May 31, 2013

Professor Michael Todd, Chair, Undergraduate Council

SUBJECT: Response to the Warren College General Education Review, Spring 2013

Dear Professor Todd,

The Warren College faculty executive committee and I thank the members of the review committee for their considerate and thorough review of the Warren College general-education program. We are grateful that the committee saw much merit in our approach to undergraduate education. Warren College's motto is Toward a Life in Balance, and we recognize that balance must periodically be evaluated, and if needed, recalibrated for it to retain vitality. We are actively engaged in discussions on how to continue to refine our pedagogical approach, and will touch upon some of these below.

General-Education Requirements

We consider student input when we examine our general-education requirements; a ten-member Provost's Student Advisory Council provides cogent insight into students' perspectives on general education. The addition of a second course in Ethics and Society (Phil 28/Poli 28), which we created five years ago, originated with the students on that committee. As the review committee noted, we are currently engaged in exploring another student-generated proposal, the creation of a cross-disciplinary research methods course. Both AVC Paul Yu and Professor Eric Bakovic, who learned of this proposal as a member of the review team, have volunteered to participate in early planning of such a course.

Warren Writing and Ethics and Society: The committee was correct to point out that greater collaboration would be beneficial between Warren Writing and the philosophy and political science faculty who teach our two Ethics and Society courses (in fall 2013, there will be four philosophy and one political science faculty members in the teaching cohort for those two courses). We agree that "students expect there to be continuity between them"; students have told us as much. It is important to point out that the writing requirement is a two-course sequence; while it must be taken before the two Ethics and Society courses, there is no formal connection between the two sets, in part because they were created at different times to fulfill different needs, and in part because the ethics courses are overseen and regulated not by Warren College, but by the two home departments.

We concur that we should address student expectations in this regard and create stronger bridges between the two requirements. While Warren College has no oversight or control of the ethics courses, which are housed in and supported by Philosophy and Political Science, we are hopeful that the arrival of Dr. Andrew Lamey, a newly-hired LPSOE in philosophy who will teach several sections of both ethics courses, and Dr. Karen Gocsik, who will join Warren as an LPSOE in the fall as director of the writing program, will produce fruitful collaboration. One idea that has recently been raised in dialogue between the ethics and writing faculty is to reorder the courses, offering Warren Writing10A before the two ethics courses, and 10B later in their

educational program, perhaps as an upper-division course. This would allow students the chance to develop stronger research and critical thinking skills.

Another idea that the executive committee, writing faculty, and advising unit is discussing is the creation of an optional advanced certificate in writing and communication skills. This could be reflected in a co-curricular record/transcript, which is currently under discussion in the Education Initiative committee. Such a designation would certify that the student has achieved a higher level of writing and communication skills as demonstrated in upper-division, writing-intensive courses beyond Warren Writing and ethics courses, as well as in an advanced composition course.

Programs of Concentration and Area Studies: We appreciate the committee's endorsement of the fundamental notion that drives these general-education program foundational components. Our challenge is to balance the goal of breadth (to expose our students to broader perspectives beyond their disciplinary arena) with the goal of timely progress to degree. The committee notes that it is making recommendations that are "somewhat contradictory." The use of a single course to fulfill the campus diversity requirement and count as a GE requirement is not of our choosing—the Senate has determined that the diversity requirement can be fulfilled by any course from the approved list, whether or not it is taken for GE or major requirements—and we endorse this approach. In response to the committee's concern about "double-dipping" between the formal skills requirement (calculus, logic, statistics, or programming) and the Programs of Concentration, we would like to explain that our current approach results from a conscious decision on the part of the Warren College faculty several years ago. We had determined that we were requiring additional courses of those students who did not fulfill this requirement via their major, as all science and engineering students and some social science and humanities majors do. Returning to the older method—wherein students could not fulfill this requirement within their Program of Concentration—favors some students over others and also could lengthen time to degree.

In discussions about adding courses to the Area Studies breadth requirement for B.S. engineering students, we have encountered differing opinions from faculty (and almost uniform resistance from students, as might be expected). Many engineering professors have opined that their students would be well served by exposure to more social science and humanities courses, but the current campus zeitgeist regarding time to degree trumps any inclinations to move in this direction. We agree with the committee that the "balance between professional training and liberal arts education is of course an issue for wider campus discussion," and we look forward to participating in those conversations as the campus embarks on an examination of time to degree and the balance between GE and major requirements.

Flexibility in the GE requirements is a desideratum, admittedly, but we believe that it is a question of the sort of flexibility we seek. We endorse the model by which students explore courses broadly beyond their disciplinary area, and to that end we agree that we can and should render the terrain more navigable and hospitable for our students. We believe that an overhaul of the numerous options for fulfilling the requirements is in order, as they have grown, as these things do, into a thicket of possibilities over the years. We always encourage and advise students to think creatively and intentionally about their general-education choices, and will continue to work with them to craft the most rewarding experience possible.

Advising

We are heartened by the committee's response to our advising unit's efforts. In turn, our academic advisors collaborate with our student affairs staff on initiatives like student-to-student mentoring programs, which the committee cited as a laudable goal. We agree that the GE requirements can be initially confusing (although, as mentioned in the committee report, students do quickly learn the lay of the land and support the principles that drive their general education), and as noted above, we concur that we must take additional steps to create a more fluid pathway for students. The students who met with the committee were further into their studies than newly-arrived students, and thus understandably not aware that we have already developed student-hosted instructional videos on our general-education requirements. We will continue to develop and hone additional materials to aid students.

Conclusion

We offer many thanks to the committee for their strong support of the collaborative efforts of Warren College's administration, staff, and faculty. We look forward to more conversations with the Senate as we continue our refining our general-education program.

Sincerely,

Steven Adler
Provost, Earl Warren College
Professor of Theatre