Navigating the Challenges of Change: Best Procedural Practices for General Education Curriculum Review and Revision at the University of Richmond

The University of Richmond (UR) advocates that a “Richmond education prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world.” Our new strategic plan’s pillar of “Academic Excellence” promises that a Richmond education “will stimulate intellectual and personal growth, connect theory with practice, and offer the inspiration of the liberal arts and the ability to approach problems thoughtfully, critically, ethically, and creatively.” The general education curriculum at UR provides a crucial foundation for student development in these areas. Thus, general education should be intentional, student-centered and embedded in the culture of our institution. As part of this intentionality, it is appropriate to examine whether the current general education curriculum at UR is the best curriculum for our twenty-first century students.

For institutions undertaking the important task of general education review and revision, it is disheartening to learn that many general education revisions fail not just because of disagreements over curriculum and pedagogy, but also because of issues of process. A central reason for this is that general education revision is, fundamentally, a cultural change from one norm to another, not just from one curriculum to another. General education review/revision asks faculty, who are teacher-scholars in a particular area, to navigate in an unfamiliar role as agents of cultural change. It also requires that the stakeholders confront their biases and apprehensions about change, which may exist below the level of consciousness and subtly reinforce existing institutional standards. Acquiring knowledge of how organizational change works and the types and patterns of resistance to cultural change can help all faculty navigate the process of general education review and revision in a productive way. Simply put, institutional change is hard. Having processes in place that maximize faculty engagement and that work to reduce anxiety about change are critical because process is a key driver of productive successful general education review and revision.

Late in November 2017, the Provost convened an administrative general education Curriculum Review Process Committee (hereinafter “Process Committee”) to “explore best practices at the University of Richmond and other institutions for undertaking successful general curriculum reviews.” The Process Committee was charged to examine two questions: (1) “which processes generate the most productive reviews that build interest and positive results?” and (2) “what specific ideas have come out of these curriculum reviews that might be of interest to our own efforts in 2018–2019?”

Previously, the provost had discussed the charge with the chair of the Faculty Senate (standing) General Education Committee and determined that the charge was beyond its scope and working capacity. The Provost then discussed potential Process Committee members with the chair of the Faculty Senate Committee on Committees, and the following faculty were selected: Laura Runyen-Janecky, School of Arts and Sciences Quadripartite Division II (Chair); Tricia Stohr-Hunt, School of Arts and Sciences Quadripartite Division I; Doug Winiarski, School of Arts and Sciences Quadripartite Division III; Sara Pappas, School of Arts and Sciences Quadripartite Division IV; Julian Hayter, Jepson School of Leadership; and Bob Nicholson, Robins School of Business.
The Process Committee met weekly throughout the Spring 2018 semester. We began by locating, examining, and discussing the scholarly and professional literature on general education reform and organizational change. This work helped us understand the landscape and scope of the challenge of general education revision across colleges and universities in the US. The central findings of this literature can be summed up as: (1) curricular reform fails frequently because of falling into numerous procedural potholes (problem areas) along the way, and thus, an appreciation of a solid process is essential for successful curricular reform (Gaston & Gaff, 2009) and (2) particular institutional culture must be considered when applying general principles of general education revision. This initial work led us to the goal of understanding how these known potholes might intersect with culture at UR and with the experiences of faculty with previous general education revision efforts at UR. To do this we adopted a two-pronged approach that was both outward and inward facing. We sent inquiries about potential key issues to external institutions that had recently undergone general education revision; and we conducted listening visits with departments in the School of Arts and Sciences, the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, and the Robins School of Business to understand current climate at UR for general education review/reform (documenting both enthusiasm and concerns). The information we collected formed the basis for the conclusions and recommendations in this report.

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Part 1: Suggested best practices for general education review and revision at UR

The University of Richmond has become a leader in higher, liberal arts education by preparing “students to contribute to, and succeed in, a complex world.” Like most liberal arts institutions of higher learning in the United States, UR has spent the last several decades implementing and organizing various strategies to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. It has not merely diversified its student body to more accurately reflect recent demographic shifts; these changes have led the institution to reimagine the very nature of its institutional culture. As the institution works to implement a new strategic plan, UR is giving serious consideration to the types of general education curricula that might best support these recent changes and continue the institution’s position as a leader in liberal arts education. While the university endeavors to review and, perhaps, revise general education, we believe that it is imperative to remember that the “failure of curriculum reform” in education broadly is often “certainly not the result of a lack of effort” (Labaree, 2018). Rather, institutions that have successfully reviewed and revised curriculum are keenly aware of how important actual process is to the success of these initiatives.

Since the mid-twentieth century, numerous institutions of higher learning have not merely revised, reviewed, and/or implemented changes to curriculum; experts have analyzed these activities to better understand best practices. As a result, we now have access to a small, but growing, body of literature that has examined not just the success of curriculum revision, but its failures. The most recent seminal work on these efforts, Gaston and Gaff’s Revising General Education – And Avoid the Potholes (2009), holds that successful curriculum review and revision is most often contingent upon a number of factors—namely, institutions must be aware of their own culture and should avoid “potholes” (difficulties that make general education reform more formidable than it needs to be) that impede the process, passage, and implementation of these reforms. Building on a body of literature and evidence, Gaston and Gaff argue, “The biggest pothole to avoid, then, is the notion that strategies to secure approval and implementation of a proposal require attention only when a proposed program has been approved and is about to be implemented. To the contrary, such strategies are critical to the process of curricular review, design, and approval, and they should be considered from the outset” (Gaston & Gaff, 2009, p. 7). In effect, understanding that process matters is essential to the reviewing and revising general education. Gaston and Gaff outlined dozens of potholes and provide strategies for overcoming obstructions to general education review and revision (best practices). We believe that several of these best practices speak directly to UR’s institutional culture, broadly, and future general education committees, specifically.

