

### III. Criterion Three: Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

**1. Credentials of instructors.** *Discuss issues pertaining to the academic credentials of instructors in the General Education program.*

**Threat III-1:** Since its inception, the new Gen Ed program has seen a decrease in the percentage of course sections taught by tenure-track faculty members, and an increase in the percentage of course sections taught by part-time lecturers and graduate assistants. As shown in Appendix III?, The percentage of sections taught by faculty members has decreased from 41% in Fall 2008 to 35% in 2011 to 26% in Fall 2014. Meanwhile, the percentage of sections taught by part-time lecturers has increased over the same period from 35% in 2008 to 38.8% in 2011 to 45% in 2014. Furthermore, the percentage of sections taught by graduate students has ballooned from 2% in 2008 to 5.9% in 2011 to 11% in 2014. The percentage of sections taught by full-time lecturers has remained relatively stable, going from 17% in 2008 to 15% in 2011 to 17% in 2014. Part-time lecturers and graduate students together therefore now account for over half (56%) of all Gen Ed course sections while faculty members account for only about a quarter of all sections.

There is nothing inherently wrong with part-time lecturers teaching Gen Ed sections; many of our part-time lecturers are gifted instructors who do a fine job in their classes. However, because of the part-time nature of their positions, these instructors are typically not well integrated into the culture of the department in which they teach. Therefore, they are less likely to comprehend how their class fits within the Gen Ed program, and may not even be aware of the overall structure of the Gen Ed program as a whole. As a result, these part-time lecturers may not be aware of the specific student learning outcomes that must be met by a course to qualify it for Gen Ed credit. As such, students may not be receiving the “general education” promised by a course, regardless of how well the course is taught in general. Some department heads/school directors may educate their part timers regarding Gen Ed requirements, but it is not currently known whether this is done consistently across all departments/schools, or if it is merely sporadic.

The teaching of Gen Ed classes by graduate students is more troubling. Again, some of these graduate students may be capable instructors, but they are likely to have far less experience overall than part-time lecturers, and suffer from the same possible disadvantages as the part timers with regard to understanding of the Gen Ed program. Moreover, for a university that markets itself as valuing education, and that claims it does not use graduate students as lead instructors in courses, the fact that over 10% of all Gen Ed course sections are currently taught by graduate students is problematic.

This is perceived as a threat to the Gen Ed program because program quality may suffer due to the teaching of more than half of the classes by instructors who are not sufficiently familiar with Gen Ed and its requirements. It is not known exactly why there has been this increase in the use of part timers and graduate students, but it is likely that departments/schools do not have a sufficient number of tenure-track faculty members to staff an increasing number of Gen Ed course sections as well as courses in the major programs.

**2. General Education and Major Programs.** *Describe the role of General Education in degree programs.*

A substantial proportion of courses in the Gen Ed program also serve as courses within a major program. Of the 210 Gen Ed courses offered in Fall 2014 (excluding courses in the Writing Intensive and Learning Beyond the Classroom categories), 139 were part of a major program, and 90 of those were part of more than one major program (see Appendix III?).

**Strength III-1:** Having such a substantial proportion of Gen Ed courses also serve as part of major programs allows students to proceed through their major curriculum and complete their general education requirements more efficiently.

**3. Resources, Academic Advising, and Community Engagement Opportunities.** *Describe how the General Education program guides students in effective use of resources and provides academic advising, community engagement opportunities, and overall educational opportunities.*

**Strength III-2:** Students can receive Gen Ed advising from the Francine Parker Advising Center. This is a major improvement over the early days of the current Gen Ed program, at which time there was no formal mechanism for advising students in Gen Ed. Students could receive advising from University Advising, but Gen Ed advising was often done on an ad hoc basis by departmental advisors.

**Strength III-3:** Community engagement is integrated into the Gen Ed program. Students are directed to community service, citizenship, and leadership opportunities, which comprise a required element of the Learning Beyond the Classroom portion of the Gen Ed program.

**Opportunity III-1:** Development of a mechanism or strategy to inform and educate part-time lecturers as to the nature and specifics of the general education program (especially the student learning outcomes for each type of course) could reduce section-to-section variability in how well outcomes are met, and make the program much more effective and robust.

**Threat III-2:** Despite the existence of some excellent resources for students, such as the Holman Success Center and the University Writing Center, they are insufficient to ameliorate the challenges faced by the many underprepared students admitted to EMU every year. Very often, the deficiencies exhibited by these students are blamed on the Gen Ed program. For example, criticism of students' writing abilities appeared numerous times in the "Open Comments" section of the Gen Ed survey given to instructors. "The

writing component seems to do nothing to prepare my students for college-level writing” and “It is not effectively providing students with the writing skills they need to perform well in upper level courses” reflect the opinion that the writing-intensive courses do not sufficiently develop writing skills in the students. However, the writing abilities of many students are sufficiently poor upon entry to EMU that WRTG 121 and one writing-intensive class cannot fix the problem. Requiring more writing-intensive classes might improve the situation, but would add additional credits to the Gen Ed program, which would likely not be politically acceptable. The same case could be made for mathematical skills. Student writing needs to be addressed outside of the Gen Ed program with remedial classes, so that students are prepared to take full advantage of the benefit from their writing intensive classes.

**4. Student Scholarly and Creative Activity.** *How are undergraduate research and creative endeavors supported by the program?*

**Strength III-4:** The Gen Ed program helps to promote student research and creative activities. These activities are a required element of the Learning Beyond the Classroom component of the Gen Ed program.

**5. Interdisciplinary Collaboration.** *How are interdisciplinary courses supported by the program?*

It can be challenging to discern, from all of the general education courses listed, which are interdisciplinary. Obvious interdisciplinary courses are those that are cross-listed with multiple prefixes. There are seven such courses within the Gen Ed curriculum; they are listed in Appendix III? Beyond these courses, however, there appear to be no other interdisciplinary courses.

