

FHSU General Education Committee

Minutes

Meeting Called by

Glen McNeil, Chair

Date:

Thursday September 29, 2022

Time:

3:30-4:30

Location:

Rarick 107

Members

Douglas Drabkin (AHSS)
Marcella Marez (AHSS)
Christina Glenn (BE)
David Schmidt (BE)
Sarah Broman Miller (Ed)
Sohyun Yang (Ed)
Denise Orth (HBS)
Tanya Smith (HBS)
C.D. Clark (STM)
Todd Moore (STM)
Robyn Hartman (Lib)
Justin Greenleaf (Senate)
Emma Day (SGA)
Cheryl Duffy (Goss Engl)

3:31 All members were present with the exception of Greenleaf, Miller, and Yang. Schmidt served as proxy for Miller.

3:32 (1 minute) The minutes from the September 15 meeting were approved.

3:33 (1 minute) Chair announced that consideration of **ART 280: Approaches to Creativity** to satisfy the **2.1A outcomes (aesthetic mode of inquiry)** has been postponed to next week. The department is making adjustments to the syllabus, to the rubric, and to the assignment descriptions.

3:34 (18 minutes) The committee considered a proposal from **ECON 202: Principles of Macroeconomics** to satisfy the **2.1F outcomes (social scientific mode of inquiry)**. It was decided to **table** the proposal and ask that the department (1) explain which assessment is supposed to go with which outcome, and (2) help us understand how the assessment tools are supposed to be assessing the outcomes -- specifically, how identifying explanatory frameworks is being assessed in the outcome 1 assessment, how evaluating social science research "with respect to factors such as sample size, study design, and validity" is being assessed in the outcome 2 assessment, and how the comparison of human behavior across cultures using social science concepts is being assessed in the outcome 3 assessment.

3:52 (19 minutes) Clark gave us a sketch update on the work of the six-person **KBOR-CORE alignment** working group. His notes from their first meeting is given below in **Appendix A**. He also informed the committee that the working group has received a document from the Department of Philosophy setting out

reasoning in support of requiring a course in ***Critical Thinking*** in the new General Education Program. This argument, along with objections and replies, is ***Appendix B***.

4:11 The meeting ended. Our next meeting is scheduled for next Thursday October 6 in Rarick 107.

Submitted by **D. Drabkin, Recording Secretary**



Appendix A (notes from the KBOR-CORE working group's first meeting):

This was the first meeting of the Group of 6. The discussion during the first half of the meeting was mainly about understanding requirements, goals, and concerns. Some items that were identified during the discussion:

1. The distinction between general education program and assessment. The CORE outcomes sets were intended to provide a set of *common* outcomes for assessing general education classes.
2. Some outcome sets have been a challenge to get courses approved for.
3. We do not have time rewrite the outcomes. But, we may recommend that the outcomes be rewritten/modified/merged etc. This work will have to happen later.
4. There are courses listed on the KBOR system wide transfer list that will be required to count for a general education requirement if they are transferred into FHSU, even if we do not count them here. For example, Anatomy and Physiology is on the transfer list and would count for the Natural and Physical Sciences Discipline Area if transferred to FHSU, even though it is not currently in CORE. The same is true for Statistics.
5. Courses that are not explicitly required by the general education program can still be required by individual departments/programs.
6. Some goals for the CORE restructuring include:
 - a. Making the approval process easier. Classes that are clearly appropriate for a given area and demonstrate a plan for assessment should be easy to approve.
 - b. Assessment should not be burdensome on the faculty tasked with doing it.
7. Dr. Carl Miller sent an email to the committee with an argument for requiring critical thinking of all students (See Attachment). A similar case could be made for several of the CORE outcomes sets and we would not be surprised to hear from more departments.

We then started discussing concrete ideas for recommendations. We started from the top of the list of KBOR Discipline Areas and worked our way down. A lot of discussion on Teams had already happened this week, so we flushed out some ideas that were discussed there.

English Discipline Area:

There is really no choice on courses, Comp I and II are required to count here. The question is what to do about assessment. We felt like the first part of the CORE outcome set 1.1-A Written Communication was a natural fit for Comp II. The recommendation would be to list Outcomes 1.1-A a – h for the English Discipline Area and begin assessing them in Comp II.

Communication Discipline Area

This area is pretty straight forward. Fundamentals of Oral Communication is required here, and the Oral Communication Outcome Set – 1.1-B was written for the class. The recommendation would be to list Outcomes 1.1-B for the Communication Discipline Area and begin assessing them in COMM 100.

