



28 May 2020

Dear Colleague,

I have been a member of the General Education Design Committee since January 2020. We met as a committee weekly (sometimes even more frequently) through Winter Semester 2020 both as subcommittees and as a committee of the whole. I am not the spokesperson for the committee, and I speak only for myself, but I write to share my perspective on the work of this committee, its goals, aspirations, and challenges, as well as to provide an update on where we are in the process.

Premises

First, I'd like to share some thoughts about why the committee exists. Upon learning about the work of the General Education Design Committee, some colleagues in our campus community have questioned the need to make changes to the General Education curriculum at BYU. This concern was expressed clearly in the feedback the previous committee received after presenting four possible models to GE during fall semester 2019. Some rejected the premise that any changes were needed at all, while others argued that minor changes could improve the program. Based on the discussions, reports, and data we have considered as a committee, I am convinced of the need not merely to tweak or make minor adjustments to our GE program but to restructure the program as we re-envision the purpose of General Education at BYU.

The Mission Statement of the university, the BYU AIMS document, as well as numerous passages of scripture in D&C sections 88 and 93 clearly indicate that a broad yet rigorous General Education program should lie at the core of the spiritual and educational aspirations of this university. We believe in education for eternity, as President Kimball taught us.

Unsurprisingly, a GE Program has existed at BYU since its founding, but the structure and scope of that program has evolved and changed—sometimes significantly—over the years. This evolution is a reaction to both internal and external forces: a) the program changed as our understanding of educational philosophy and practice evolved within the academy, b) the program changed in response to a changing world and educational climate, as both BYU faculty and administrators strove to better prepare students to engage in the world outside the university.

The current BYU GE program has not experienced a significant structural change in about forty years.¹ During this period, departments and programs have evolved and expanded their curricular offerings around the GE structure in ways that could not have been anticipated forty years ago. Currently, BYU offers 485 distinct courses that count for GE credit in some capacity. With this dramatic expansion of the classes that can possibly fulfill GE requirements, the identity and purposes of a GE program has been lost. Evidence of this can be found in the following:

¹ Please see the document "Rationale for Envisioning and Designing a New General Education: the GE 'Moonshot'" for details on the history of GE at BYU.



- Countless student interviews reveal that a large percentage of students fail to understand the holistic nature of the GE program. Students regularly view the GE requirements as a barrier to their education and not something that should be at the core of their university experience.
- Parents, friends, and even some faculty encourage students to “get their GE courses out of the way” so they can more quickly move towards the courses that “really matter.”
- In response to the pressures of graduating in a timely manner, academic departments and programs have looked for places where a single course might double count for more than one GE requirement. This practice has led some to question how relevant these courses actually are to the underlying GE principles.
- Over the last forty years, many of our major and minor programs at BYU have changed. Individual courses have likewise changed and evolved in response to the changing pedagogies and knowledge we have about our individual disciplines. GE needs to keep pace.
- Despite the existence of 485 GE courses, the dean’s office continues to receive an increasing and even unprecedented number of petitions asking for substitutions to GE policies. Students often reason that every course they take meets GE standards. If every course is a GE course, what does it mean that any course is a GE course?

These are just a few of the internal factors that have led to the creation of this committee for the purpose of envisioning and designing a new General Education Program.

There are also external factors. The world around us continues to evolve and universities across the country are changing too. In fact, during the last fifteen to twenty years, a significant number of GE reform projects have occurred on campuses large and small around the nation, and there now exists a rich body of literature on the GE reform movement.² Under the direction of Dean Rugh, we have spent a significant amount of time reading and discussing this GE Reform movement. As we looked at a survey of the GE revision cycle elsewhere, we learned that most universities revise their GE curricula on a cycle of about twenty years, although some universities, like Notre Dame, for example, undergo such revisions every ten years!

The evidence convinces me that BYU is wise to take these steps now. These changes are needed not just to keep pace with other universities but more importantly to embrace our unique institutional identity, to better serve and educate our students, and to integrate their participation in GE with the whole undergraduate experience.

Reasons for Optimism

Some might be fearful that a revision to GE might place in jeopardy the existence of a particular program, but my experience participating on the GE Design Committee leads me to have confidence and enthusiasm for the future of all programs at BYU. The purpose of the re-design is not to look for ways of cutting out particular classes but rather to restructure our GE program in a way that will help students have a richer and more complete experience at BYU. We are committed to developing a GE program that does the following:

² See newge.byu.edu for a select bibliography of readings about General Education reform.



1. Provides students with a common experience, to the extent that a common experience is possible at BYU.
2. Helps both students and faculty understand more clearly the ways in which our GE program fulfills the divine purposes of BYU as laid out in the Mission Statement, the AIMS document, and the scriptures. We hope students and faculty will be excited about the possibilities this program will provide.
3. Creates a meaningful GE program, not merely a set of requirements to get through, but one that will enhance the educational goals of specific major and minor programs.

To this end, and to allay the fears of my colleagues, I believe that while the structure of the revised GE program will most likely appear new and different, there will still be ample opportunities for departments to connect the important courses they provide to the GE program and provide students with many opportunities to have meaningful educational experiences in departments across campus.

I am sure that you probably still have questions about the process and to be perfectly frank, we still have a significant amount of work before us as we develop a possible new model, but rest assured that there will be opportunity for feedback. The committee is composed of representative faculty members from every college on campus, and they welcome your suggestions and input at any stage.

I hope I have made it abundantly clear that our foremost interest is in developing people, in providing an education for eternity, and in creating an educational environment where both students and faculty thrive.

I wish to reiterate that these thoughts do not necessarily represent the ideas of any other member of the committee, and I welcome your feedback.

Sincerely, your fellow traveler in this great educational experiment,

Rex

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