Committees designed to review and, perhaps, revise curriculum at UR, we hold, must not only identify our institutional culture and avoid the potholes inherent to general education review and revision, but also: (1) recognize that strategies for change should identify what problems (if any) need fixing; (2) operate with an appropriate set of resources, time, and transparency; (3) consider general education in its own right; and (4) imagine the process as a research-based exercise.
1. **Strategies for change should identify what problems (if any) need fixing:** Effective general education curriculum review and revision is contingent upon understanding an institution’s culture (since culture, in fact, can either make or break the success of this process) and identifying what problems need to be addressed. These two factors, experts hold, come equipped with their own potholes. The Process Committee concluded that early in the process, the future general education review committee should consider questions that probe the very institutional culture of UR with respect to general education and, within this context, ask “What, in essence, needs to be fixed?”. To this end we have outlined several key questions for this next committee (see Appendix B for the suggested draft of a charge for a general education review committee prepared by the Process Committee and sent to University Faculty Senate). These questions have been written to probe not just general education at UR, but where general education fits into UR’s culture broadly. They are:

- What are the fundamental skills, abilities, and perspectives that every student should develop during the course of a Richmond education?
- Does the current general education curriculum serve the objectives of a Richmond education, as articulated in in the current UR mission statement and in the outcomes of the previous question?
- How do students and alumni understand the strengths and challenges of the current general education?
- Do the procedures for administrating and assessing our general education curriculum support these objectives (e.g. the process for evaluating and using AP and transfer credit for general education courses)?
- Among the general education curriculum models discussed in the literature, which models might best serve our mission and support the outcomes of the first question above? What are examples of the most effective curricula using similar models at other schools?

The first pothole (and series of subsequent potholes) in the overall process is to assume that faculty and administrators understand (a) the value of general education and (b) the need for improvement. It is imperative that future general education review and revision committees “help their colleagues understand the value and significance of general education” (Gaston & Gaff, 2009, p. 8). While we hold that future general education committees think about general education on its own terms (see subheading 3, p. 6), committees might also think about review and revision within the cultural context of UR. As the last few years have seen many important initiatives come to fruition at UR (e.g. strategic plan), an understandably elevated level of faculty fatigue, related to further potential change, has emerged. A best practice, then, is to start the review and revision process with a faculty energized and enthusiastic about this new and important work. The Process committee has recommended starting with just a general education review committee to look first at the current state of general education at UR, and this recommendation has been taken by the Faculty Senate. Then, if change is warranted, a second committee can be convened and tasked with researching, creating, and proposing alternative general education curricula for faculty consideration. We resolved to break the important work of general education review and revision into two more manageable tasks, which will alleviate some of the fatigue associated with the large work that faculty have taken on in the last few years.
Even with an energized faculty, there may be differing opinions on the success of our current general education curriculum and the nature of an ideal general education for UR. It is imperative then to employ the best practice of not avoiding and isolating those who disagree. Future general education committees must anticipate blowback/resistance and consider legitimate fears, engaging these constituents to move towards consensus. Finally, in an institution with fatigue (e.g., one that has undergone recent administrative overhauls), the assumption that a vote against a new curriculum is final can impinge upon an engaged and thorough revision process. Gaff and Gaston have several suggestions for this “deepest of potholes” including “a committee should expand rather than close lines of communication” and “scheduling another vote to follow its revision efforts” after a negative vote (2009). We suggest that, at a minimum, all future general education revision proposals include a clearly articulated set of voting procedures and outcomes.

Ultimately, the types of questions listed above (p. 4), experts hold, are essential to the process of not merely general education review but questioning the essence of an institution’s culture and mission. For instance, future general education committees might think about UR culture and if that culture is better suited for evolutionary (incremental change) or revolutionary change (a complete overhaul)? Thinking about an institution’s culture is of paramount importance to general education. Indeed, experts contend that one pitfall to avoid in this equation (especially at a liberal arts institution with five distinct schools) is relying on humanists exclusively as the only true believers in general education. Do not assume, they contend, that certain fields prioritize general education over others, and do not neutralize the contributions of smaller departments in this process (Gaston & Gaff, 2009, p. 8 and 15).

2. **Strategies for change should recognize the value of committee work and the importance of process time/transparency:** Successful review and revision of general education should also understand the value of committee work, the process of transparency, and the importance of an effective timeline for completion. While UR has avoided one pothole by creating a special faculty “task force” committee—in lieu of a standing curriculum committee—this General Education Review Committee (and any future revision committee) needs adequate support. This work, in many ways, should be approached as a research endeavor. Indeed, support is essential to institutions that might already be suffering from institutional fatigue, and experts agree the success of a review committee hinges on having resources. During the review and revision process, institutions should give serious consideration to providing funds for materials, consultants, travel to relevant conferences on GE, site visits to other institutions, relief from other service, summer stipends, and release time). Additionally, soliciting feedback from wide-array of faculty and administration representatives should be done in new forums, not pre-existing ones, since general education revision is not “business as usual.” In fact, avoiding issues related to lack of transparency also requires that students and other stakeholders play an integral role in this process. It is essential that opponents to revision are engaged, respected, and heard, and that concerns of those who most affected by potential change are addressed. In our discussions with other schools who have recently reviewed and revised their general education, one school noted that not everyone will get what they want, and when a group or groups do not get what they want, it is important that they understand why. While Gaston and Gaff hold that the process of review is faster with maximum feasible input from faculty, administrators, and students, they also strongly caution against rushing through this process. “Fat that took years to
put on,” they contend, “cannot be removed in a few days” (Gaston & Gaff, 2009, p. 11). As such, best practices state that genuine curricular reform almost always requires more than one year (change often ranges from one to eight years, but averages two to three). We recommend that future committees not be constrained with an artificially short time line, yet still have some checkpoints in place so that the process does not drag out and lose steam with faculty. This process, ultimately, should be approached in well-thought-out steps. For example, the University of Virginia, which recently underwent the process of review and revision, approached the process of implementation in an incremental fashion (“Curricular Reform”, 2018).

