

Recommending the Creation of a General Education Oversight Committee

Ad-Hoc Committee on the Development of the General Education Oversight Committee
October 5, 2021

Introduction

On April 27, 2021, the Faculty Senate resolved to create an ad hoc committee to consider and report on the creation of a new Standing Committee, the General Education Oversight Committee (GEOC). The ad hoc committee was assembled and formally charged on July 27, 2021. What follows is its report and recommendations, which have taken into consideration input from representatives of the General Education Steering Committee and the Faculty at large.

Salisbury University's General Education program is an essential part of the curriculum for all undergraduates, impacting the instructional work of Faculty even if they do not teach General Education courses themselves. Given this broadly shared area of responsibility, a Standing Committee of the Faculty Senate should be established to oversee the implementation, assessment, and ongoing review of the General Education program.

The GEOC would not only support the establishment of our recently revised General Education program by developing processes and guidelines for aligning courses with specific General Education categories, but also ensure Faculty input during assessment of the program's effectiveness and ongoing modifications to enhance student success. General Education categories—including Salisbury University-specific, COMAR-mandated, and/or tagged requirements—are distinguished by their particular headings, descriptions, and associated Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), and indicate the distinct arrangement of courses undergraduates are required to complete for graduation.

Charging a Standing Committee of the Faculty Senate with these duties would affirm that Faculty are uniquely responsible for the oversight and maintenance of General Education, as well as the rest of the curriculum. Its members would also be well-placed to support and mentor their Faculty colleagues through their own engagement with General Education.

Proposed bylaws text

Article VII. Senate Standing Committees

Section 18. General Education Oversight Committee

The purposes of the committee shall be to:

- A. Create, regularly review, and update guidelines and processes to be used for approving General Education courses;
- B. Approve the alignment of undergraduate courses with specific General Education requirements;
- C. Coordinate with all academic units to ensure appropriate distribution and offerings of General Education courses;

- D. Evaluate, in coordination with the University Academic Assessment Committee, the General Education program's effectiveness. Results shall be reported to the Senate annually;
- E. Recommend modifications to the General Education program and its Student Learning Outcomes to the Senate. Recommendations must consider input from Faculty and the Office of Academic Affairs, and report on impact studies; and
- F. Recommend modifications to its own Advisory Subcommittees to the Senate.

The committee shall have seven voting members: one Faculty member elected by and from each Unit and one Faculty member elected at-large. Ex officio members: the Provost; the Registrar; and the Director of University Analysis, Reporting, and Assessment.

The committee shall be supported by Advisory Subcommittees associated with specific General Education requirements. The number, structure, and composition of these subcommittees shall be explicitly described in the General Education Oversight Committee's standing rules.

The purposes of these subcommittees shall be to:

- A. Recommend guidelines for the alignment of courses with their assigned General Education requirements to the General Education Oversight Committee;
- B. Recommend the approval of specific courses for those requirements to the General Education Oversight Committee and, where courses are not recommended for approval, provide faculty with actionable advice for how they might be brought into alignment; and
- C. Provide support for evaluation and faculty development associated with those requirements as needed.

Recommendations regarding the GEOC

The consensus of the ad hoc committee is that the GEOC itself should be structured much like other Senate Standing Committees, with representation from all academic units. This is particularly important given the intent of General Education revisions to make participation in the program more inclusive. An undergraduate student member was considered, but on the advice of those with experience on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC), where there is such a student member, we decided against this. While some members of the committee thought that the Director of University Analysis, Reporting, and Assessment (UARA) might not need to be represented on the GEOC, given the charge to work with the University Academic Assessment Committee (UAAC), others believe that a more direct line of communication to the UARA would be valuable. As a reminder, ex officio members of committees are non-voting by default and may always send a designee, as specified in the Faculty Senate bylaws.

We further recommend that the GEOC develop standing rules for its own operation, to be approved by the Faculty Senate and published on the appropriate webpage, as the Membership and Elections Committee (M&E) does. These standing rules should clearly and explicitly define the terms used to describe various elements of the General Education program (SLOs, categories, etc.), and detail the number, structure, and composition of its Advisory Subcommittees. Rather than enshrining such details and processes in the bylaws, which require an all-Faculty referendum to modify, standing rules will allow modification of the committee's procedures after review and approval by the Faculty Senate. This will provide transparency and clarity of process, while making evolutionary changes less onerous to enact.