**Weakness III-1:** No specific mechanism exists to promote interdisciplinary course offerings within the Gen Ed program. This may be due in part to the disciplinary structure of the Gen Ed system; for example, dividing the “Knowledge of the Disciplines” portion of the program into discipline-specific areas (Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities) works against interdisciplinarity rather than promoting it. Alternatively, or additionally, the issue may be more endemic to the university as a whole, in which there has always been an inertia regarding the development of interdisciplinary courses and/or programs. The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

Despite there being no overt support for interdisciplinary Gen Ed courses, a number of interdisciplinary courses have been developed, as described above.

**Opportunity III-2:** The development of interdisciplinary course offerings should be promoted. This would require identifying the barriers to interdisciplinary courses at EMU, and developing a mechanism to overcome those barriers.

## 6. Curriculum. Assess the Gen Ed program curriculum.

EMU's General Education program is in line with the analogous programs at regional peer institutions. A table of other regional institutions and their general education requirements is presented in Appendix III-?. As can be seen in the table, our general education program requires that approximately 13 courses be taken to complete the requirements. This compares to a range of 7 to 14 courses at other institutions. All programs require at least one course in written composition and courses in the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Most of the other institutions require a course in quantitative reasoning and at least one course in global awareness. Some universities have additional requirements, such as additional writing courses, courses in interdisciplinary studies, knowledge application, wellness, and the principles of thinking. Several universities include a computer literacy class, typically as an option.

**Strength III-4:** EMU's General Education program is strongly aligned with the requirements of the Michigan Transfer Agreement (see the Table in Appendix III-?). This facilitates the transfer of general education credits completed elsewhere, making it easier for students to transfer to EMU and have their completed coursework count.

**Strength III-5:** The program offers a robust selection of courses, giving students plenty of choice to satisfy their general education requirements. The number of different courses offered in the General Education program was 211 in Fall semester 2008, 241 in Fall semester 2011, and 234 in Fall semester 2014 (see Appendix III-A). Moreover, there were 886 sections of Gen Ed courses offered in Fall 2008, 1154 sections in Fall 2011, and 1126 sections offered in Fall 2014, indicating that students have numerous opportunities to find course sections that fit their schedules. The Gen Ed survey given to EMU instructional staff (faculty members, full-time lecturers, and Part-time lecturers) supports this assessment of programmatic offerings; in the "Open comments" section on the survey, 32% of respondents commented that the selection of courses was a strength of the program. This was the second most-frequently cited strength of the program. Moreover, in the 2013 EMU Graduating Senior Survey, 94% of seniors said that they were satisfied with the variety of general education courses.

There is a minority opinion among the faculty members who responded to the survey that the program is too broad, and therefore the education that students receive is too diffuse and lacking in depth to be of any value. However, the purpose of the Gen Ed program is to introduce students to a variety of disciplines, give them a set of basic skills, and offer them different perspectives and experiences in preparation for life beyond the university, and the available data indicate that the program is successful in offering those opportunities. There was never intended to be any depth on the program; depth comes in a student's chosen major.

The diversity of courses offered as part of the Gen Ed program is underscored by the fact that Gen Ed courses are offered by departments and schools in every college in the university. This belies a belief among some faculty members (and echoed in some comments in the faculty survey) that the Gen Ed program is simply a "credit hour grab" by the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). Certainly, CAS offers the majority of course

sections in the Gen Ed program; this is understandable based on the nature of the college. However, other colleges offer an increasing number of Gen Ed sections. Non-CAS sections comprised 12.9% of total section offerings in 2008, which increased to 13.9% in 2011 and to 14.5% in 2014.

**Weakness III-2:** EMU’s General education program lacks a course in computer literacy. At the time that the new Gen Ed program was devised, it was felt that such a course was unnecessary, because many students today are very comfortable with computers. However, there is a growing technological divide between those with computer skills and computer access and those without. Because EMU has such a diverse student population, the technological divide also exists on campus. Students have access to computers on campus, but if they do not possess basic computer skills, that access is meaningless. Not having a computer literacy course only serves to exacerbate the technological divide.

**Threat III-3:** Many faculty members continue to have misconceptions about Gen Ed. Ideas such as “there are too many Gen Ed courses” and “Gen Ed is just a credit hour grab by the College of Arts and Sciences” are pervasive (as indicated by their frequency in the open comments section of the instructors survey) which causes some faculty members to be dismissive of the program. As outlined above, these beliefs are not supported by the data. This is largely a public relations issue; by making the EMU community more aware of the strengths and benefits of the Gen Ed program, such misconceptions may be overcome.

**Opportunity III-3:** An effort needs to be made to dispel persistent misconceptions about the Gen Ed program. Dissemination of this Gen Ed Review would be a start to that process, but an effort should be made to identify other ways to inform the university community of the benefits of general education. Enhancing campus-wide support for the program would make the program more effective and successful.

## **7. Implications and Recommendations**

For example, consider building a process for assessing the efficacy of the Gen Ed outcomes—how can Gen Ed improve?

**Recommendation:** To ensure consistency in general education course offerings, a formal mechanism should be developed for educating part-time lecturers who teach general education courses about the philosophical and practical considerations of the Gen Ed program.

**Recommendation:** Infrastructure should be put in place that supports the development of interdisciplinary course offerings in the Gen Ed program.

**Recommendation:** Implement a strategy to do a better job educating the EMU community (including faculty, full-time and part-time lecturers, staff, and students) about the benefits of the Gen Ed program.

**Recommendation:** Add a computer literacy course to the General Education program. Not everyone will need this course, so there should be some mechanism for testing out of the requirement.