3. **General education should be considered in its own right:** Although the questions delineated in subheading 1 examine the purpose of general education, experts believe that thinking about general education in its own right is absolutely necessary to a healthy review process. One factor that often impinges upon effective curriculum review and revision is the belief that the “current course of study works reasonably well.” Given the nature of UR’s strategic plan, future general education committees need to very openly contemplate the emphasis of general education goals. For instance, with the strategic plan in mind, the committee might question whether or not a general education should promote democratic equality by providing students with the skills and knowledge to function as competent citizens or whether a general education should meet the challenges of social productivity by attempting to provide students with specific skills to meet the challenges of complex economies. While these are merely examples, they drive at the purpose of thinking about general education on its own terms.

4. **The process of general education review and revision should be imagined as a research-based exercise:** Ultimately, it is imperative that the outcome, the possibility of general education curriculum revision, not dictate the process of curriculum review. Committees tasked to review curriculum should avoid assuming that relevant constituencies will hold particular views; instead they should conduct studies and collect data (as the Process Committee has done) to test ideas and solicit feedback from diverse voices. There may not be, in a university with five schools, “one best” program—understanding the unique nature of an institution often dictates the review process. If revision of the general education curriculum is warranted from a general education review committee’s work, then a later revision committee should think of the university as a laboratory and attempt to involve constituencies in repeated communications and debate about general education and do so in an open, and inclusive manner. In fact, the Process Committee recommends that the entire faculty engage in part of the academic exercise of curricular review and revision by reading selected articles on general education, which are summarized in the section that follows, and by attending on campus seminars given by external experts in general education. This recommendation is partially based on the knowledge that even though previous UR general education revision committees were aware of some of the relevant literature, such as Gaston and Gaff’s report (2009), their genuine efforts did not result in curricular change. Although there are other differences between previous general education committees and the one(s) that will be created for the upcoming work, we believe that having a more informed faculty is an important, additional piece of creating a productive process.

Furthermore, experts contend that review and revision processes with successful outcomes include evidence-based research that shows what educational conditions engage and enhance learning. If the process of general education review and revision is to be thought of as a research-
based endeavor, it should strive to measure relevant outcomes in a scholarly fashion. Tom Schrand argues, “The design-thinking approach generally includes separate generative and iterative processes. After an “ideation” or brainstorming phase to spin out as many different potential solutions to a problem as possible, the results are then reviewed and analyzed, and the most promising are rapidly prototyped. The goal is to manifest a version of the product quickly so that it can be tested and its shortcomings can be analyzed and corrected in a cyclical process of improvement” (Schrand, 2016, p. 18). We encourage future revision committees to consider such strategies that involve an iterative process [generate idea  make a prototype  test prototype  revise prototype and retest iteratively] to build consensus. Ultimately, the objective is to encourage faculty and students to become more active agents in the educational design process and be deliberate in making choices that emphasize teaching and learning as the basis for curriculum review and revision (Gaston & Gaff, 2009, p. 11).

**Part 2: Results of examining general education review and revision external to UR**

**2A. Literature review**

During the spring 2018 semester, the members of the Process Committee read, discussed, and debated a range of published works on the procedures for planning productive general education review and revision. The publications under consideration included theoretical essays, how-to guides, and case studies of successes and failures at other institutions. Especially helpful was Gaston and Gaff’s *Revising General Education – And Avoiding the Potholes* (2009), a comprehensive list of fifty potential “potholes” related to curricular review, task force procedures, learning outcomes, program planning, and approval processes. Cited widely in the literature we encountered, Gaston and Gaff’s report should be considered essential reading for members of future general education review and revision committees and for the faculty as a whole. In addition, the Hart Research Associates have produced a useful survey of recent trends in general education design, learning outcomes, and teaching approaches (2016).

The goal of general education review, as noted by Kean et al., is for an institution to “become more intentional about what students should learn” (2008, p. 4). Awbrey approaches this issue by providing a useful taxonomy of general education programs (2005). She identifies three prevailing models: *great books, effective citizen, and scholarly discipline*. Like most colleges and universities, UR appears to have adopted a version of the scholarly discipline model, in which the “ideally educated person is a beginning practitioner of the basic disciplines who has an understanding of the key concepts and the methods of inquiry that scholars use” (Awbrey, 2005, p. 9). Awbrey also highlights an emerging *communicative* model that “focuses on the relationship between student and instructor and the connection between general and specialized education” (Awbrey, 2005, p. 11). She advocates a cultural approach to the process of general education reform; her conclusion—and one that the members of the committee endorse—is that the process of general education review and revision must be “embedded in the culture of an institution” (Awbrey, 2005, p. 11). We also suggest that is vital during a general education review that the members of general education review and revision committees familiarize themselves with these general education models, and that they educate the faculty on these as well.
Colleges and universities have experienced mixed results in their efforts to engage in productive general education review and revision. Most efforts during the past decade have developed out of perceived limitations of the scholarly discipline model, or what a committee at the University of Virginia denigrated as the “cafeteria-style approach” to general education (Joselow, 2016). Although we encountered a few success stories, the case studies we read more often emphasized daunting challenges, sharp debates, and, in the end, failure. Problems range from student and faculty apathy and inter-departmental power struggles, to ineffective program branding and overly complex proposals. The example of Rice University’s failed general education reform initiative is particularly relevant, as it involved cooperation among seven schools (Schneider 1999). “What kills a curriculum,” explained a Duke University administrator, “are little oppositions, all of which don’t agree with each other, but all of which agree that there’s something wrong with the curriculum” (Schneider, 1999).

