

Grand Challenge Initiative

ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR FALL 2010

UCGE Subcommittee on Assessment of General Educationⁱ

Introduction

The University's Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI) began the planning phase in the fall of 2009. From the outset it was recognized that innovative first-year seminars with an interdisciplinary perspective and a focus on global challenges would be a part of the general education program and should be evaluated accordingly. The University College and General Education Subcommittee on Assessment of General Education (SAGE) determined that GCI offered a promising context for assessing learning outcomes that are associated with the objectives of our general education program, and the committee focused on GCI assessment for its own work in late fall, 2009. Since the inception of the GCI, SAGE members recognized that pooling together a cadre of faculty with a special interest in teaching first-year general education courses was a potential resource and microcosm for broader assessment of general education learning outcomes. To that end, Sage members enthusiastically contributed to workshops provided to Grand Challenge Fellows in the spring of 2010, as they developed their courses and facilitated linkages with their paired Writing (WRT) and Communication Studies (COM) faculty and courses. One of three spring workshops was devoted to identifying learning objectives for the courses, with presentations by staff from the Office of Student Learning Outcome Assessment and Accreditation (SLOAA) and the SAGE chair, followed by faculty work sessions facilitated with help from SAGE members. Emphasized categories of objectives included (1) general education cognitive outcomes specified in the Catalog for application to each of four knowledge domains (fine arts and literature, letters, natural sciences, and social sciences); (2) general education skill outcomes for eight designated skills to be integrated into general education courses; (3) GCI-specific outcomes dealing with interdisciplinarity, engagement with global challenges, and engagement with the University's academic community; and (4) course-specific objectives. An additional workshop was held during the summer of 2010 to support continuing course development and particularly the use of rubrics for grading course assignments.

Methods

Planning for the fall 2010 implementation of the seminars, SAGE identified several sources of data that offered promise for shedding light on the GCI and, in particular, its impact on general education learning outcomes. These sources are listed and described in Table 1. For the purposes of this report we will focus on three sources of data: the original faculty proposals submitted in spring 2010, the Faculty Focus Groups convened in November, 2010, and the Student Survey conducted with IDEA

course evaluations at the end of the fall 2010 semester. SAGE intends to make use of the course assignment sample in a future report, but serious limitations of that data source call for a renewed effort to obtain a sample of student work from the fall 2011 cohort of Grand Challenge teams.

Table 1. SAGE Assessment Methods

Assessment method	Source	Focus	Description
Application form and syllabus	Instructors of GCI courses	Objectives chosen Means for achieving them	Proposals submitted April 1, 2010
Final syllabi and written plan for integration with WRT/COM course	Instructors of GCI courses	Role of paired course in achieving objectives	Required to be submitted in September, 2010 following summer collaboration
Faculty focus groups convened in late fall 2010	Instructors of GCI courses and paired WRT and COM courses – notes taken by SLOAA, Task Force, and SAGE members	Qualitative feedback on issues in implementing GCI courses	Seven groups facilitated to discuss (1) teaching first-year students; (2) the interdisciplinary aspects of the courses; and (3) success in achieving learning objectives. Convened on Nov 22 and Nov 30, 2010
Student survey	Students in all sections of GCI courses	Student views on overall value, engagement with instructor and peers, learning about global challenges and interdisciplinary problem-solving, and contributions of paired-course approach	10-item scannable questionnaire to be distributed with IDEA at the end of the fall 2010 semester, completed by 319 students from 20 of 28 sections
Sample of student work on course assignments	Instructors provide materials including actual student work sample	Types of assignments used to assess learning outcomes; performance of students on actual course objectives; potential for applying general education outcome rubrics	Cover sheet indicating learning objectives, description of assignment, rubric if used, perception of overall class performance, and actual student responses to assignment – to be submitted by Jan 21, 2011

Course Core Knowledge Areas and Outcome Objectives

We provide a general description of the 28 courses included in the fall 2010 GCI cohort (not the paired Writing and Communication Studies courses) in Table 2. The table indicates the general education categories represented by these courses. The most frequent core knowledge areas for which the courses sought approval were the Social Sciences, with 12 approved courses, followed by Letters, with 9 approved courses. Courses in Fine Arts and Literature were rare.

The table also shows the home departments and schools/colleges of the faculty teaching GCI courses. Some courses had multiple instructors, and the information on colleges represented is not fully reflective of the extent of college involvement. It is notable that fully 50% of the Grand Challenge seminars included instructors from outside the College of Arts and Sciences. All of the other colleges, with the exception of the Feinstein College of Continuing Education, were represented by one to three offerings.

