

“Don’t Take My Comp II Away”: A Mostly Objective Examination of How a New Core Curriculum Could Impact First-Year Writing Courses

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Abstract: Although the release of a tentative structure for the new University System of Georgia general education curriculum has caused a notable stir among the ranks of the faculty, especially those involved in teaching current core classes in English, the move to evaluate and possibly redesign the core is part of a national trend in higher education. Based on what has already been done in other states, this paper explores why this change is being considered and how a new core, if implemented, might impact the structure of first-year writing programs.

KEYWORDS: general education, core curriculum, first-year writing, college composition, University System of Georgia, writing across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines.

By now, the University System of Georgia’s plan to redesign the general education curriculum, particularly the “core curriculum,” is little more than an unpleasant memory that many of its faculty members have stashed away in the semi-conscious portions of their professional minds. Certainly, the announcement from the USG in the spring of 2020 that these plans had been pushed back at least a year has contributed to this “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” mentality, not to mention the disruption of the current pandemic to higher education in general. Because of the significant contribution English faculty make to teaching courses in the current core, most of us hope that, in the long run, reason and logic will prevail, and we will see little change to the USG general education model, or at least that part of it related to the core English courses.

However, it is wise to be prepared. If the USG does, in fact, pick up with the core redesign in the next year or so, and follows through with it, what can English faculty expect? This paper is not intended to predict a doomsday scenario, or to suggest that we let pessimism take over as we helplessly wait for system administrators to decide our fate, but faculty members can and should strategize to effectively articulate their position with regards to core classes and to react in a way that will best serve their student and faculty populations if, or when, they are faced with a “new core.”

In February of 2020, Dr. Tristan Denley, Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, made an online presentation explaining this new core [see Figure 1]. In May of 2019, the Chancellor announced the need for a redesign of the general education curriculum to meet the demands “of a new century” (University System of Georgia 2020); a design committee came up with some general guidelines for the implementation committee; and a draft of the proposed new model was shared throughout the USG in early 2020 with the idea of having it in place for the fall of 2021. In the current model of the core curriculum [see Figure 2], English plays an important role: faculty in that discipline are responsible for a total of nine credits, six in the writing portion of the communication skills area of the core and three in the literature requirement of the arts and humanities portion (also known as Area C). The new curriculum, as shown in the proposed redesign [Figure 3], reduces the English-specific writing requirement to just one three-credit course. Presumably, the arts and humanities requirement could include another English class, but it would be an elective—one that students select from a long list of other options.

The other writing requirement is now included in the field courses, currently known as “area F” of the general education curriculum. As “written communication in the field,” Dr. Denley has suggested that this would be a class to “help students write well in the genre of their discipline.” Based on other institutional practices, this could either be a writing-specific course within a given major—for example, “Writing for Education Majors”—or an existing course within a major that adds a writing component to make it more writing intensive—for example, “Communicating Mathematics.” In both cases, however, it is unclear who would be responsible for these kinds of courses—would it be English faculty or would it be the faculty within the given field?

Other areas of the redesigned general education curriculum where English might contribute include the “institutional options” and the “exploratory courses.” Based on the unique access mission of Middle Georgia State in the USG, for example, that institution could make a case for an additional writing course as one of these institutional options. Whether this class would be a requirement for all students, or simply another kind of elective in a broader category is another unknown at this point in time, but English faculty at an institution like Middle Georgia State would be wise to make an argument that students would greatly benefit from an additional three credits

of writing instruction, perhaps something along the lines of “researched-based writing.” In the area of exploratory courses, English would be competing with almost every other course in the institutional curriculum; however, this could be an opportunity to showcase popular English courses like creative writing and special topics in literature, as well as a chance to entice students with relevant offerings in tracks like professional and technical writing. What IT or Aviation major, for example, wouldn’t benefit from a course that enhances their ability to better communicate in a professional setting?

In spite of these potential contributions, faculty must face the reality of what a core redesign could mean: the fields of English and/or rhetoric and composition could go from providing nine credits’ worth of courses that every university student must take, to just three credits. This is a sobering thought if we consider what this change could mean to faculty lines, tenure-track as well as non-tenure track. Traditionally, English has been one of the largest and strongest departments on campuses across the USG, in part because of the discipline’s service to the university system in terms of the core. We can hope for the best, but we must be prepared for something less than the best.