General education review and revision projects falter over procedural issues as well as pedagogical disagreements. As Trainor summarizes: “The problem is not that colleges and universities do not pay attention to process; rather, difficulties arise from their failure to anticipate the results a given process is likely to produce” (2004, p. 16). Most institutions begin by appointing a committee to produce a new curricular model. “Precisely because they were chosen as representatives,” Trainor explains, “the committee members are concerned to speak for their constituents’ interests—the liberal arts, the professional programs, the humanities or the social sciences, the territory of a single department or discipline. It is the rare faculty member who can transcend his or her own area and speak for the institution as a whole. Thus, this typical process practically guarantees that the committee will be at odds with itself in most of its deliberations” (Trainor, 2004, p. 16).

Committees embarking on the difficult process of general education review and revision need to establish processes that ensure clarity on a series of key preliminary questions that appear with frequency in the scholarly literature: What are/should be the goals of a general education? Which goals are most appropriate for specific institutions? What existing challenges require attention in the current general education review? If change is required, how comprehensive should it be? Does the institution seek to establish a “signature” academic program? And how are general education programs most effectively administered? (Trainor, 2004).

Above all, the literature on the process of general education review and reform urges colleagues to adopt a wide range of best practices in order to avoid what Susan Steele calls the “curricular wars” (2006). Gaston and Gaff outline a wide range of specific procedural practices, which we examine elsewhere in this report, but other important lessons may be gleaned from the literature our committee consulted (2009):

- Productive general education review and revision nearly always involves “cultural change” (Awbrey, 2005), as well as longstanding issues of faculty governance and resource allocation (Patel, 2018).
- General education review and revision committees should examine “past reform efforts…searching for tactical mistakes” (Schneider, 1999).
- Although review and revision committees should work within the framework of existing faculty governance structures (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2008), they should be a
dedicated ad-hoc committee (not a standing one) charged with the sole task of general education review and/or revision (Gaston and Gaff, 2009).

- The “involvement of rank-and-file faculty members in the debate is essential” (Steele 2009, p. 174).
- Review and revision committees need to foster campus engagement through continual messaging, transparent and frequent communications, and a wide range of opportunities to contribute to the process (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2008).
- All stakeholders must be willing to “negotiate and barter” (Steele, 2009, p. 179).
- Faculty tasked reforming general education must demonstrate the feasibility of their plan (Steele, 2009).
- Successful general education review and revision requires not only a thoughtful “political process” but also a robust “marketing strategy” (Schneider, 1999; see also Kean et al., 2008).
- Even with careful planning, “successful, deep-level systematic change” to a general education curriculum usually takes several years to complete (Awbrey, 2005, 18).

2B. Focused inquiries to other colleges and universities

The Process Committee identified and contacted 43 schools who are currently undergoing a general education curriculum revision or who have completed one in the last 10 years. We received responses and data from 21 of the 43 schools. The review/revision process is still ongoing at 6 of the schools who responded to our queries. We were interested in four primary questions: the process by which their committee(s) was (were) constituted, whether or not they contacted outside consultants during their review/revision, how long their review/revision took, and whether or not their review/revision was successful.

Formation of the review and/or revision committee: We did not find a clear pattern for forming the committee, most likely because of structural and governing differences between different colleges and universities of varying size. Among the schools that responded to our request, 4 had committees appointed directly by a Provost. The most common committee formation was either appointment by a combination of administrative offices, often with input from the faculty in the form of either volunteers or nominations (5 schools), appointment by an administrator other than the Provost (usually a Dean, 5 schools), or appointment by a combination of faculty and administration (3 schools). Other committee formation processes included an elected subcommittee of a standing faculty committee (1 school), appointment by a standing elected faculty committee in consultation with administration (1 school), appointed by a standing committee (1 school), using a standing faculty committee (1 school), and via faculty elections (2 schools). Some had multiple committees; thus, the numbers do not add up to the 21 schools who responded.

Hiring outside consultants: On our second question, whether or not a committee hired outside consultants, approximately two-thirds of the schools did not use any outside consultants. Four schools did hire consultants, and another 3 schools had committee members attend the
Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) General Education Institute, where they could interact with experts in curricular reform.

**Timeframe:** The one question that received a resoundingly consistent response was the question of timeframe. The shortest time period for a review/revision that we encountered was 1.5 years (1 school), and there were three schools with much longer timeframes (an anticipated 4 years for one school, 6 years for another, and 8 years for the third school). The majority of schools we talked to that had completed their curricular revision had a 2-3 year timeframe for review and revision. This 2-3 year timeframe does not always include implementation. With 6 of the schools, their reviews are still ongoing and we cannot report on their final timeframe, though 1 of the 6 reported an anticipated 2-year timeframe.

