the new leadership and the broader faculty. Provost Kuleck wanted to see data showing that the transfer student problem had in fact been resolved by dropping the requirement for vertical integration. He also wanted data assuring him that a student's time to graduation would not be significantly increased by the new model. By the end of Fall 2018 the Office of Academic Excellence had gathered enough data to mostly assuage these concerns as well as many (but not all) of the concerns about impacts on course enrollment and credit hour pressures in curricula.

President Nagi's principle concern involved an important piece of legislation, Oregon House Bill 2998. He wanted to be assured that the new model did not put OIT in conflict with this law. HB 2998, whose precise details were still being worked out by a consortium of higher education representatives at the time, was intended to harmonize the general education transfer structure in Oregon public colleges. The idea was to establish a set of relatively basic courses that could be taken at any Oregon public college and then transferred productively to any other Oregon public college. "Productively" meant that it was not sufficient for the receiving college to simply accept the courses for credit. The credit also had to count toward general education graduation requirements. Fortunately, the indefatigable Seth Anthony was OIT's representative on the consortium writing HB 2998's requirements, so we were kept well-informed about precisely what would be required. In the end, a single unlovely compromise on the ever-problematic QL ESLO requirement was the only change to the GERAC model necessary.

By early 2019, leadership signaled it was willing to sign-off on a general education reform along the lines of the GERAC model, assuming that GEAC could settle on the final details. At this point, however, former members of the original GERTF wrote a public letter declaring, in effect, that the GERAC model unreasonably compromised the goals and intent of general education reform and was not worth pursuing. There were public responses to the GERTF letter from GERAC members (including the author). Finally, GEAC decided that the way to move forward would be for a small group of GERAC members (including the author) to produce a presentation on the GERAC model, with as much detail and supporting data as could be managed, describing what the GERAC model was and why it was a worthwhile reform. Our intention was to give the presentation to GEAC, then receive feedback and make amendments. Once GEAC was satisfied, we would repeat the process with the former GERTF members, and then again finally in a university-wide, faculty open forum. The objective was to achieve something like general consensus at each step.

The response to this presentation in GEAC was generally positive, but reserved. Several members expressed concerns similar to those in the GERTF open letter. Then we gave the

presentation to the former GERTF members. As you might expect, this resulted in a lively debate. The former GERTF members eventually accepted the GERAC's case against vertical integration. However, they could not accept such a small amount of program integration as the GERAC model called for. They insisted that some sort of meaningful program integration had to occur, and that program integration exclusively through the assessment process was simply insufficient. We settled on a compromise that each program would designate a programmatic class in support of each ESLO. The programmatic class would not need any sort of ESLO committee approval, but an assignment would have to be designated to test student understanding of the ESLO. These would be assigned every time the classes was offered, and the student work from these assignments would be preserved and later assessed in the normal assessment cycle. I genuinely believed that this was a compromise that everyone could live with. I was mistaken.

The revised model was taken back to GEAC, and resulted in another lively debate. The view that general education should have no say in programmatic course content was just as well represented on GEAC as it was on GERAC (and, to be fair, as it is in the wider faculty). To them, the purpose of a technical university is to distribute valuable degrees to well-trained students. Further, the decision on what programmatic courses and content make a given degree more valuable should be the exclusive purview of the experts in the field in which the degree is given—the faculty of the relevant department. Thus to these faculty, the program integration compromise reached with the former GERTF members was simply unacceptable. It quickly became clear that no broad consensus was possible. After the meeting adjourned, Seth Anthony and I decided that there was no point in the scheduled faculty open forum, and advised Provost Kuleck to cancel it. The GERAC model was, effectively, dead.

I should add that there were other serious, outstanding issues. A GEAC member proposed that significant changes to GERAC's ESLO course requirements be made. The GERAC requirements had arisen from a long process of balancing our perceived needs for the ESLO with their impacts on various programs, as well as their impacts on workload in various service departments. The original GERTF requirements were the result of an equally tortuous process. The new proposal would have initiated yet another round of this process. Certainly it could have been done, but equally certainly it wasn't going to be done in the Spring of 2019.

Finally, the construction of an ESSE piloting process was simply crowded out by other, more pressing concerns. The fact that ESSE piloting was not really addressed should not lead one to believe that it isn't a challenging problem.

4   Lessons

Though in the end we finished with nothing, there are some lessons to be taken away from this effort. It is my sincere hope that these observations will be useful the next time serious general education reform is considered.

4.1   Leadership Support

Any general education reform effort must be faculty driven, and in the end have reasonably broad faculty support. There should be presentations to faculty senate and in open faculty forums. Nevertheless, in a group as diverse and opinionated as the OIT faculty, it is hopeless

to think there will be complete agreement. At some point leadership has to be willing to say, "This is what we are going to do."

