

Faculty Senate Statement on the Revision of General Education at Virginia Tech Passed by vote of the Faculty Senate, 1.20.2015

The Faculty Senate cannot support the Revision of General Education at Virginia Tech (dated 11/17/2014 and hereafter referred to as the “Pathways proposal” or as the “proposed Pathways curriculum”) for the reasons articulated below. The Faculty Senate respectfully requests that CUSP *not pass* Resolution 2014-15.H: Resolution to Revise Presidential Policy Memorandum No. 125 (University Core Curriculum/Curriculum for Liberal Education (CLE) (PPM 240)).

The Faculty Senate recognizes the significant amount of work that has gone into the development of this curricular revision, over many years and on the part of both faculty and administrators across the institution. The Faculty Senate seeks to continue our collaboration with CUSP and the UCCLC throughout spring 2015 in order to ensure that the general education curriculum that is eventually approved inspires and energizes Virginia Tech faculty to take on the significant burdens of implementation.

The Faculty Senate recognizes and applauds the following important and well-conceived elements of the proposed Pathways curriculum, which are new elements not currently included in the existing Curriculum for Liberal Education (CLE):

- The creation of Pathways minors for those students who seek more integrated coursework to fulfill general education requirements;
- The opportunity to devise truly alternative Pathways curricula for exceptionally motivated students and faculty;
- The addition of computational and design thinking to the general education curriculum;
- The recognition that education in ethics is a necessary element of general education;
- The focus on active learning pedagogies and the need for varied pedagogical approaches to general education that nevertheless focus on engaging students in the learning process;
- The inclusion of assessable outcomes for all areas of the general education curriculum so that the university and outside accrediting agencies will be able to determine if the curriculum is indeed meeting its stated goals for general education; and
- The recognition that a traditional distribution model is necessary to allow transfer students (especially from Virginia’s community colleges) and high school students with AP and IB credits to graduate from Virginia Tech in a timely manner.

However, the Faculty Senate is concerned that the existing proposal is not specific enough in a number of areas to inspire widespread faculty approval. There are a number of points in the proposal that continue to raise concerns among the faculty; these concerns have been articulated to the Faculty Senate through its departmental representatives. While the Faculty Senate recognizes that the Pathways proposal has been in development at the university for a number of years, and that many faculty across the institution have worked on the proposal, it has been less than one full year since a written proposal has been available for comment and feedback from the faculty. The Faculty Senate, as a conduit for faculty concerns about the proposed program, believes that the faculty as a whole are not committed to the new curriculum as written.

The Faculty Senate cannot endorse a proposal for revision of the general education curriculum that has not been vetted properly by the faculty at large and which does not garner energetic

enthusiasm from the faculty as an improvement over the existing curriculum. This is especially true since the faculty will be responsible for the initial burdens of implementation, which involve revising existing courses, developing new courses, and learning the complex new requirements for successful student advising. For some departments with a large number of courses in the existing CLE, this is a significant burden.

In particular, the Faculty Senate finds the existing proposal to be lacking in specific details that are necessary to gain the support of the faculty:

- The need for assessment appears to have driven the kind of descriptive language used in the Pathways proposal, in ways detrimental to its stated goal for “a more robust and meaningful general education” for students. The need to include measurable learning outcomes in the discussion of the goals for each area of the proposed Pathways curriculum means that there are a small number of specific learning indicators that can be identified. As a result, the overall description of the Pathways curriculum is far less intellectually robust, complex, and stimulating than the existing aspirational goals of the CLE. The Faculty Senate finds the difference in the language of the existing CLE curriculum guides and the proposed Pathways curriculum to be troublesome, and would find it a problem if the stripped down language of the learning outcomes and indicators, as written, were to become the public face of Virginia Tech’s general education curriculum. The Faculty Senate recommends that the UCCE and/or CUSP explore ways to develop descriptive language for the new curriculum that is as robust, complex, and intellectually exciting as the existing language of the CLE. The limited number of assessable learning outcomes and indicators can then be abstracted from these broader descriptions, which will also serve to guide faculty in developing and revising courses. The aspirational goals and descriptions of the learning domains of the existing CLE are written in language that demonstrates a passion for knowledge and learning; the Faculty Senate believes that the new Pathways curriculum should likewise include language that conveys the faculty’s enthusiasm for the content of the curriculum.
- The relation of the Core Learning Outcomes to the Integrative Learning Outcomes in the proposed Pathways curriculum is unclear. The proposal states that “every Pathways course will address at least one of the Integrative Outcomes” (Revision General Education VT 11/17/2014, p. 10). Such a requirement demands significant revision of almost every course in the existing curriculum, because it means that each course must meet either the ethics or intercultural and global awareness learning indicators in addition to the learning indicators in its own area. The Faculty Senate is not certain that this is the best way to accomplish learning goals in these two content areas, especially since the requirement will be waived for transfer students who transfer in credits on the distribution model (Revision General Education VT 11/17/2014, p. 12). In addition, the document states that “clearly, competence in ethical reasoning [or intercultural and global awareness] can’t be achieved in just one course” (Revision General Education VT 11/17/2014, p. 12), a rationale that seems to be meant to justify the distribution of these outcomes across the curriculum as a whole. However, it is not clear to the Faculty Senate that a basic foundational course in these areas is not necessary as an element of general education, to be augmented by integration of these topics in students’ subsequent coursework in general education or their majors. In any event, it is clear to the Faculty Senate that more work needs to be done to clarify the value and place of ethical reasoning and intercultural and global awareness in the Pathways curriculum, as it is not confident

that the existing structure is adequate to the demands of these learning outcomes.

- The implementation process and timeline in the Pathways proposal are, in the Senate's view, too ambitious for adequate scrutiny of courses and oversight of the curriculum as a whole. In particular, the Faculty Senate finds the language describing the streamlining of course approvals so that courses will be available for students entering in fall 2016 to be untenable. While it is to be expected that there will be some concentrated work leading to the implementation of the curriculum in any case, the Faculty Senate would like to see a more robust outline of this aspect of implementation. This outline should include a discussion of how the fast-tracking of approvals will drill down to the department level, where the most onerous work of revision and course development will occur. Such a discussion should also include more specific information about the support that will be made available to departments for faculty involvement in this effort.

It is the view of the Faculty Senate that domain experts, selected at the department level, should be asked to participate in the refinement and revision of the existing proposal, whose overall scheme is largely acceptable. For example, ethics experts from across the university should be consulted concerning how to integrate ethics into undergraduate education. In another example, social scientists should develop both the broad aspirational goals of the social science area and be consulted on its specific learning indicators. The learning indicators and outcomes should be scrutinized to ensure that they are in sync and that both are related to broader descriptions of the learning domains and the significance and purpose of knowledge across the curriculum. In all areas, language in the existing CLE curriculum guide should be consulted to determine if it is still relevant to the Pathways curriculum and its objectives and, if so, incorporated.

The Faculty Senate recognizes that this request to CUSP to reject Resolution 2014-15.H pending further consideration, revision, and a broader discussion of the Pathways proposal among the faculty at large will delay implementation of the proposed program. The Faculty Senate does not make this request lightly. For such a significant revision of general education to be successful, the faculty as a whole must feel engaged in the process and confident that the proposed curriculum will be an improvement on the existing model. At present, the Faculty Senate does not believe that either is the case. The Faculty Senate pledges to continue to work with both the UCCLE and CUSP on the Pathways proposal, ensuring widespread faculty involvement in the process so that revisions to general education at Virginia Tech can inspire both faculty and students to excellence in this crucial area of undergraduate learning.