

DRAFT

Recommendations with Regard to Assessment of the Courses that Fulfill the Social Science GER Requirement and Courses that Simultaneously Fulfill the Social Science GER and the Diversity GER

Faculty Senate Document #1382

The Social Science GER requirement is a distributional requirement that is currently met by taking courses from among the offerings of six schools and colleges (The School of Education, The Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, The College of Nursing, The School of Health Sciences, The School of Architecture and Urban Planning and the College of Letters & Science).

Faculty Senate Document #1382 requires students to take six credits of social science GER courses in at least two courses. The document defines social science as “a branch of science dealing with study of human behavior and the organization, development, and consequences of human activity.” Courses seeking approval to fulfill the social science GER requirement according to that document “should reflect one or more of the following intellectual foci as its primary instructional purpose:

- a) The study of intrapersonal, interpersonal and/or socio-cultural factors associated with individual behavior, collective action, or societal development.
- b) The study of human collectivities, organizations, institutions, and cultures, their infrastructures and interrelationships.
- c) The study of capacities for and/or techniques of creating behavior acquisition and change.
- d) The study of methodologies designed for conducting inquiry into human behavior, collective action, societies, or cultures.
- e) Exploration of the alternative theoretical frameworks which have been used to offer meaningful explanation of social phenomena.”

The Intent of Faculty Document #1382 and Assessment

The intent of the five criteria for courses carrying social science GER credit listed above was to insure that UWM, as an institution, *exposed* students to selected aspects of social science that were thought to constitute the minimal knowledge that should characterize an educated person. There was no thought of attempting to assess the degree to which faculty were successful in *communicating* that knowledge or students were successful in *learning* it. Because exposure was the goal rather than actual learning, the course criteria

do not readily lend themselves to assessment. The first task, then, is to transform these criteria into measurable outcomes. The result of just such an exercise appears below:

**Proposal for
Assessment of Measurable Learning Outcomes as the
Result of Fulfilling the Social Science GER Requirement**

Having taken six credits in at least two courses in fulfillment of the social science GER requirements, students should be able to complete two of the six tasks listed under a1, a2, b1, b2, c1, c2 **and** d1 and e1 successfully:

- a. 1. Describe the reflexive social process by which the self/personality emerges in the context of social, cultural or geophysical factors.
- a. 2. Describe the role of culture in shaping individual and collective behavior.

- b. 1. Define and describe the operation of a social group, a formal organization and a social institution.

- b. 2. Describe the relationship between humans' material conditions and their social structure and culture.

- c. 1. Describe the process of socialization over the life-course.
- c. 2. Choose an example of social change and provide a social science explanation of it.

- d. 1. Presented with a research question amenable to social scientific inquiry, describe a research methodology appropriate for answering the question posed.

- e. 1. Explain a social phenomenon using at least two different theoretical frameworks from the social sciences.

**Discussion of Implications of Changing the Focus from Exposure (Course Content)
to Learning Objectives and Outcomes**

Faculty Senate Document #1382 requires that social science GER courses expose students to at least one of five “intellectual foci.” The focus of efforts here is shifted from exposure to course content to measurable learning outcomes. Moreover, a shift is recommended from the goal of having students exposed at best to at least two intellectual foci of social science to their being able to demonstrate that they have learned some of the basic concepts of social science as well as some of the theoretical underpinnings **and** methodological strategies of social science. One consequence of this shift is that the criteria for vetting courses have to change. It is recommended that all courses carrying

social science GER credit now have at least two learning objectives, one from a1, a2, b1, b2, c1, c2 **and** d1 and e1.

A Plan for Assessment of the Social Science GER Courses

Given the large number of courses currently approved to carry social science GER credit, a plan which incrementally reviews course content and learning objectives as part of the mandated cycle of program reviews makes good sense. In addition, assessment of student learning in each course approved to carry social science GER credit should become part of the state-mandated course evaluation that is conducted at the end of each semester. Finally, evidence needs to be collected that documents that the assessment done as part of the course evaluation has actually led to changes in instruction, i.e., there needs to be evidence of feedback mechanisms.

In practice, this would mean that GER courses would be reviewed as part of the undergraduate program review. During the review, GER course syllabi would be reviewed to determine whether or not learning objectives and assessment methods are clearly and specifically stated and aligned to GER criteria and whether this effort is made clear to students. Instructors would be then be advised to write learning objectives that follow the format described above (one from a1, a2, b1, b2, c1, c2 **and** d1 and e1) and indicate which activities will be used to assess which specific aspects of students' learning.

Initially all GER courses should be reviewed within the next five years: about half would be covered in the ten-year undergraduate program review cycle and the remaining courses could be reviewed on the five-year anniversaries of the last program review. Subsequent reviews would then occur as part of the routinely scheduled undergraduate program reviews.