To help English faculty better prepare, they must understand the precedents for general education redesign. This effort to streamline the traditional liberal arts core, to give it more flexibility, to make it more applicable for twenty-first century learners, is nothing new. In fact, it is part of a national trend in higher education [Figure 4]. In 2018, for example, the University of Notre Dame announced updates to its core curriculum based on a “ways of knowing” framework (McMurtrie 2018). In the 2012-2013 academic year, the University of Idaho implemented a redesigned general education program that emphasized “soft skills” like critical thinking, collaboration, communication in multiple formats, appreciation of diversity, and intellectual adaptability (University of Idaho 2020). A few years ago, Washington State University rolled out a new version of their general education curriculum called UCORE that includes “foundational courses and inquiry-based learning...complemented by a diversity requirement” (Washington State University n.d.). As far back as the early 2000s, Stetson University in Florida began an in-depth study of their core curriculum that resulted in an updated model organized around “primary areas” like knowledge of human culture and the natural world, intellectual and practical skills, and personal

and social responsibility (O'Neill 2018, 97). If anything, Georgia is a relative latecomer to this gen-ed makeover party.

Although all of these restructurings of general education are patterned after, to some extent, the Liberal Education and America's Promise (or LEAP) initiative, their use of English courses, specifically writing courses, to meet their goals varies. For instance, the University of Idaho still includes the traditional model of two required writing courses, English 101 and 102, in the communications area of their core (University of Idaho 2020). At the other extreme is Stetson University, who after a careful assessment-based comparison of their traditional English 101 class to a new multidisciplinary first-year seminar, concluded that the latter had a more positive impact on student writing than English composition. Therefore, they removed English as a writing requirement from their core curriculum entirely (O'Neill 2018)! The University System of Georgia, with its proposed core, has taken a more moderate approach, following in the footsteps of institutions like Washington State University that acknowledge the necessity of at least one required English writing course for all students and additional writing requirements embedded elsewhere throughout students' academic undergraduate careers (Washington State University n.d.).

Let me briefly share my experience with this last model at Washington State University, my alma mater, to illustrate some of my concerns. The writing program underwent an extensive overhaul in the early 1990s under the direction of some of the leading scholars at the time in the field of rhetoric and composition. Their goal was to integrate a Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing in the Disciplines approach with the institution's general education layout to address a state board of education mandate that all students demonstrate writing competency by graduation. This aim was an admirable one; the idea of WAC or WID, as these programs are generally called, has been around for a long time (at least as early as the 1970s) and has consistently been shown to enhance student writing wherever it has been implemented. See, for example, Johnson and King (2018). But the devil is in the details. WAC and WID programs have always met stiff faculty resistance, with some claiming that it is not their job to teach writing, and others arguing that faculty members outside of English or rhetoric and composition aren't qualified to teach it. Unfortunately, WAC or WID has too often been seen as a replacement for first-year English classes instead of as a

supplement to them. Again, the research here has long maintained that the more writing instruction students receive and the more writing they do, especially metacognitive writing, the better chance they have of graduating with a degree in higher education (National Council of Teachers of English 2012; Hansen 2012; Johnson and King 2018).

In an apparent effort to meet state board requirements and to “sell” WAC to the faculty and administration, the rhetoric and composition specialists at Washington State University reduced the first-year composition requirement to one course and added a junior-year writing portfolio checkpoint that included timed writing exams to identify any students that might need writing remediation before graduating (Washington State University 2020) [see Figure 5]. The writing program’s assertion that they have received numerous awards and recognition over the years for this model notwithstanding (Washington State University 2020), my fellow graduate students and I had mixed perceptions of its success. We were under intense pressure from outside stakeholders, program administrators, and ourselves to make the one-semester composition course into a sort of “be-all-end-all” first-year writing experience for students. As a result, courses were often ill-designed, ill-managed, and frequently overwhelming for both instructors and students. Those of us who further participated in the program as remediation tutors or as portfolio and exam readers were dismayed by the lack of writing competency displayed by many of the students, even after they had completed the English 101 course and a writing-intensive course within their major field of study. In short, my experience with a general education curriculum that includes only one required English writing course has made me cautious about similar approaches. Although the evidence in this case is anecdotal, there is a substantial body of research that indicates that more, not less, writing instruction is needed to help our students progress towards their degrees. Removing or replacing English courses in that writing equation seems like a move in the wrong direction.