Advisory Subcommittees of the GEOC

Our charge from the Senate specified that the GEOC was to have at least three Advisory Subcommittees, which would develop and help implement course approval processes and guidelines for specific General Education categories. The consensus of this ad hoc committee is that there will need to be more than three Advisory Subcommittees, at least during the period when we are transitioning to the new General Education model. Conscious of Faculty workloads, we do not recommend a subcommittee for every category (fourteen in total). After considering a variety of options, we recommend eight subcommittees, and are agreed on the following six:

- Civic and Community Engagement (tagged category)
- Diversity and Inclusion (tagged category)
- Environmental Sustainability (tagged category)
- Human Expression and Humanity in Context (COMAR-linked categories)
- Hands-on Science and Solutions Through Science (COMAR-linked categories)
- Social Configurations and Social Issues (COMAR-linked categories)

We have not been able to agree on how the remaining five categories (Communicating Through Writing, Experiential Learning, First Year Seminar, Personal Wellness, and Quantitative Analysis) should be assigned to subcommittees. Several models have been proposed. In one, Communicating Through Writing would be placed with the Humanities and Quantitative Analysis with the Sciences, First Year Seminar and Experiential Learning would be under one subcommittee, and Personal Wellness would have its own subcommittee. In another, Communicating Through Writing, Quantitative Analysis, and Personal Wellness would be under one subcommittee; and First Year Seminar and Experiential Learning under another. A third (which would need nine subcommittees) would put Communicating Through Writing together with First Year Seminar, Quantitative Analysis with the Sciences, and give Experiential Learning and Personal Wellness their own separate subcommittees.

The difficulty here is in trying to put together categories that have the same or allied SLOs, while considering the likely workload of each subcommittee. At present, there are only two General Education courses each that are roughly aligned with Personal Wellness and Communicating Through Writing; approximately twenty for Quantitative Analysis; around sixty for the Sciences; somewhat over one hundred for the Social Sciences; and over two hundred for the Humanities. (These are extremely approximate estimates.) Most of these courses will

probably seek realignment, but for which categories is uncertain. Substantial work will need to be done to create clear guidelines for the categories that are not associated with COMAR mandates. If the anticipated workloads of different subcommittees will be significantly different, one solution may be to vary the size of the subcommittees accordingly.

However the Advisory Subcommittees are initially structured, once the guidelines for all General Education categories have been established and most existing courses realigned, we recommend that the GEOC propose a revised subcommittee structure to the Senate for approval, to reduce the number of seats that will need to be filled on an ongoing basis.

It should be emphasized that these are *advisory* subcommittees: the GEOC itself is responsible for establishing guidelines and processes, and approving courses for inclusion in the General Education program.

Composition of the Advisory Subcommittees

Our committee has considered a number of different models for how these subcommittees might be constituted. An early candidate, now set aside, gave greater representation to certain units for COMAR-linked subcommittees. Not only was this seen as antithetical to the ideals of the new General Education model, but committee members were unable to agree on which units should have what level of representation on which subcommittees.

We are in agreement that members should be Faculty, selected by election. We recommend, and faculty strongly favor, that self-nominating candidates for these positions would provide a statement of no more than 150 words to M&E explaining their qualifications and professional engagement with the relevant subject matter and SLOs, for inclusion on the ballot. It is hoped that this would diminish the “silo effect” whereby people often vote for those whom they know, having little information about other candidates. It has been suggested that if seats cannot be filled by election, that they might then be open to appointment, to ensure that necessary work is completed. To alleviate concerns that some academic disciplines might be able to dominate a particular subcommittee, there is strong support for a rule of one representative from a discipline per subcommittee, as is already the rule for Standing Committees of the Senate.

Two models for constituting Advisory Subcommittees have found equal favor with faculty providing feedback on our proposals: the All At-Large model and the Units-Plus model.

In the **All At-Large model**, subcommittees would consist of five faculty members, all elected at large by the Faculty. This is seen as providing opportunities for self-selection by faculty who wish to engage with specific General Education categories, no matter which academic unit they belong to. This model has, however, raised the most concern about potential domination by “traditional gatekeepers,” hence the earlier recommendation regarding limits on representation by discipline. If variation in the size of subcommittees is considered desirable, alternatives would be three or seven members.