One school that took 2 years to pass a successful revision reported that they felt like they were moving at “breakneck speed” for the entire process and did not recommend 2 years. Another school approved goals for general education curriculum before even looking at a specific curriculum. It is clear from the data from external institutions of higher learning that a 2–3 year time period is emerging as the absolute minimum and as a possible common standard.

**Gauging the success of the review and/or revision:** This ended up being a more interesting question than the Process Committee had originally imagined. Some schools interpreted the question as pertaining to whether or not a general education curriculum revision passed; whereas other schools also commented on whether or not the faculty were satisfied with whatever revision had passed. If there is a common theme that emerges, it is the idea of the importance of “faculty buy-in” and trust in the process. One school going through their third general education revision process since the mid-1990s went so far as to have a Chair with veto power in case they ended up with a personality that the Chair felt “had an agenda rather than student learning as his or her focus.” Another school with a successful revision (in that it passed the Faculty Senate) has had a lot of problems with implementation and many faculty feel it was rushed, despite the 3-year timeframe. There was no vote on the revision by the entire faculty (with their governance structure, it only had to pass the Senate), so many faculty feel disenfranchised. There have been so many logistical problems with their new curriculum that they have had to temporarily halt the acceptance of new course proposals to the general education curriculum until they can figure things out. One of the reasons identified for the problems has been a lack of full faculty participation—our contact reported that they realize now that they should have involved more faculty in the constitution of the original committee (which was appointed by upper administration). To ensure optimal participation, one school, quite a bit larger than UR, had 10 members of the general education review/revision committee but involved 200 others in task forces and subcommittees—such that roughly 1/5 of the campus was in some way involved in the process. Another school mentions the importance of being “genuinely open” and “genuinely listening.” Not everyone will get what they want, they stress, and when a group or groups do not get what they want, it is important that they understand why. Still one more school begins their entire report on their review/revision with the importance of building trust in order to undertake such a task. It is clear that “faculty buy-in,” optimal faculty and staff participation, and trust in the committee are crucial to both the process of review and revision as well as to future university endeavors beyond an implemented curricular change.
Part 3: Results of internal investigations at UR

3A. Assessing the climate for curricular change at UR through listening visits

Committee members extended offers to visit faculty in all departments in the School of Arts and Sciences, the Jepson School of Leadership, and the Robins School of Business. They were able to speak with approximately half the faculty in the various schools, including Library Services, to assess the climate for general education review and revision to gather ideas regarding the process that should be undertaken. Many different opinions were found in these listening sessions and useful information was acquired for the process as it goes forward.

Although many faculty expressed a level of “burn-out” with the many recent University initiatives, there is still interest in an investigation into potential general education revision among some faculty in Arts and Sciences. The Jepson School faculty is not enthusiastic about a revision at this time and just a small number of Robins School faculty are interested in a revision. Two departments in Arts and Sciences did not indicate interest in a review at this time, while one expressed concerns about the current general education curriculum and stated a willingness for an intensive study. Other departments believed that the current “model” of general education (the Field-of-Study framework) is acceptable but there are many different ideas for improvements within this model. In contrast, other departments believe that the current framework is not appropriate for the twenty-first century and that the general education needs a complete restructuring. Similarly, there was mixed opinion on FYS with some being strong supporters and others expressing concerns. The divergent opinion of faculty regarding FYS indicates a willingness to examine this topic.

Some faculty strongly suggested that the first goal of a future general education review committee should be to study the current general education curriculum to determine what problems, if any, currently exist. For example, are current “problems” structural or content based?

Those expressing a positive inclination for change have concerns about how to reach the current generation of students and how the general education curriculum could be changed to reflect the mission and values of UR. On the negative side, some faculty worry that change in and of itself will be considered “success.” In other words, some faculty believe that change should not be preordained.

With respect to the process of reviewing and possibly revising the general education curriculum, an overwhelming faculty opinion is that the committees (1) should have competent and unbiased leadership, (2) should have a membership that is broad-based by departments and schools, and (3) should include people who can function and view the university outside their “silos.” Also, many stated that ALL the faculty should be engaged in the process early through open hearings and information sessions. The committee should be transparent and open to outside contributions. Indeed, the desire for committee members to look outside of their own parochial interests and a concern about the Faculty Senate appointment process using standard procedures was expressed in many departmental listening sessions. Thus, the Process Committee recommended to the Faculty Senate that the Senate Committee on Committees (a) issue a call for
written nominations in which prospective general education review committee members/nominees provide a short narrative in which they reflect on their strengths and expertise in a few key areas and (b) assemble a balanced cohort from these nominations (see Appendix C for the full recommendation of the Process Committee). Employing these procedural elements gives the best chance to start general education review and/or revision with maximal faculty buy-in.

The Process Committee further heard loud and clear that a large majority of the faculty believe that the Faculty Senate should monitor committee progress and receive the final report. A minority believe that the Provost should work with the Faculty Senate in selecting and overseeing the committee. As a result of concerns related to administrative versus faculty committee formation, the Process Committee facilitated critical discussions among the university community (administration, faculty, Faculty Senate representatives) that led to the decision that the General Education Review Committee will originate from the Faculty Senate. This procedural element will help start general education review on a positive procedural note.

3B. Assessing faculty perspectives on previous general education revision efforts at UR

For many years, the degree requirements for the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, and Bachelor of Music at UR included proficiency, distributional, and major requirements. Proficiency and Basic Knowledge Requirements included courses or equivalent tests and/or experiences in the areas of English Composition and Literature, Foreign Language, Mathematics and Computer Science, and Western Civilization. Distributional requirements included courses in Social Sciences (6 semester hours), Natural Sciences (8 semester hours), Humanities and Fine Arts (9 semester hours), Language and Literature (6 semester hours), Physical Education (4 semester hours and swimming test).