That being said, here are some suggestions for writing-instruction faculty related to how we can best respond to the proposed core curriculum change for the USG:

1. Stay positive and continue to provide excellent writing instruction to our students.

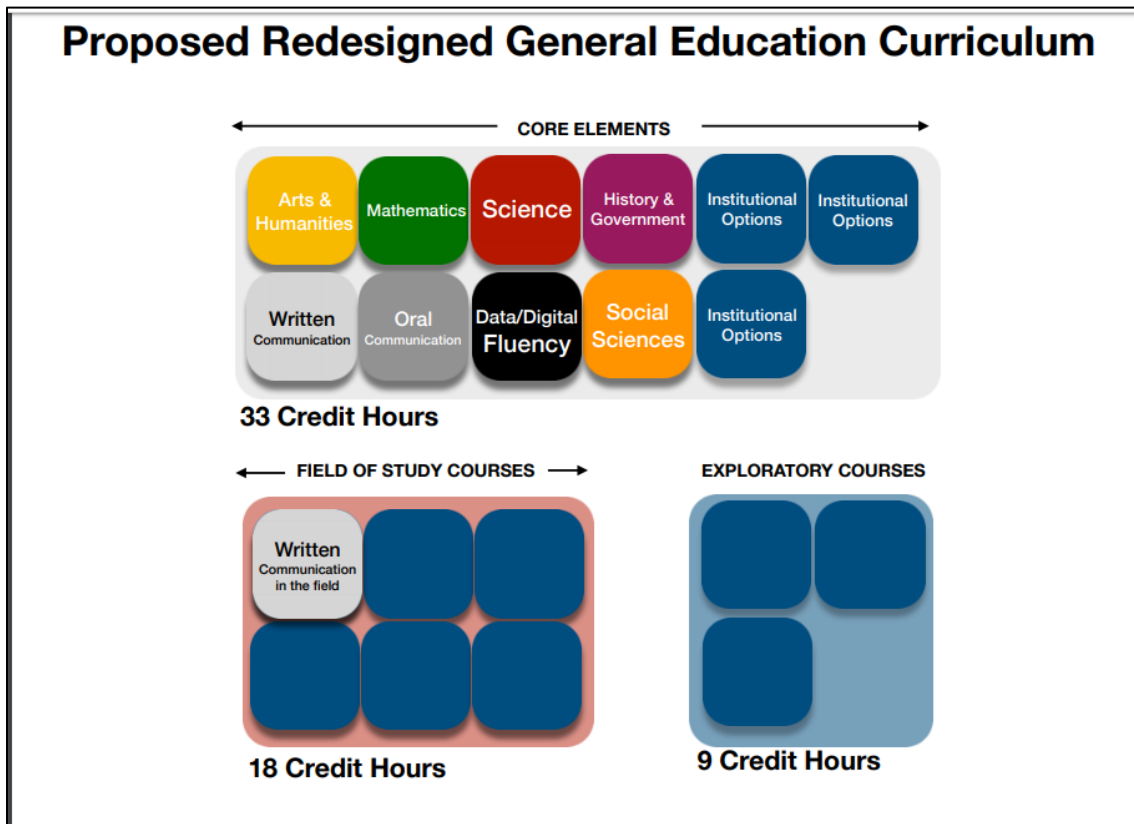
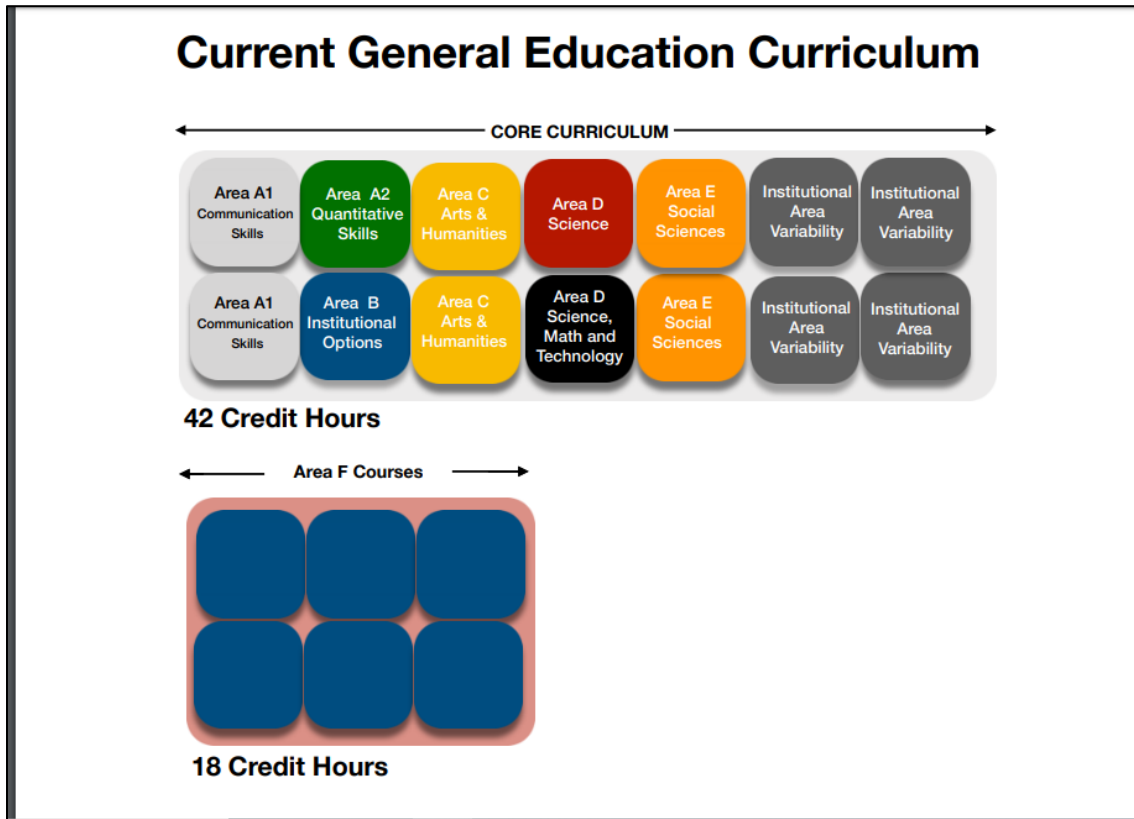
2. Search for ways to improve how we teach first-year writing and be prepared to adapt; curriculum changes of this sort can have far-reaching effects, including on course design.