We were interested in the general education learning outcome objectives chosen by instructors, and Table 2 reports these. Although a specially designed general education application form was used for the Grand Challenge proposals, some applicants inadvertently used the standard general education application form, which does not include a section for describing the established cognitive learning outcome objectives for general education (identify, recognize, ask, collect, analyze). In those cases, SAGE raters made judgments by reviewing submitted proposals and syllabi. Compared with a previous stratified random sample of general education courses obtained in the fall of 2007, the GCI courses are remarkable in the amount of emphasis placed on collecting new information (in the form of literature and web searches, and actual empirical data), and expecting students to come up with their own questions for investigation (“asking”). It is clear from the GCI course proposals that these instructors were relatively ambitious, and eager to actively involve first-year students in formulating their own questions and seeking out data to answer them. In selecting integrated skill objectives, instructors designated qualitative analysis and oral communication more frequently than in previous samples of general education courses. The relatively small class sizes, coupled with ambitious plans to engage students in group projects, undoubtedly contributed to this pattern of learning objectives.

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Table 2. Grand Challenge Course Characteristics, Fall 2010

	Gen Ed Category				Faculty Department		College	General Education Outcome					Integrated skills						
	SS	NS	FA	LE				Ident	Recog	Coll	Ask	Analy	Read	Quant	Qual	Artist	InfoLit	Write	Oral
001	1				HDF		HSS			1		1	1	1				1	
002	1				CELS	CELS	CELS	1	1	1	1	1	1					1	1
003	1				Pharm		PHARM		1			1		1				1	1
004	1				Com		A&S	1	1	1									
005	1				Bus Adm		BUS		1		1	1	1				?	1	
006	1				Civ Eng	Lang	ENG		1	1		1	1	1	1		1		1
007	1				Music		A&S					1	1					1	
008	1				Bus		BUS	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1	1
009	1				Psy		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1					1	
010	1				Kines		HSS	1		1		1			1			1	1
011	1				Comm S.		A&S		1		1	1			1		1		1
012	1				Pharm	NUR	PHARM		1	1		1					1	1	1
013		1			Ocean		OCG	1	1	1		1	1	1				1	
014		1			Oceanography		CELS	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1
015		1			Eng		ENG	1	1	1				1	1				
016		1			Anthro		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		
017		1			Chem		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1				1		1
018			1		FLM		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1		1			1	1
019			1		Music		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1			
020				1	Eng		ENG			1	1	1	1		1			1	
021				1	Bus		BUS						1					1	1
022				1	Lang		A&S						1					1	1
023				1	Hist		A&S	1		1	1	1	1					1	1
024				1	Physics	Math	A&S		1	1			1					1	1
025				1	WRT		A&S	1	1	1	1	1	1						1
026				1	Comm		A&S	1	1			1	1		1				
027				1	Comm		A&S	1	1			1	1		1				1
028				1	Lib		LIB	1	1			1					1		1
TOTAL	12	5	2	9				17	21	19	13	22	21	8	11	1	8	17	17

Faculty Comments on Their Experience as Instructors

Here we report the results from the faculty focus groups. In total, SAGE, in collaboration with SLOAA and the General Education Task Force, coordinated seven focus groups with instructors of the GCI seminars and their paired courses in Writing and Communication Studies. These sessions were held late in the fall 2010 semester. A note-taker from SAGE, SLOA, or the Task Force was present in each group. We used a semi-structured format with several open-ended questions to elicit the views of a broad sample of the instructors. We organized the notes from faculty comments according to the questions used to structure the discussions. Some comments were made by several groups, others by only one. Major themes are apparent across multiple comments, and the focus of comments is coded — key provided — in terms of the content (see codes in Table 3 and comments in Table 4). From the faculty focus groups we draw several conclusions and recommendations. Most recommendations will be saved for the final section of this report, but we provide some observations on the faculty comments here.

Observations on Faculty Comments from Focus Groups

Although the majority of GCI faculty ended the semester with a general positive feeling about their experience teaching these first-year student seminars (reflected in the high proportion choosing to return for a second year), faculty responses in the focus groups provided valuable instructor perspectives on challenges to the effectiveness of the program in meeting learning objectives, as well as insights on how to further develop the GCI and better assess its impact on general education learning outcomes. Here are some major themes from the responses of faculty in the seven focus groups.