Between September 1989 and May 1992, the Arts and Science Curriculum Committee submitted a proposal for a new general education curriculum. After some amendment, it was approved by the Arts and Sciences faculty in April 1992 and accepted by the Board of Trustees in May of the same year. In the fall of 1993, incoming students could choose to meet the new general education curriculum or the proficiency and distributional requirements. In the fall of 1994, the Arts and Sciences General Education Curriculum was adopted fully. This new curriculum required a two-semester, first year Core course (6 credits), Expository Writing (3 credits), Oral Communication (incorporated into Core course), Foreign Language (up to 12 credits), Dimensions of Wellness (2 credits), Activity class (no academic credits), and Fields of Study: Symbolic Reasoning (3 credits), Historical Studies (3 credits), Literary Studies (3 credits), Natural Science (8 credits), Social analysis (3 credits), and Visual and Performing Arts (3 credits). Since this time, there have been attempts to completely overhaul general education, as well as piecemeal approaches to refining the curriculum. Some examples of “tweaks” to the curriculum included the reduction of the Fields of Study Natural Sciences requirement from two science courses to one, the elimination of the Activity class requirement, and the addition of URAware (WELL 085), the University’s alcohol education and prevention program.
In the fall of 2002, an exploratory committee was formed by the Provost to determine whether or not the time was right for a review of the undergraduate education experience. In 2003, the Task Force on Undergraduate Education (TFUGE) was created by the provost to make proposals for reform. Over the course of two years, subcommittees of the task force examined and made recommendations regarding the curriculum, advising and residential learning, the academic calendar, and policies related to credit hours for courses and graduation. The Steering Committee, drawing upon the work of the Curriculum Subcommittee, shared a draft proposal on the reform of the general education curriculum in early 2005. After holding several faculty hearings and inviting comment, that proposal was amended over the summer and presented again to the faculty in the fall of 2005. After another round of hearings and meetings with various groups of faculty and students, a final proposal for reform of general education was put forward in the March of 2006.

In devising the new curriculum, the Curriculum Subcommittee thought deeply about the meaning of a liberal education. The final proposal included both a Statement on Liberal Education at UR, as well as a list of Educational “Aims” that identified seven basic areas the subcommittee believed were essential to creating and sustaining a culture of intellectual inquiry on campus. Specifically, the proposal reduced the Core course sequence to one Writing-Intensive Core course. Writing would continue to be emphasized through three Writing-Intensive Inquiry Seminars organized into the categories of (1) Culture, Nature, and Identity; (2) Representation and Interpretation; and (3) Choice, Values, and Action. The Foreign Language requirement remained unchanged. Courses were still required in areas closely aligned with Fields of Study. These included:

- First-year Science Experience: One semester course with laboratory that is the same as the current Natural Science requirement
- Deductive/Quantitative Reasoning: One semester course similar to current Symbolic Reasoning requirement
- Creative Experience: One semester course that requires students to engage in the creative act or experience and is similar to some current offerings in Visual and Performing Arts

The proposal also required an Independent Inquiry Experience, and for students who needed to further their basic writing skills, a Gateway to Academic Writing Tutorial. After a vote in which 70% of eligible voters participated, the proposal was soundly defeated.

The next major effort at curriculum revision came three years after the failure of TFUGE and on the heels of a university-wide strategic planning process. The General Education Revision Committee was convened in February 2009 as part of an Ad Hoc Curriculum Task Force. The Committee’s charge was framed in Principle I of the Richmond Promise: “the University will have an academic enterprise that will be connected, innovative, rigorous and personal” and “seek[s] to ensure that our students appreciate different modes of inquiry, engage in lifelong learning, and communicate effectively both orally and in writing.” In addition, Principle I highlighted the importance of helping students develop “skills in critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, intercultural effectiveness and ethical decision-making. With respect to the general education curriculum specifically, Principle I.1.(vi) indicated that it should be revised “to include attention to our local and international contexts” and Principle I.1.(vii) stated that UR
should “create greater opportunities for community engagement linked to academic coursework.”

In May of 2009, the UR faculty approved the first piece of a revised general education curriculum by establishing a requirement that all students complete two first-year seminars, all designed to adhere to a set of common goals. This change came about in part because of the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on Writing Instruction that produced a report and recommendations in the spring of 2007 that was built upon in 2009. It should be noted that the change from the Core course sequence to the First Year Seminars passed by a narrow margin, and that this was just one piece of the general education curriculum.

The 2009 General Education Revision Committee began their work by reading and discussing sections of Derek Bok’s *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006) along with consulting a variety of other materials, including *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002) and Paul L. Gaston and Jerry G. Gaff’s *Revising General Education–and Avoid the Potholes* (2009). They also reviewed the TFUGE Report of 26 September 2005, as well as the history of general education at UR. In addition to this research, the Committee consulted with a number of different individuals and groups, held nine open hearings, a series of meetings with student government groups in Richmond and Westhampton College and the School of Leadership Studies, and a series of meetings with faculties in Arts and Sciences, Leadership Studies, Business and Law. As a result of this process, the Committee made a report to the faculty and presented three different models for general education curriculum, one of which was to keep the General Education Curriculum that was in place as of the fall of 2010. After a vote on the proposal, the existing model was chosen and the general education curriculum that was largely adopted in 1992 remained in place.