3. If the new curriculum is implemented at some future date, consider how to advocate for an additional required writing course as one of our institutional options. It may not be 1102, but our students will thank us in the long run for spending a second semester with them on their writing!

2019	
May	Chancellor announced redesign
June	Chancellor's Charge; Design Committee began work
September	Board Approved Design Principles
November	Implementation Committee Established
Winter	General Education Implementation Meetings
2020	
February	Draft Curriculum outline released for review
April	General Education Curriculum submitted for Board Approval
	Institutional review and approval processes
2021	
Fall	Target for Redesigned General Education Curriculum

Figure 1: Timeline of General Education Redesign for USG (University System of Georgia 2020).

Figures 2-3: Current Core and Proposed Core for USG (University System of Georgia 2020).



- University of Notre Dame (2018): **“ways of knowing”**
- University of Idaho (2012-13): **“soft skills”**
 - critical thinking, collaboration, communication in multiple formats, appreciation of diversity, and intellectual adaptability
- Washington State University: **“foundational courses”**
 - “inquiry- based learning . . . complemented by a diversity requirement”
- Stetson University (early 2000s): **“primary areas”**
 - knowledge of human culture and the natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility

Figure 4: Core Redesign and National Trends

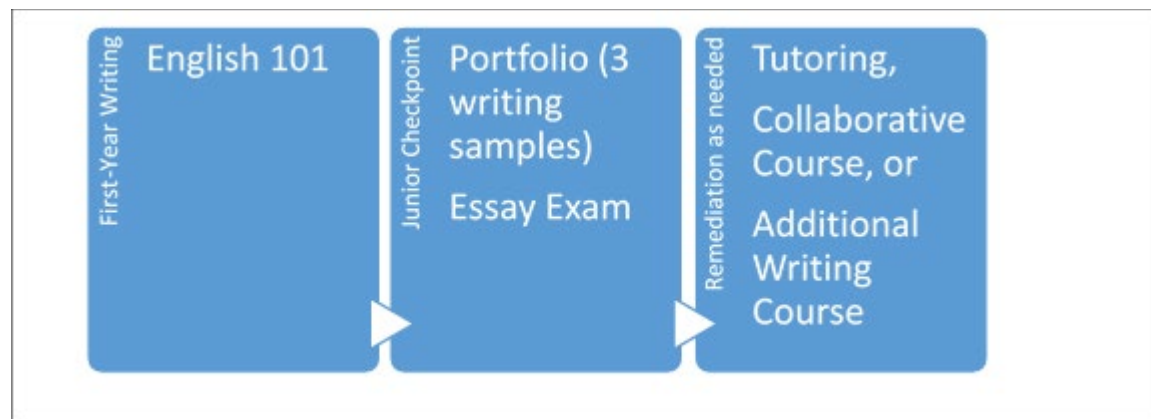


Figure 5: WSU Writing Program Overview

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