- Many of the involved faculty thought their students were ill-prepared for an interdisciplinary course and/or they lacked the motivation and study skills to succeed in it. On the other hand, several faculty admitted that their own prior inexperience with teaching first-year classes and students was a significant limitation, and a few suggested that the GCI should be open to more than just first-year students, or offered in the spring semester rather than fall, when students are more prepared and well-transitioned into college.
- As a result of teaching these first-year student seminars (or, for some, just teaching a course for first-year students, which several had not done for some time), many GCI instructors learned valuable lessons about how to develop realistic expectations and course objectives for first-year student courses, with focused assignments to realize them. Faculty comments in the focus groups emphasized their need to develop better pedagogical models for stimulating the classroom environment, providing clear structure and standards, and using hands-on and group activities to encourage intimacy and deeper learning.
- Some faculty discovered that their initial learning objectives were unrealistic, and some of them adapted their expectations as they gathered more experience with their students. Others decided that assessing learning objectives was difficult, and did not attend to the objectives they had initially specified. Determined to aim high, some instructors “scaffolded” assignments and linked them together, engaging students with models, motivating assignments, group projects, and activities that related specifically to course objectives.
- It is not clear from comments made during the faculty focus groups that there is a shared sense of what it means to teach an interdisciplinary course, or how an interdisciplinary course should be structured.

Responses to a question about what makes your course interdisciplinary included “instructors introduce multiples perspectives” and “team-taught with multiple instructors for the class.”

- Perceived barriers to an interdisciplinary approach consisted mainly of (mis)communication or (lack of) collaboration between paired faculty, followed by student unfamiliarity with the concepts of “disciplines” and “interdisciplinarity.” To make the program more effective in the future, faculty noted that a fourth credit could be added to account for collaborative teaching and assignments, and perhaps more communication between paired instructors.

Table 3. Codes for faculty focus group responses

SP	Student limitations -- preparation
SB	Student limitations – attitudes, behavior
FE	Faculty prior experience
FB	Faculty behavior
CO	Course objectives
CA	Course assignments, requirements
CP	Classroom process
PD	Program design
PC	Paired course as an aspect of program design

Table 4. Summary of faculty comments from Fall 2010 focus groups

Topic I: TEACHING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS	
I.A. What was it like to teach first year students? Did you encounter any special concerns or barriers?	
Code	Comment
SP	Students lack knowledge of current issues
SP	Lack vocabulary, reading ability for “intellectual prose”
SP	Lack study skills
SP	Some majors more prepared, more motivated
SP	Some assignments (personally relevant) motivated students and their performance was much better on those assignments
SB	Poor attendance; took long weekends; seemed unconcerned about attendance
SB	Few took notes
SB	Many did not complete reading assignments
SB	No one attended optional film night
SB	Many did not follow instructions for papers
SB	Did not respond to e-mails
SB	Often did not complete reading assignments
SB	Some formed cliques, talked in class; there were classroom management issues; “wise guys” raised discipline issues; “a ton of attitude”
SB	A 10-page paper was too long
SB	Participation in class was non-existent
SB	A lot of students have jobs
SB	Some (a minority student) seemed “lost”
SB	Good students get discouraged; Best student in class is transferring out of URI
SB	Talent Development students are helped and supported
SB	Minority report: students were highly motivated, vocal, and engaged
FE	Majority of faculty reported prior experience teaching first-year students
FE	Some faculty had not had recent or general education experience with first-year students
FB	“I expected 50 pages of reading a week;” that was not realistic, and was scaled back
FB	Struggled with balance between academic <u>challenge</u> for students (focus on topic) and need to offer <u>support</u> for the transition to college
PD	Spring semester might be better

PD/PC	Students feel overwhelmed in first semester; paired classes really helped with peer support
PD	Freshman year is a waste to have this program
PD	In other 100-level courses, the presence of sophomore and junior students really helps; having all freshmen is a bad idea
PD	Students should be required to drop both paired courses if they need to drop one
I.B. Do you have any tips for others who will be teaching similar seminars to first year students in the future? Things you tried that seemed to work?	
Code	Comment
CO	Have realistic expectations
CP	Keep examples simple, understandable
CP	Minimize lecturing
CP	Use many “hands-on” activities, group work, experiential exercises, gaming, debates
CA	Minimize reading assignments; Short videos are better than reading assignments
CA	Provide very clear structure, emphasize it early and keep giving reminders
CP	Send out e-mail reminders for each week’s class expectations on Sunday (using Sakai)
CA	Make standards for grading clear early
CA	Create engaging, personally relevant, assignments
CP	Use seating in-the-round
CP	Locate the classroom near the dorms
CP/ FB	Create a more intimate classroom environment; get to know students personally; require an advising hour visit from each student; pull students out of class group work for individual conversations
CO	Use a rubric for grading, making students aware of it in advance
CA	Require attendance
CP	Emphasize the point of addressing global issues and the limited perspective from which Americans start (assume naïve parochialism and work with it)
FB	Talking with other faculty about the course as it went along was invaluable
PD	It’s too early in students’ college experience for my topic to work
PD	Provide more advance preparation of faculty for teaching first-year students
PD	All professors should rotate through teaching first year students
PD	“We are teaching high school”
PD	Add a fourth credit for transition issues