In sum, two major efforts at curriculum reform have been attempted in the last 15 years. Neither has been successful at ushering in any major change. The changes that have passed in the last 15 years have been incremental (versus revolutionary), namely replacement of the COM1 (Communication Skills - Expository Writing) requirement and Core sequence with First Year Seminars, and adoption of UR Aware.

Since the time of TFUGE, the institution has undergone a significant change in personnel. Some have no memory of TFUGE. Those who do remember it do so with a surprising degree of bitterness and are still jaded about the process. Though the process was long and thoughtful, the perception of the faculty is that it was quick and not transparent or inclusive enough. In hindsight, numerous concerns have been raised, including how the task force was constituted, how the subcommittees worked, and how individual votes and school votes impacted the decision. These concerns and the perceptions of the faculty about the fairness and transparency of the process must be addressed in any future attempts at curriculum reform, along with increased education and engagement of the faculty in principles of general education pedagogies.

In departmental conversations, it was TFUGE that was largely the focus of discussion, and not the 2009 attempt. There was no strong recollection of the work of the 2009 General Education Revision Committee or the proposed changes. It is clear that for faculty relatively new to the university, there is no institutional memory of these failures at curriculum reform.
Part 4: Conclusions

During the past few years, the University faculty have organized a series of important initiatives to increase clarity in shared governance policies and practices. The Process Committee worked with attention to this new governance framework and were guided throughout their deliberations by the principle, stated in the charter of the Faculty Senate, that primary responsibility for determining curriculum and methods of instruction at UR has been delegated to the faculty. We encourage the General Education Review Committee to draw upon the procedural practices outlined above in order to ensure transparency and effective faculty governance as they move forward with their work.

The Faculty Senate voted to appoint the next committee before the Process Committee was done with our work. Nonetheless, we were able to provide to the Senate with interim information, which included the following items: (1) a verbal report at the March 23rd Faculty Senate meeting, (2) a suggested charge for a General Education Review Committee (submitted April 4, Appendix B), and (3) a document (submitted April 4) with suggestions for a mechanism of creating a nominating process to assemble a diverse and enthusiastic committee with a broad range of skills, philosophies, commitments, and perspectives as outlined in Appendix C. Our intention was that, as a whole, the cohort of committee members will have the skill set and broad institutional viewpoints needed for careful and impartial review of our current general education curriculum.

At the time that the Process Committee provided the Faculty Senate with the documents described in the paragraph above, they also relayed concern about how an accelerated timeline for choosing the committee during the last few weeks of the semester might potentially affect outcomes of the Review Committee’s work next year. Members of the Process Committee were especially concerned with the perception that the selection of the next committee was being “rushed through.” In addition, the Faculty Senate has chosen to employ traditional, relatively conservative methods for selecting the members of the review committee, thereby by-passing the Process Committee’s suggestions for developing a more robust recruitment strategy (Appendix C). In accelerating the timeline for population of the Review Committee, the University may already have fallen into at least one of the “potholes” (“Plan for a short-term project”) identified by Gaston and Gaff (2009, p. 11), and they may inadvertently have set UR on the road to the kind of adversarial approach to general education review and reform described by Trainor (2004). Indeed, the members of the Process Committee found it challenging to avoid some of the potholes in our own work and discussions, and we were also constrained by an artificially short timeline. Moving forward, we strongly urge our colleagues to proceed more slowly, with greater deliberation, and in accord with the best procedural practices outlined in this report. After all, “piloting a curricular proposal” in such a way as to avoid the potholes, as Gaston and Gaff conclude, “is an art; it involves some luck, but one’s skill can—and should—discernibly improve” (2009, p. 30).

As we hand off the critical task of ensuring that all our undergraduate students have access to a general education curriculum that “prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world”, we hope that future general education committees will build on the work we began to ensure that all efforts have the best chance of success by
incorporating best practices in process. The processes should keep at the forefront the idea that a
general education curriculum should be one that offers “the kind of education that [our UR]
students will need for their futures” (Gaston and Gaff, 2009, p. 10). In the end “How successfully
we resolve the remaining and yet to emerge cultural challenges that threaten our movement [as
an intellectual community] toward a more collaborative culture ... may depend upon how well we heed ... [a] call for a transformative view of faculty work—from an individualistic approach
(‘my work’) to a more collaborative approach (‘our work’)” (Gano-Phillips and Barnett, 2008, p. 41).

Part 5: References Cited


Appendix A: Strategies for Successful General Education Review and Revision Most Relevant to the UR culture

Although the Process Committee found merit in almost all of the recommendations in the work by Gaston and Gaff, the following represent those from Gaston and Gaff, and others, that are most relevant to the particular institutional culture of UR. Indeed, Gaston and Gaff’s Pothole Patch #2 is “Make clear that general education must embody the character and capacities of the institution” (2009, p. 31). Thus, general education review and revision efforts should be considered in the framework of the values that UR espouses (student growth, pursuit of knowledge, inclusivity and equity, diversity and educational opportunities, ethical engagement, and responsible stewardship).

