April 20, 2006

MEMORANDUM

To: MSU Academic Council

From: Ralph Putnam
Chair, University Committee on Academic Policy

RE: Commentary on the Final Report of the Working Group for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education

University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP) discussed the Final Report of the Working Group for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education at several of our meetings. We have commentary in three areas:

1. Goals for Liberal Learning

UCAP supports the importance of establishing a set of broad goals for liberal learning that can provide a vision of what the MSU community wants an undergraduate liberal education to be and what we hope graduates of MSU will be like. UCAP developed the following set of goals for liberal learning at MSU, adapted from the Task Force Report. We intend to propose to ECAC, and ultimately Academic Council, the adoption of these goals. It is important to note that the intent of these goals is to provide a common vision of liberal education at MSU, not specific standards on which students can be assessed. (The development of more specific standards is important, and should take these broad goals as a starting point.)

MSU Goals for Liberal Learning

An MSU liberal education should result in the MSU graduate having the potential to be an outstanding leader—perceiving and developing opportunities, actively fostering and guiding change, and applying skills and knowledge to understand and articulate complex issues of work, community, and public life. To that end, it is important that the MSU community establish goals to clarify this vision of the ideal MSU graduate and guide programmatic, curricular, and instructional decisions at all levels of the university as we work together to strengthen liberal education at MSU. We hold the following goals for liberal education at MSU:

Integrated Judgment

The MSU Graduate will effectively synthesize specialized discipline-based knowledge with a broad-based liberal arts education, understand the importance of life-long learning, and make decisions that reflect humane, social, ethical, and aesthetic sensibilities developed through coherent curricular and co-curricular activities.
Analytical Thinking

The MSU graduate will be a critical user of knowledge, having the ability to analyze complex information critically, use multiple modes of inquiry (i.e., scientific, artistic, literary, and information methodologies), and use current technologies to access information.

Communication Skills

The MSU graduate will be a competent writer and speaker, able to write and speak effectively in a variety of situations and to a variety of audiences, able to write and speak with authority within a professional area, and able to write and speak effectively and persuasively as a citizen in the public arena.

Literacy in Science and Mathematics

The MSU graduate will be able to formulate, evaluate, and communicate conclusions and inferences from quantitative information, employing analytical arguments and reasoning built upon fundamental concepts and skills of science, mathematics, statistics, and computing.

Effective Citizenship

The MSU graduate will have a sense of responsibility for a dynamic, democratic society that offers broad opportunities and requires the ability to function in an interdependent world.

Cultural Competence

The MSU graduate will have explored global, cultural, social, and intellectual diversity and will value the experiential and intellectual diversity of the academic community.

2. Further study

The Working Group recommended undertaking study of the current state of writing and quantitative literacy education through means such as Quality Fund investment. UCAP, supports these efforts, approving the following statement at its March 30, 2006, meeting:

UCAP strongly endorses undertaking appropriate study to inform an outcome-driven approach to the implementation of the Quantitative Literacy and Writing recommendations in the Report of the Working Group for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education

3. Council or Group for Liberal Learning

UCAP supports the Working Group’s vision of

the establishment and support of a group of faculty, academic specialists, and students who will, in effect, constitute a community of learners with an interest in advancing the goals for liberal learning at MSU. The primary intention is to establish and maintain a campus wide dialog focused on advancing the goals of liberal learning among University, College, and Disciplinary academic requirements.

The Committee felt, however, that the form, functions, and membership of such a group requires further discussion to achieve the goal of support for liberal learning efforts while avoiding unnecessary administrative structure and oversight.
April 17, 2006

To: Members of the Academic Council

From: Michael G. Schechter, Chairperson
       University Committee on Curriculum (UCC)

Subject: UCC Commentary on the Final Report of the Working Group to Improve Undergraduate Education (WGIUE)

At the request of the Executive Committee of Academic Council (ECAC), the Full Committee of the UCC reviewed the WGIUE and then discussed issues related to it. This report summarizes the major points of that discussion.