Math and Statistics Discipline Area

There are two outcomes sets in CORE that apply to math, and these could be used to assess the Math and Statistics Discipline Area. However, statistics is not currently included in the list of CORE approved courses. The reason is that, while it is appropriate for the Mathematical Mode of Inquiry outcome set, the Math department did not feel comfortable with it being appropriate for the Quantitative Literacy outcome set (1.2). And since Math was careful to make sure all of their proposed courses satisfied both Quantitative Literacy and Mathematical Mode of Inquiry, Statistics was excluded from the list.

The recommendation would be to merge the Quantitative Literacy and Mathematical Mode of Inquiry outcome sets in a way that Statistics could be included and use them to assess the Math and Statistics Discipline Area.

We plan to meet next week and begin discussion of the Natural and Physical Sciences Discipline Area.

[Submitted by C.D. Clark]

Appendix B:

THE CASE FOR REQUIRING A CRITICAL THINKING COURSE IN THE NEW GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

Critical thinking is the activity of identifying, analyzing, evaluating, and formulating various types of *arguments* – reasons given in support of claims. As the CORE program defines it (outcome 1.5.2), it is a matter of understanding "when an argument is being made, what its conclusion is, what the logical relation between premises and conclusion is purported to be, whether the premises are plausible, and whether the conclusion is established." This involves understanding that there are very different sorts of evidence that can be brought to bear in reasoning (conceptual claims, empirical claims, and evaluative claims), and very different forms that arguments can take (deductive proofs, generalizations from a sample, arguments by analogy, arguments to the best explanation, and so on).

WHY SHOULD A COURSE IN CRITICAL THINKING BE REQUIRED AT FHSU?

Critical thinking so understood is foundational to nearly all academic work: writing essays, conducting experiments and studies, evaluating claims, weighing evidence, defending one's own positions, and deciding what ideas are worth believing. For example, writing a persuasive essay involves giving reasons and evidence in support of a thesis and responding to the strongest objections. But, as much experience teaching critical thinking abundantly confirms, entering students conspicuously lack these skills. So it is appropriate for critical thinking—logic broadly conceived—to be taught formally and deliberately in a college course. This is even more appropriate considering the responsibility of higher education to prepare students for the workplace. Given that most graduates change their careers multiple times over the course of their lives, and considering that many of our current students will one day work in fields and jobs that do not yet exist, it makes sense to train students in the reasoning skills required for them to flourish regardless of the career they turn to. No subject taught at the university is more valuable, no skill set more transferable.

Objection 1 – *These skills are just common sense.*

Someone might argue that critical thinking is just common sense. Like learning to talk, comfort someone, or read social situations, students learn how to think and evaluate ideas as they mature and experience life. They do not require any special training in how to think. Consequently, there is no need to require students to take a special course in critical thinking.

Reply to objection 1

Being able to reason well is no more a matter of common sense than learning to write well or learning to deliver a speech. It requires skillful coaching and practice. Unfortunately, our students *do not* come to college possessing critical thinking skills. They are generally poor at spotting the conclusion of even short and unadorned arguments, and they have difficulty telling the difference between reasoning and people just stating their views with clarity and earnestness. Just consider a short list of skills necessary for good reasoning, most of which our students do not possess, even at a rudimentary level: recognizing when an argument is present and when it is not, identifying what is a part of an argument and what is not, distinguishing different types of claims and identifying the kind of inquiry needed to determine their truth, recognizing various types of deductive and inductive arguments, understanding how to evaluate and raise reasonable objections to these various types of arguments, recognizing some of the more notorious forms of fallacious reasoning, and constructing arguments in support of one's own position. Sober reflection on our experience as professors reveals that this is not "common sense" at FHSU.

Objection 2 – *The needed skills will be picked up elsewhere.*

Some have suggested, recognizing that critical thinking deserves the highest priority at a university, that it may be handled by retaining, as a special university graduation requirement, outcome 1.5.3 ("produce a written document on a difficult question involving the disciplinary content of the student's major that subjects the student's reasoning to sustained, intelligent criticism according to the standards of that discipline" – this is the third outcome in the "upper-division writing and critical thinking" package). The idea here is that, yes, critical thinking skills may be important and may even be essential to academic and professional success, but we do not need to require a critical thinking course in the general education curriculum, since students will naturally absorb these skills in their other general education courses and in their majors, and we can assess this in their senior writing projects.