1. Strategies for change in curriculum review should first identify what problems (if any) need fixing.
2. The possibility of curriculum reform should not dictate the process of curriculum review.
3. Appoint committee within defined governance channels (e.g. faculty committee, not administrative committee).
4. Convene a dedicated committee (as opposed to using a standing committee) via a nomination/application process, with the goal being creation of a cohort of enthusiastic individuals that as a whole bring a complete skill set and a range of institutional viewpoints needed for success. These committees might need to be larger than the standing faculty advisory committees to ensure the broad inclusivity described here and in Appendix C.
5. Educate faculty as a whole (not just committee members) about barriers to curricular reform.
6. Have university wide discussions about the value of general education and current state of pedagogical research in this area.
7. Start the general education review and revision process with a faculty energized and enthusiastic about this work.
8. Provide the necessary resources (both time and money) for committees to do thorough work.
9. Involve all stakeholders, including students, early and often to ensure transparency.
10. Understand that thorough and deliberate curricular review and revision will require a multi-year endeavor.
11. Keep at the center of the conversation the needs of all students and also the faculty at large, who create an expansive space for intellectual inquiry in a broad range of important areas.
12. Employ ideas from research that show what educational paradigms engage students and enhance their learning in general education proposals.
13. Respectfully engage those who have opposition to general education revision.
14. Acknowledge the legitimate concerns of those who will be most impacted by general education revision (e.g. smaller departments).
15. Consider the pros and cons of incremental versus revolutionary change.
16. Do not assume that a negative vote on a new curriculum is final, only that more revision of a proposal might be needed.
Appendix B: Draft of the Charge to the General Education Review Committee prepared by Process Committee for the University Faculty Senate

Charge to the General Education Review Committee

April 4, 2018

The Charge. The mission statement of the University of Richmond’s new strategic plan envisions a Richmond education that “prepares students for lives of purpose, thoughtful inquiry, and responsible leadership in a diverse world.” This requires that we “ensure that our curriculum provides students with the best possible preparation for lifelong learning, success in their chosen profession, and meaningful contributions to addressing the world’s problems.” With a new strategic plan just underway, we have an opportunity to consider what type of general education curriculum (GEC) can best support a distinctive Richmond education in the years ahead.

This committee will review our general education curriculum (GEC) and make recommendations on whether our current GEC is best suited to fulfill Richmond’s mission in light of the University’s strengths. The committee will produce a report of its findings by the end of spring semester 2019.

The Questions. The committee should address the questions below:

5. What are the fundamental skills, abilities, and perspectives that every student should develop during the course of a Richmond education?
6. Does the current GEC serve the objectives of a Richmond education, as articulated in the current UR mission statement and in the outcomes of question 1?
7. How do students and alumni understand the strengths and challenges of the current GEC?
8. Do the procedures for administrating and assessing our GEC support these objectives (e.g. the process for evaluating and using AP and transfer credit for GEC courses)?
9. Among the GEC models discussed in the literature, which models might best serve our mission and support the outcomes of question 1 above? What are examples of the most effective curricula using similar models at other schools?

The Process. The Committee will pursue a process informed by the General Education Curriculum Review Process Committee that will issue its report in the spring of 2018. The Committee will consult with relevant constituencies during its review, including the university faculty, relevant university staff, current students, and alumni. The Committee will maintain transparency throughout the process.

The Product. The Committee will prepare a report of their findings, with respect to the questions outlined in this charge. The report should recommend to the faculty that either (a) no change in the GEC is warranted or (b) change in the GEC is warranted. If a change is warranted, the committee will forward to the faculty senate a charge for a new committee that will work to generate possible revisions/reform of the GEC. This committee will build on the best practices outlined in the General Education Curriculum Review Process Committee’s report in the spring of 2018 and the report from the committee charged here. Any future faculty vote on the GEC will be conducted in accordance with the rules of the University Faculty Senate Charter (IIIB 1 and 4), which requires a full faculty vote.
Appendix C: Draft of a Nomination Process for General Education Curriculum Review Committee prepared by Process Committee for the University Faculty Senate

Nomination Process for General Education Curriculum Review Committee

The committee will be constituted by the University Faculty Senate Committee on Committees (COC). The goal is to use a nomination process to assemble a diverse and enthusiastic committee with a broad range of skills, philosophies, commitments, and perspectives on our University as outlined below. Although each individual will not meet all the criteria listed below, as a whole the cohort of committee members will have the skill set and broad institutional viewpoints needed for careful and impartial review of our current GEC.

In order to ensure a successful review, the Review Committee should:

- have proportional representation among the schools;

- include representatives from all tenure/tenure-stream ranks: professors, associate professors, and assistant professors;

- include representatives from librarians and instructional directors;

- include student representatives for work that requires student perspective;

- include faculty with experience in consensus building in groups of diverse views and across various units of the university;

- include faculty with knowledge of general education curricula (here and elsewhere) and of the philosophical foundations of general education in today’s higher education;

- include faculty who can address the distinctive perspectives of small and large departments, with at least one representative from the School of Arts and Sciences from a small department;

- include faculty with demonstrated experience working on issues related to inclusion and equity in higher education

- include both faculty who teach regularly within the GEC and those who do not;

- represent the interests of faculty who are appointed both within and outside the perceived proprietary stakeholder departments of the current GEC: arts, languages, natural sciences, and departments closely aligned with the fields-of-study;

- include faculty representing not only schools and departments, but also cross-school and interdisciplinary programs;

- divide the leadership of the committee between co-chairs, at least one of whom would come from the School of Arts and Science;
Appendix C – continued

- include some faculty who are willing and able to attend the upcoming AACU 2018 Institute on General Education and Assessment at the University of Utah (June 5–8, https://www.aacu.org/summerinstitutes/igea/2018

Obtaining potential committee member names: The COC will issue a call for written nominations in which prospective members/nominees provide a short narrative in which they reflect on their strengths and expertise in the relevant areas listed in above. The COC will then assemble a balanced cohort from these nominations.

Compensation for summer work: Faculty will be appropriately compensated for work done over the summer (faculty senate will need to work with Provost on the compensation).