This is a report of the University Days session on General Education, NEASC, and Student Engagement. The report begins with a description of the session and the feedback provided by attendees. It ends with some next steps.

The Session
A group of 25+ faculty, staff, and administrators gathered in Samuel Read Hall the morning of Thursday, August 24, 2017 to discuss how PSU can make general education more meaningful for our students, and how such efforts can improve student persistence and assist us with NEASC requirements. The facilitators for the workshop included the chair of the General Education Committee, the chair of the General Education Outcomes Task Force, TLT members, and academic leadership; three of the faculty facilitators were First Year Seminar Fellows.

The session started with Dean Gail Mears giving a brief introduction to the session goals surrounding general education, student experience, and assessment. Dean Mears gave a brief overview of the President’s Four Tools for Clusters and outlined some of the initiatives PSU is already taking to revise and reinvigorate our general education curriculum. This fall, we’ve rolled out a newly re-envisioned challenge-based First Year Seminar course along with several sections of cluster-themed Composition for incoming students. Projects and open laboratory experiences continue to develop apace and gain public recognition. The General Education Committee is meeting with the General Education Outcomes Task Force to go over their recommendations to establish the four ‘habits of mind’ for all general education courses (See the Gen Ed Outcomes Task Force Report for more details). In addition, the General Education Committee will be meeting with the Transition Leadership Team early this month to discuss prioritization of General Education initiatives like themed general education, themed transcripts, and possibly the need for something like a task force to redesign the Integration Connection course. Many of these initiatives were outlined in PSU’s most recent NEASC progress report.

The goal of the session was to solicit campus feedback on the four tools and to generate additional ideas about what makes general education meaningful for our students, our faculty, and our campus partners. We collected feedback, discussed it in the session, and share with you below.

Wendy Palmquist led the workshop participants in a 1+2+4 activity where participants brainstormed answers to the question: How might we make general education more meaningful for our students? Individuals had one minute to think of their own answers, then a few minutes to share with a partner, and then time to work in groups of four. Groups were then asked to synthesize their ideas and report out their top idea per group. Some responses included:

- Philosophical perspective – look at individual: locally, regionally, and globally.
- Structural – drive courses by student interest.
- Frame course descriptions in a student voice.
- Language should be able to be understood.
  - Projects – hands on
    - Value to person’s life;
    - Easily relatable;
    - Practical problem solving.
  - Include external partners in classroom.
    - Real world problems.
  - Will the faculty be interested in providing these experiences?
    - Personal competencies vs. professional competencies.
  - Advising – important to create “Gen Ed” engagement.
  - Reframe “First Year” as “Foundation Year” to include transfer students.
  - Need to include Tls in conversation (construction of program).
  - Can we rename “Gen Ed”? 
    - “Pathways” is a word transfer students understand (from community colleges in particular).
  - Focus groups with students about the language we use.
  - Some time slots that are only for “Gen Ed” courses.
  - Provide as much choice as possible.
  - Connection to the major
    - Requires full faculty engagement with “Gen Ed”;
    - No faculty speaking negatively about “Gen Ed”;
    - Include this as part of new faculty campus interviews.
  - Create a “Gen Ed Faculty” program???
    - Can we incentivize without creating hierarchies?

Many groups expressed similar ideas and concerns. After general discussion and further explanation of many of the above topics, the facilitators asked the participants for feedback on how we can bring more of the campus community into the conversation. Some ideas they shared included:
  - Share feedback with “Gen Ed” committee.
  - Move forward with “habits of the mind”.
  - Creation of assessment task force.
  - Need to talk to departments about the “clusterization” of their courses.
  - Need to prioritize “Gen Ed” work as cluster work – clusters should be working on “Gen Ed”
  - Incorporate “Gen Ed” values in searches, PT&E, and community of “Gen Ed” scholars thru Center for Transformation.
  - Student Focus Groups.
  - Retreat for Tls teaching “Gen Ed”.
  - Need to keep transfers in mind as we make changes to “Gen Ed” (don’t make things more difficult).
  - More conversation about themed “Gen Ed”.
    - Help with assessment of that experience.
The facilitators consolidated some of these suggestions into broader groups for action: “Gen Ed” could do/be:

- Student driven with a focus on projects and innovation.
- Hands-on projects driven by a field of interest.
- Course topics/titles created by students about what they want to know and tools they feel they need in order to be successful college students.

The session ended with a review of PSU’s NEASC accreditation priorities and deadlines.

**Next Steps**

In a follow up meeting, the facilitators processed the feedback from the session to determine next steps. Some of the priorities that we have told NEASC that we will engage in are already in motion:

- The First Year Seminar Fellows have begun the redesign of the First Year Seminar and are teaching the first sections of the new course this fall. The redesign includes some tools for beginning to assess the FYS.
- The General Education Outcomes Task Force has identified four ‘habits of mind’ (learning outcomes) for the General Education program.
- The General Education Outcomes Task Force has developed a set of benchmarks to be used to assess the General Education program. (Both the four ‘habits of mind’ and proposed benchmarks were shared with the campus at a highly attended workshop during University Days.)

There is additional work that will begin this fall:

1. The General Education Committee will be calling for an assessment task force to develop an assessment plan using the habits of mind and benchmarks developed by the General Education Outcomes Task Force.
2. The General Education Committee will be moving forward with a proposal to faculty regarding four credit Directions courses with a change in the structure of the program so that it doesn’t exceed the current credit requirements.
3. The General Education Committee, working with the Transition Leadership Team and the deans, will craft a charge for an INCO task force to redesign the INCO requirement to act as a capstone experience for the General Education program.
4. The university will conduct an internal search for a coordinator of General Education.
5. The university will use much of this information and planning to develop an interim report for NEASC due in August 2018.

Work that still needs to be completed:

1. Establish General Education pathways (themes?) with possible micro-credentialing so that students have cluster General Education experiences in more courses than the FYS and the INCO.
2. We might determine some mechanisms for allowing students to demonstrate/articulate what they have learned in their General Education program. One idea that is intriguing to the facilitators of this session is to rethink the way we present student learning on their
academic transcript. The idea of flipping the transcript, or organizing the transcript by skills and experience rather than a listing of courses, was a consistent theme at the AAC&U conference on general education last February when five faculty members attended from various PSU leadership constituencies including curriculum committee, general education committee, general education working group, and FYS fellows. For example, instead of presenting courses taken listed by the semester in which they were taken, could we list courses by skills learned in those courses? Could we put tags on courses to show the kinds of experiences students had in those courses and then list the courses by type of experience? To begin this conversation, we think the General Education Committee should meet with the Curriculum Committee and the Registrar to explore possibilities.

3. Develop mechanisms for full university/campus engagement in these discussions. General Education and Curriculum Committees should identify and plan ways to engage full campus conversations to obtain input and feedback regarding this suite of changes to curriculum. These conversations should occur during fall 2017 so that the respective committees can continue to effectively work on the necessary changes during spring 2018 in the spirit of meeting the needs of our first incoming class of students who are expecting to experience a full cluster initiative. Moving at this pace will also ensure we can contribute successfully to the demands of student persistence and to our NEASC requirements.

Our work ahead is exciting and essential to the success of our cluster initiative and to the future of Plymouth. We are excited to see where these changes will take our students and our institution.

Respectfully submitted by:
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