Those participating in the discussion seemed supportive of the various elements of the report. They embraced the notion that the University needed an ongoing, proactive mechanism to develop and implement innovative curricular ideas, such as those endorsed in the WGIUE, which will improve liberal learning on the MSU campus. There seemed to be support for the notion of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies taking a leadership role in this endeavor, assisted by the sort of “executive group” outlined in the Final Report. They also thought it would probably be a mistake for UCC Sub D (its Policy Subcommittee) to be charged with working with the Dean and the “executive group” in this regard, as it isn’t sufficiently representative and already has a different set of tasks. And while members recognized that it might seem ironic to call for the establishment of a University Council for Liberal Learning, with a membership similar to the UCC, at a time when the Voice Committee is calling for streamlining academic governance, members saw some good reasons for doing so. These include the fact that the UCC already has a pretty full plate; given its role in both undergraduate and graduate education and that it would seem suboptimal to have the same body charged with developing innovative ideas and then approving or disapproving those ideas after they have taken shape. Moreover, some expressed concern that compounding UCC tasks might discourage faculty from agreeing to serve on the UCC. On the other hand, getting candidates to run for both the UCC and the new University Council for Liberal Learning, especially from small colleges, might be a problem. It was suggested that perhaps some of the members of the Council for Liberal Learning might also be College representatives of the UCC. That would also have the added advantage of providing the Council with the sort of curricular insights that are garnered from service on the UCC.

Members expressed their hope and expectation that when the WGUIE’s recommendations are put into practice, that considerable attention will be devoted to the ways to ensure that MSU’s undergraduates have a firm understanding of the globe’s evolving environmental and ecological challenges. In a similar vein, it was hoped that there would be specific attention to improving ways to hone undergraduate students’ research skills, i.e. giving them knowledge of how to conduct library research along with statistical, computer and mathematical skills and laboratory experience.
April 18, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Jon Sticklen, Chairperson
       Executive Committee of Academic Council

FROM: Jeremy Hernandez, UCSA Chairperson

SUBJECT: Final Report of the Working Group for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education

At the request of the Executive Committee of Academic Council, the University Committee on Student Affairs (UCSA) reviewed the final report of the Working Group for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education (WGIUE) at its April 2006 meeting. Based on the information that was provided, the UCSA does not endorse this report due to a number of concerns that are listed below (in no particular order):

There is concern about the exact meaning of the stated goal of “effective citizenship” and ambiguity around certain terms such as “responsibilities and opportunities associated with citizenship in a democratic society”. Different groups may have different interpretations of what these terms actually mean. For example, some members of UCSA openly wondered why the learning of economics is not mandated in this proposal as knowing how public funds are raised and used could be interpreted as being very important in becoming an effective citizen. Having a more precise definition of these terms is paramount to the legitimacy of this initiative.

UCSA is concerned about the report’s stated goal of the MSU graduate being a competent speaker. The report offers very little description of how the goal would be successfully accomplished. The information that is provided seems to imply an underlying assumption that if a student can write about a topic then they can also talk about it. UCSA is skeptical of such an assumption without proof of such a relationship.

While the WGIUE authors may have intended something else, it is our interpretation that the report would require that both the Tier I and Tier II writing courses cover basic writing skills equally. UCSA believes that basic writing skills should be emphasized/taught primarily in Tier I courses. Such an expectation for Tier II courses is potentially problematic given the expected focus on discipline-specific subject matter. As one UCSA member stated, “the notion of how to formulate an argument should not have to be taught in Tier II”. Those instructing Tier II courses are subject matter experts and are not likely to want (or even be able) to teach basic writing skills to a student.

UCSA members also expressed concern about centralizing the ISP course requirement, as there seems to be no exemption plan for those students in the science disciplines. UCSA believes that certain academic departments would consider this required ISP course to be inadequate for program needs and could add even more required credits for a student to graduate as a result.
There is continuing concern about the establishment of an electronic portfolio system. UCSA is skeptical as to the stated benefits of having such an online resource. Would students or faculty even use such a resource? Would a portfolio of work during the freshman and sophomore years be relevant to the student or disciplinary faculty in the long term? How would this portfolio system protect student privacy?

UCSA members questioned whether mandating quantitative literacy requirements across all majors made sense (e.g. foreign language majors). The concern here was that departments that rarely use quantitative measures may resort to unproductive/wasteful teaching activities to meet the requirement.

Lastly, it is the opinion of the UCSA that the report itself is poorly written. Although the UCSA does not intend to disrespect any of those who contributed their valuable time and energies in the creation of the proposal by this statement, we are deeply troubled by the notion of approving a proposal that calls for the improvement of writing skills that is perceiving poorly written.

If you have any questions or concerns about these comments please feel free to contact me.