

DEAN'S OFFICE

IRA A. FULTON COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING



22 June 2020

Dear Faculty,

As the faculty of Brigham Young University, we have the sacred responsibility to provide the best university education for all of our students - whatever their selected major. This best *university* education includes the best general education. Our foundational documents attest to this.

However, general education, and in fact university education, is a constrained proposal. We have to literally fit the selected content into a limited number of courses and semesters. And we have to wisely craft the interface between general education and the major disciplines. The task becomes a constrained optimization problem. We can't teach everything, and we can't provide every experience that students could benefit from as they fulfil their potential and prepare for their futures. A critical, economic (evaluating and wisely selecting alternatives when there are limited resources) analysis is necessary.

For many years, our students have benefitted from our current general education program. Yet, there is movement at the university to develop a new general education program. Why should we consider undertaking this herculean task? Is the current program broken, or seriously deficient? If we answer in the affirmative, then we need to further ask, "Can the current program be made adequate with modest tweaks and adjustments, or does it require a more systemic re-design?"

There are real indications that our current program is inadequately serving our students. We have significant data from standardized surveys and graduate and professional school exams that witness that our students are less well-prepared than graduates of other top universities. For example, specific weaknesses in writing and quantitative reasoning have been identified.

In addition to serious "skill" deficiencies, there are other important concerns. The world has changed around our students. They are facing questions that previous generations did not know. They are also facing affronts to their spiritual and emotional well-being that makes it ever harder for them to thrive and self-determine in positive and joyful ways. Although our general education program is not the sole realm through which to better equip our students for this world's challenges, it is a fertile and appropriate place to do much good.

Then back to the question, "Is the current program broken?" Asking this question leads to something of a semantical discussion. No, it probably is not broken from a mechanical perspective, but it is not fully meeting the needs of our students, and it could be much better. And it needs to be.

This places on our shoulders the opportunity and responsibility to develop an improved general education program that will better serve and bless our wonderful students. The only relevant aspect of the “broken” question is deciding what is the best way to get from where we are to where we need to be. This is something we need to figure out together. In this pursuit, we need to first focus considerable attention on defining the attributes, skills, and knowledge (outcomes) our students need to gain from our general education program. With that foundational focus, we can consider the best ways to develop these outcomes, and then we can figure out the details of the process to get us from where we are to where we need to be.

We have exceptional people (faculty, staff, and administrators) at BYU. We are all dedicated to serving the Lord, His Church, and our students. I am therefore filled with hope that we will be successful in this critically important pursuit.



W. Vincent Wilding
Associate Dean, College of Engineering
Professor of Chemical Engineering
Brigham Young University