Topic II: ACCOMPLISHING LEARNING OBJECTIVES	
II.A. How do you feel about the learning outcomes you identified for your course? Do you see evidence that they are being accomplished?	
Code	Comment
CO	Some found initial objective unrealistic, changed (scaled back) objectives after more experience with students
CO	Not as much depth in outcomes as hoped for, not as much progress on skills
CO	Some found that students were doing reasonably on objectives, about as expected
CP	Would need 1-on-1 meetings with students to really know if learning objectives were being met
CO	Larger aspirations of instructor didn't always work; big projects were very exciting to the instructor but could be overwhelming for students
CO/ PD	We need clear outcomes for the Grand Challenge program, beyond the individual course, department, gen ed objectives
FE	"My goals are always the same; I just try to write them to fit required language"
II.B. Any notable things you tried that worked well for accomplishing your learning objectives?	
Code	Comment
CO	Expect basic outcomes, not too elaborate
CO /PC	Use the paired course for emphasis, to reinforce outcomes, with shared learning objectives across the courses – gives more time on task
PD	Students who took the course because they wanted the particular topic did better than those who were just pushed in
CP	Do group projects during class time to get more reliable products
CP	Link activities done in every class to specific objectives
CP	Have students reflect on what they are learning, with the objectives as part of that reflection
CA	Provide models for expected types and levels of writing
CA	Give motivating writing assignments that have personal significance
CA	"Scaffold" assignments, e.g. students do a survey, collect data, then include the data as part of a paper, then discuss/review all of the papers in a final reflection paper
II.C. Any barriers you encountered, changes you would make for next time (if you taught a similar seminar again) in outcome designations or ways of teaching to accomplish them?	
Code	Comment
CA	Writing skills of some students were limited; don't make writing assignments too elaborate

CA	Allow resubmission with revisions for major written work; more drafting opportunities
PC	Pair with a Writing course to help with writing mechanics
PD	Would work better if offered in second semester
PC	Share assignments and objectives with paired course
CO	Put less emphasis on “book learning”
CP	Provide more time for students to “make meaning” out of their learning experiences
CA	Need more scaffolding; work on basic skills
CP/ CA	Make it relevant, make it fun
FB	Meet with students individually
PD	Avoid multiple instructors – students don’t like this
Topic III: INTERDISCIPLINARITY	
III.A. What is interdisciplinary about your course(s)?	
Code	Comment
FB	Instructor introduces multiple perspectives
CP	Guest speakers present varying views
CP	Videos present multiple perspectives
CA	Tailored writing assignments can call for multiple perspectives, including one’s personal view
PD	Team taught with multiple instructors for the class
PC	Paired courses
PC	Shared experience of students leads to more bonding among students; they talk after class about both classes; the other class covers important competencies I need students to have
III.B. Did you encounter any particular barriers to an interdisciplinary approach?	
Code	Comment
CP	Students complained about guest speakers with different presentation styles and new concepts
PD	First-semester freshmen may not be ready for an interdisciplinary approach – it confuses them
PD	Students aren’t familiar with different disciplines; it’s too ambitious
PC	Syllabus coordination was done beforehand, but nothing after the semester started
PC	The other instructor (WRT or COM) did all the work to integrate
PC	Some reported that “the paired instructor was not on board”
PC	Need to have similar expectations for outlining, references, etc.