There was an infamous exchange in a forum during the transitional year after the GERTF model was released. A senior faculty member challenged the moderators, "Who gave you the authority to tell us what we have to do?!" It is, in fact, a good question. While leadership cannot be seen as imposing an unpopular reform on the faculty, they equally cannot consider themselves innocent by-standers in the process. They will eventually be called upon to make the final decision, and thus inevitably anger some programs and some faculty. If leadership is not willing to do this, then they should not begin the process at all.

Let me hasten to add that I do not mean this as a criticism of current leadership. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the loss of leadership support in 2016-17 made an already difficult effort much more difficult.

4.2 Program Integration

Any worthwhile general education reform will inevitably impact every program in the university. An acceptable manner and degree to which the reform may impact programs should be determined early in the process. The most obvious impact is if the reform requires a program to add credit hours to their curriculum. There are, however, more subtle impacts such as requiring programmatic classes for each ESLO.

The credit hour impact is more difficult to assess than one might first think because, of the 54 hours or so of normal general education requirements, many will already be part of a program's degree. These are "free" from the standpoint of the program. An engineering program, for instance, will be unperturbed by additional general education math requirements, since they already require a lot of math. A psychology program, though, will find an additional general education math requirement onerous.

The GERTF model aspired to have no credit hour adds for any program. As an absolute requirement, this is probably too strong for a really meaningful reform. If, for instance, the reform calls for every student to take an ethics class, and a particular program has no ethics class (or room in their syllabus for an ethics class), what then is to happen? This type of "full syllabus" problem was an issue for programs such as MIT, which has no free electives at all. I do believe it is good policy to establish early on how many credit hour adds (if any) a program might be expected to accept. If the answer is "none", then that should be a constraint on whatever reform is proposed. If the answer is, say, "four", then leadership must be comfortable telling a problematic program, "You will add these four credits or find other ways to adjust your curriculum map."

Difficult as those impacts are, in my personal estimation the most recent reform effort foundered on a different kind of impact. A question that should have been answered for the original GERTF model was: "Can programs be forced to put ESLO content that they do not think is central to their program into programmatic classes?" An enormous amount of time and effort would have been saved if this question had been answered early on.

To their credit, the GERTF did try to answer this question. GERTF members went into the lion's den of many departmental meetings and asked that very question. For some programs the answer was a resounding "No!". Nevertheless, the GERTF continued with this feature in their model, and they did so with the best of intentions. Program integration was central to the philosophy of their model, and they hoped to eventually change the minds of the dissenters. And if they could not change minds, they hoped that leadership would

force the change. In retrospect, it's now clear that the GERTF should have checked to see if leadership was, in fact, willing to do this. Of course in the event, leadership itself was about to change, so the issue may not have stayed resolved. Nevertheless, the lesson I take from all of this is that these "philosophical impact" questions should be resolved as early as possible.

4.3   Evolution vs. Revolution

It may well be that the idea of a "Grand Reform" is just the wrong way to approach this problem. Many times in our discussions, people would object to some feature with the understanding that, once general education reform was "done", it would not be reconsidered again for decades. Former GERTF members said that they opposed the GERAC model, not because they particularly opposed anything in the model, but rather because they believed that if the model was adopted, no other elements would be. That is an unfortunate and damaging perception.

Much of the resistance to a large general education reform is based on the quite defensible fear that, once a reform is introduced, some unforeseen problem will arise and produce a disaster. Provost Kuleck's early response to the GERTF plan was to "pilot" the plan for some degrees. It was not clear precisely what he meant by that, and piloting in some programs and not others raises a host of challenges, but the notion of incremental progress towards comprehensive reform is a broadly sensible idea. There are no really practical "baby steps" in general education reform—any change effects pretty much all of the university. However, one can certainly imagine introducing pieces of reform that are not necessarily sitting inside some Grand Plan.

One of the issues presented to GEAC that led to the original reform effort was a perceived need for "Cultural Literacy" among our students. That appeared in the GERTF model as the "Diverse Perspectives" (DP) ESLO. I see no reason why we couldn't now simply require just that ESLO to be supported. We currently require three Humanities and four Social Science classes. It would be no dramatic change to say that one or two of those seven courses must be "Diverse Perspectives" courses. The DP ESLO committee already has an extensive list of qualifying courses.

Similarly, the more problematic requirements for the QL ESLO could be considered. Does the university want to impose a requirement that every student take a statistics class and/or a financial literacy class? (in lieu of a pre-calculus class that is effectively useless for many majors). The answer may be 'yes', or may be 'no', but it can be considered on its own merits, rather than as a small, controversial part of an enormous, controversial plan.

There is no reason we could not explore the possibility of ESSE courses with a piloting program. The idea of making them more appealing to students by making them a form of general education "wildcard" need not be tied to some larger reform.

It may be that I have been chastened by this long, difficult effort, but I do see this "evolutionary" approach as a more measured and practical way forward. The real obstacle to this approach is the fear that, if it is not packaged as part of some giant reform effort, no reform will happen at all. I don't believe that is necessarily the case.

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