Assessment of student learning

The course review will provide an assessment of the learning “input” of courses that carry social science GER credit. In addition instructors should be able to document the use of direct measures of specific aspects of student learning. The wide number of courses used to meet the social science GER requirement makes evaluation of the overall efficacy of the Social Science GER Requirement difficult, but the combined use of several assessment strategies should facilitate this goal.

1. Tracking of student assignments

At the time of the course review, instructors will be asked to indicate specific assignments that align with the student-learning objectives. Instructors should track pooled student performance in those assignments to assess the outcomes. This data would be used at the time of the ten-year GER course review.

2. Course surveys

Student evaluations are conducted at the end of each course. GER course evaluations should include some questions that ascertain whether or not students realized they were in a course that met the social science GER requirements and questions designed to reveal how well students felt the course met the GER objectives. At a minimum, these questions could be: (1) Did you take this course in order to fulfill your social science GER requirement? (2) What were the social science GER course objectives in this course? and (3) How well did this course meet the social science GER course objectives?

Feedback

Historically, once courses were approved for GER credit, there were little tracking of how well the courses actually met the GER objectives. This would change if the GER courses were re-evaluated at the time of the program reviews. Instructors will need to track student performance on the assignments that they identify as appropriate for tracking GER learning objectives. An additional step is necessary, however, instructors should be able to demonstrate how assessments of student learning affected how the course was structured and student learning assessed in subsequent iterations. Although in some cases the assessments may indicate that little change is needed, some assessments will indicate otherwise. Instructors should track the changes and their impact in such cases.

Summary of Proposed Changes

The changes proposed above would change the GER courses from an exposure-based approach to a learning-objective program. This will require faculty, teaching academic staff, and teaching assistants to rethink the role of GER courses. It may also change our students' perception of the intention of the requirements. However, this shift will require a reconsideration of Faculty Senate Document #1382 and the APCC procedures.

The criteria presented in section V.5.d of Faculty Senate Document #1382 indicate the course content that reflects an "exposure" approach to GER. The criteria for the learning objectives of GER need to be derived from the criteria for course approval as they were in this document. Otherwise, assessment is impossible.

Courses that Fulfill that Social Sciences GER Requirement as well as the GER Diversity Requirement

Faculty Document #1382 also includes a distribution requirement in "minority cultural diversity in America." It states that "[t]his area pertains to the study of life experiences either of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, American Indians, or Asian Americans." A course approved to fulfill the GER requirement in minority cultural diversity "will simultaneously satisfy the GER requirement in the approved distribution area." Thus a student completes the requirement by taking at least one three-credit course

in “an approved distribution area” that also fulfills the GER requirement in minority cultural diversity in America. Again, the criteria for satisfying this requirement have as their primary goals *exposing* students to material about these racial/ethnic groups. These criteria are as follows:

- “a) have primary focus on African Americans, Hispanic Americans, American Indians, or Asians Americans;
- b) introduce student to significant elements that ground the life histories and life prospects of one or more of the groups listed above;
- c) scrutinize perspectives, world views, methodologies, and philosophic constructs which the group(s) use(s) to describe, explain and evaluate its/their life experiences over historical time;
- d) enhance and extend the student’s ability to conceive and perceive transcultural similarities and dissimilarities, and make sound empirical as well as normative generalizations.”

Reframed in terms of measurable learning objectives and measurable outcomes, but continuing to assume that this requirement will be fulfilled by taking at least one three-credit course in one of the “approved distribution areas,” a course approved to fulfill the GER requirement in minority cultural diversity in America would ensure that students could do **all** of the following:

- a) be able to describe the socio-economic status of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, American Indian or Asian Americans relative to Anglo-Americans and link it to the everyday lived experience of various members of these groups;
- b) be able to describe the world-view of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, American Indians, or Asian Americans, their methodologies for constructing these world-views and their philosophical underpinnings and relate them to the life experiences of these groups over time;
- c) be able to compare, contrast and appreciate the cultures of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, American Indians or Asian Americans.

Assessment of Student Learning

The assessment of the learning in GER that fulfill the requirement in minority cultural diversity in American would parallel in every way the assessment of learning in courses that fulfill the social science requirement.

A Note of the Minority Cultural Diversity in American Distribution Requirement

The goal in this attempt to transform the original criteria in Faculty Document #1382 into learning objectives and measurable outcomes was to remain as faithful as possible to the original criteria. The area of racial and ethnic diversity has evolved quickly in the twenty years since this faculty document was conceived, however. During that time, different language has emerged to describe and analyze racial/ethnic experience and a concerted effort has been made to explore the unique experiences of persons who are uniquely situated with regard to race/ethnicity and other social statuses, such as gender, sexuality, physical ability, age, etc., an effort that avoids universalizing theories of group experience. The current criteria do not recognize such change. As a result, in addition to a reexamination of Faculty Document #1382 in light of the transformation required to move beyond a rubric of *exposure* to one responsive to a culture of assessment, it is clear that the way in which the GER Minority Cultural Diversity in America Requirement is conceptualized, including its very language and exclusiveness should be examined by a group of faculty with expertise in this area.