The **Units-Plus model** would mirror the GEOC itself. Subcommittees of seven Faculty members would consist (in most cases) of five Unit representatives, elected by their Unit, and two additional Faculty elected at-large. Subcommittees whose category or categories include the

Information Literacy SLO would add a Library representative and only include one at-large member. This model is seen as ensuring more equitable representation, while providing some opportunity for flexibility through at-large seats. There is some concern, however, that Units with fewer faculty may have difficulty filling the number of seats required.

The third model we considered, which was inspired by the processes of blind review used by IRB committees or editorial boards, has much that faculty find attractive. Any Faculty who wished to participate as a reviewing “content expert” would submit a statement similar to the one required for election; some suggest the Faculty as a whole would approve candidates, others that the GEOC would. The number of reviewers for a General Education category would, ideally, be very large; three reviewers would consider each proposed course, recommending it for approval (or not) to the GEOC. The inclusiveness and flexibility of this approach do much to recommend it, but a number of elements of this model have not yet been explicitly defined, such as how work on the creation of guidelines and support for assessment would be carried out. There are concerns about the definition and selection of “content experts,” which may be contentious and might lead to “traditional” experts retaining control in some areas. Some level of administrative support is anticipated as well, for coordination and recordkeeping. Despite these issues, our committee recommends that this avenue be further explored by the GEOC as a possible post-transition model for its Advisory Subcommittees.

Another point to be considered, which was introduced by some faculty during the feedback period, is whether it would be desirable to have student, external, or community representatives on the Advisory Subcommittees. While the demands on a student member of the GEOC might be prohibitively high, those for an Advisory Subcommittee might be more reasonable, allowing meaningful student input at this level, particularly during the development of the guidelines for alignment. While external members of, for instance, program review committees provide significant advantages, in the case of these General Education oversight bodies they might be seen as diluting Faculty responsibility for Salisbury University’s curriculum.

Further Recommendations

While the GEOC, once it has been established, should develop its own procedures and processes, our committee does have some recommendations for its consideration.

First, it must be made clear that during the transition period, the GEOC will approve the General Education alignment of existing courses. No UCC review will be necessary, provided a course is not changed in ways that would normally require submission to the UCC. For new or significantly modified courses, thought should be given to whether a course proposal goes to the UCC or GEOC first, considering where modifications to a proposal may be necessary and what impact they will have on the other committee’s decision. If the UCC approves a course, it can be offered, whether it is aligned with General Education or not; the question is whether modifications required to bring a course into alignment with General Education might require further UCC review.

Second, the initial Advisory Subcommittees will be responsible for producing explicit guidelines for alignment with a particular General Education category. These guidelines should be clearly connected to the SLOs for that category. Subcommittees should solicit and respond to

feedback from the Faculty as they develop requirements, prepare a report for the GEOC articulating their recommendations and rationales, and respond to feedback from the GEOC if further development is requested. The GEOC will be responsible for ensuring that there are commensurate expectations for how SLOs are met across different General Education categories. Once guidelines have been approved, Advisory Subcommittees should aid the GEOC in communicating these to the Faculty and supporting those who wish to align courses with the categories they are responsible for.

There has been some discussion on our committee regarding the desirability of a set term for General Education approval: whether after a certain number of years, and after appropriate assessment, courses might have to be reviewed and reapproved for inclusion in General Education. This is a matter the GEOC should consider once it has begun to assess the effectiveness of the new General Education model.

Proposed revisions to other parts of the Senate bylaws

The charges proposed for the GEOC will require minor revisions to the bylaws text for the UCC, to explicitly remove General Education from its purview; and the UAAC, to charge it to work in coordination with the GEOC on General Education assessment. Revisions are in bold and underlined.

Section 2. Undergraduate Curriculum Committee:

The purposes of the committee shall be to: A. Make recommendations to, and receive suggestions from, the Provost and/or the chairs of the several departments for the general coordination and improvement of the University academic program; and B. Approve all additions, deletions, and changes in the undergraduate curriculum, **except those pertaining to alignment with General Education requirements.**

Section 16. University Academic Assessment Committee:

B. Articulate and update, **in coordination with the General Education Oversight Committee,** a coherent plan for ongoing assessment of the General Education curriculum;

E. Review assessment reports, **in coordination with the General Education Oversight Committee, to evaluate the General Education program's effectiveness;**