Reply to objection 2

The critical thinking instruction students receive in their other FHSU classes is no doubt valuable, when it occurs, but it is nowhere near sufficient. Students are simply not being taught the full-range of critical thinking skills in their other courses. At most, instructors teach only the parts relevant to the task at hand, not systematically, and not with anything like the completeness of a proper overview. If we genuinely want our students to reason well, as we all say we do, then we need to equip them with the skills necessary to do so. And since they are not acquiring these skills prior to college or in their other college courses, we need to do this in a dedicated course. If we do this well, then other courses—composition courses and courses in the student major—can build on these skills and refine them. If we cut this from the list of general education requirements, then we are just pretending to prepare students for "upper-division critical thinking." We would never choose to do this with a skill set like written composition. Although most of our courses do involve writing, and we all try to help our students become better writers, we require students to take two dedicated composition classes, where they spend a whole year writing essays and receiving feedback and coaching from instructors specifically trained in composition. Those skills can then be further developed as students complete writing assignments in their other classes. We need to do something similar for critical thinking, where a single dedicated class can devote an entire semester to teaching students the broad range of skills needed to analyze and evaluate arguments, and provide opportunities for them to practice those skills at length.

Objection 3 – *Other outcome sets are just as important.*

We have been tasked with selecting from seven "homeless" CORE program outcome sets -- computing literacy (1.3), information literacy (1.4), critical thinking (1.5), dimensions of wellness (3.1A), financial health (3.1B), intercultural competence (3.2), and engaged global citizens (3.3) -- just two for inclusion in the six-hour "Institutionally Designated Area" of the KBOR Systemwide General Education Program. Which two should this be? Someone might argue that this is a matter of setting priorities. And while critical thinking is important, it is no more important than these other competing objectives. If it is no higher priority than the other objectives, then the case for requiring a critical thinking course is weak.

Reply to objection 3

This is indeed a matter of setting priorities. The other objectives on this list are no doubt important. We want our students to take care of their mental and physical health, and to spend their money wisely and save for retirement. We want them to be able to engage constructively with all kinds of people, to use computer programs effectively, to have access to the information they need when they need it to do the work they need to do, and so on. But here's the thing: not all of these require a dedicated course to happen. Information about commonly used computer applications is readily available online, and students have considerable training prior to college. Information literacy is best achieved in the student's major program, as was the plan in the pre-KBOR-systemwide CORE program. All major programs can, and should, still be required to teach students how to access the information they need to do their work. As for wellness education, it must be admitted that students come to college with quite a lot of it already. FHSU can supplement this by encouraging extracurricular wellness training. Basic budgeting and cause-and-effect reasoning about money is something that comes naturally, if painfully, with growing up. Our students vary considerably regarding what they already know and what they need to know about thinking through their financial options. FHSU can supplement what they already know with basic financial advising and financial health coaching by expanding services available through the Fischli-Wills Center for Student Success. As for intercultural competence and engaged global citizens, these are worthy aspirations, but they do not depend on a body of knowledge that requires a standalone course, which is the point at issue. We should do what we can to achieve them through extracurricular activities, curricular changes in major programs, international travel opportunities, internships, and elective course offerings. But their value and inclusion in our university's mission statement is not a sufficient reason for prioritizing courses dedicated to these objectives over a foundational course like critical thinking.

Objection 4 – *Students should get to choose for themselves.*

Someone might argue that all seven "homeless" objectives are important, and that in an ideal program, we would require courses addressing them all. But in a situation where this is impossible, why not provide a short list of options and let the students choose which objectives seem most important to them? Students are the best judges of what they need, and autonomy is a value worth promoting, so rather than setting priorities for the students, we should let the students set their own priorities.

Reply to objection 4:

There is obviously much to be said for giving students flexibility in designing their courses of study. Not every student needs the same things, and interests vary. However, with foundational courses such as writing, critical thinking, math, or communications, we recognize the need to be prescriptive, whether or not students recognize the value of these courses, and often *because* they do not recognize their value. This is even more true with respect to critical thinking, because, unlike other basic courses, such as math or composition, which students take in high school and middle school, most students have never taken a course in critical thinking prior to college. Consequently, most students would not know what it is they were turning down or appreciate its value. Many would not even realize that they lack the skills it teaches. In short, they would not be competent to make this decision. For their own good, and for the sake of their academic and professional success, we owe it to them to require that they take a course meeting this outcome set.