

General Education Committee (GEC) Report (May 2012)

Following the University Senate's approval of the WKU Colonnade Program, the Provost requested that the GEC consider several proposed changes to and clarifications of the Program. The GEC met with the Provost at its early April meeting to discuss the Program. As a result of our discussions, the GEC voted to forward four suggested changes or clarifications to the University Senate for approval.

The GEC met again in late April to discuss a final change to the WKU Colonnade Program requested by the Provost. The WKU Colonnade Program passed by the University Senate in March included 30 hours of General Education coursework and 9 hours of "Degree Requirements" Connections courses that were not categorized as General Education coursework. The Provost requested that all WKU Colonnade Program courses be categorized as General Education coursework. The Provost argues that doing so will make it possible to engage in a more robust assessment of the entire WKU Colonnade Program and will make the Program more compatible with SACS general education assessment standards. The Provost indicated that he will not approve the Program unless this change is made. The GEC voted to send forward to the Senate a motion that will, if approved, categorize all courses in the WKU Colonnade Program as General Education Coursework. The GEC recommends that the Senate approve the motion.

Nevertheless, the GEC has serious reservations and concerns about making this change to the WKU Colonnade Program:

1. The GEC feels that this rule change is motivated more by financial and/or enrollment concerns rather than by pedagogical or assessment considerations. Currently, WKU's General Education program provides a "loophole" for transfer students whereby students who transfer to WKU and have completed the 30-hour General Education transfer "core" (as mandated by the Commonwealth) are certified as having completed WKU's General Education requirements. The WKU Colonnade Program approved by the University Senate would eliminate this loophole and require all students, regardless of transfer status, to complete 9 hours of Connections courses as "degree requirements" to receive a baccalaureate degree. The rule change requested by the Provost reinstates this loophole into the new core curriculum. The GEC assumes that the administration, in addition to some concerns about program assessment, (a) has concerns that eliminating the General Education "loophole" will cause a decline in transfers to WKU and/or (b) has concerns that eliminating the "loophole" will make it more difficult for WKU to attract new transfer students, a demographic where we may see enrollment growth.

The GEC does not believe that these concerns are substantiated by evidence. The number of transfer students potentially affected by implementing the WKU Colonnade Program with 9 hours of "degree requirements" is small. Adopting the proposed rule change whereby "Connections" courses can be taken at the 200 level would make it possible for students to complete all WKU Colonnade Program coursework at community colleges before transferring to WKU. The WKU Colonnade Program will not be evaluated by SACS in 2015 since its implementation will begin only a year before the next SACS visit. There will be adequate time to develop assessment tools for the Program.

2. The GEC worries that this rule change may cause unintended, possibly serious pedagogical and assessment problems. Preserving the General Education "loophole" may encourage more and more students to take advantage of it. If the University succeeds in attracting many more transfer students who take advantage of the "loophole," then WKU may

find itself in a situation in which a growing number of its students do not participate fully in the WKU Colonnade Program. It may be the case, too, that the students who might choose to take advantage of the General Education “loophole” may be the students who could benefit the most from completing the WKU Colonnade Program in its entirety.

Despite these reservations, the GEC recommends that the Senate approve the proposed rule change. The GEC believes approving the rule change is a necessary compromise that will preserve the WKU Colonnade Program and allow its implementation to begin without further delay. The GEC also believes that approving the rule change will avoid a scenario in which the University might be forced to renegotiate the entire General Education reform – a process that has taken nearly four years to date.

If the Senate approves the rule change and implements the revised WKU Colonnade Program, the GEC recommends that the WKU Colonnade Program Implementation Committee examine transfer student participation in the WKU Colonnade Program periodically beginning three years after implementation (2017) and present regular reports on the issue to the University Senate. In particular, the Implementation Committee should ask:

- Does preserving the “loophole” create educational inequities across different WKU campuses?
- How many students take advantage of the General Education “loophole?” Is the number growing? What are the characteristics of students (educational background and preparation, 6-year graduation rate, and so on) who take advantage of the “loophole?”
- Is preserving the “loophole” worth it, in terms of enrollment management? Is the number of student credit-hours generated by transfers greater than the number of student credit-hours lost by allowing the “loophole” to exist? Is there evidence that the loophole allows us to attract students who might transfer to other universities?