PC	Hard for the WRT instructor to limit to one topic (the topic of the GCH course)
PC	Difficult to make it genuinely collaborative
PC	Common vocabulary terms turn out to mean different things
PC	Students are not exactly the same in the two paired courses, and this leads to student complaints about unfairness
III.C. Do you have any tips for instructors teaching similar interdisciplinary seminars in the future?	
Code	Comment
CP	Short video clips better than full-length guest lectures or reading assignments to get different perspectives across
PC	WRT and COM both seem like good choices for the pairing – they work well
PC	You can accomplish more of your learning objectives with a dual focus on the same topic – can include more reflection, practice with multiple skills
PC	Require a fourth credit for collaboration
PC/ PD	Should build in more communication between paired instructors
PC	Have both instructors come to both classes
PC	Have an introductory discussion with students about the value of the paired course approach and how it will benefit them
PC	A lot of planning together over the summer led to a good sense of what each of us is doing
PC	I make reference to the other course in virtually every class
PC	It is helpful to discuss students with the other instructor and compare observations

Results of Grand Challenge End-of-Semester Student Survey

SAGE designed a 10-question survey with input from the General Education Task Force of the Faculty Senate. The survey was distributed in GCH seminar classes at the same time as the IDEA at the end of the fall 2010 semester. The instrument was designed to survey student views on several issues related to the Grand Challenge course: overall value, engagement with instructor and peers, learning about global challenges and interdisciplinary problem-solving, and the perceived roles of the paired courses in Writing and Communication Studies.

A packet containing (a) instructions for instructor; (b) 25 single-page item sets; and (c) 25 Optical Mark Reader/Recognition (OMR) answer sheets was provided to each instructor. We requested that the instructors distribute the accompanying 10 questions, along with the answer sheets, at the same time students completed the IDEA. Instructors were informed that the survey should take very little time for students to complete (3-4 minutes). Instructors were reminded that students must use #2 pencils, as for the IDEA. Finally, an envelope was provided for the return of the survey results after administration to the SAGE chair.

Twenty-one sections returned results. One section is not included in this analysis as the number of students in the course was much larger than the other courses participating (67 versus approximately 20). The responses were anonymous and were aggregated across all of the remaining 20 sections for analysis (n=319). The results are displayed in Table 5.

For purposes of this analysis, the responses from “Definitely true” and “More true than false” were added together in the “True” column to provide a more general indication of agreement with each statement. Students were relatively positive about their Grand Challenge experience.

- One of the aspirations for the GCI was to connect a broad range of full-time faculty in the classroom with freshmen students. Faculty instructors were generally quite successful at making a positive connection with their students, with 80% of the student respondents agreeing that their instructors cared about them and wanted them to have a positive learning experience.
- More than two thirds (70%) of the students agreed that the course helped with feeling connected to other students in the class. This is another positive outcome in line with the expectations for these small seminar classes. Most of the students in the Grand Challenge courses were also in a “paired” course with the same students. In addition to supporting students’ writing and communication skills, these paired courses gave freshmen even more opportunity to work with and come to know a particular group of students. A major goal of the GCI was to introduce students to current issues that affect them and the planet. The topics for the courses addressed global challenges ranging from environmental and public health issues, to the implications of scientific advances, to political and social realities of the twenty-first century. The goal of motivating students to become more interested in working on global challenges was substantially achieved; 70% agreed that the course had that effect.
- The major problems addressed in this program were interdisciplinary in nature and the institution is interested in developing students’ abilities to address issues from multiple perspectives. The interdisciplinary nature of these courses is reflected in the majority views of students who suggested that the course helped with approaching a problem from multiple perspectives (57%) and integrating different ways of seeing a problem to find solutions (59%). However, although these levels of agreement were positive

they were lower than for items dealing with increasing interest in the global challenge, connection to instructors, and connection with other students.

- The pairing of two courses (Grand Challenge with a Writing or a Communication Studies course) was designed to help students see the connection between the current challenge and the development of writing or communication skills to describe and analyze that challenge. Faculty were encouraged to develop assignments that reinforced the other course's content and to develop common assignments that would help students see the connections between the two courses. For students enrolled in paired courses, the value of shared assignments was viewed positively by a slim majority (52%) and slightly less than half felt the connection was well developed (49%) or helped them learn more (48%).
- One way to measure the success of a course is to ask students if they would recommend the course to others. While students' responses were not overwhelmingly positive, 67% agreed that they would recommend the Grand Challenge course to next year's incoming students.

We conclude that the first year of the Grand Challenge Initiative was generally successful as measured by student responses to the end-of-semester survey. The most highly rated aspects of the program were the freshmen's personal connection to their instructors and to their fellow students. Based on past research we believe this outcome is a very valuable one; in addition to supporting a positive outlook on their learning experience, the strong connection to other students in the classroom and to faculty instructors can have long-term effects on student retention.

Additional positive evidence from the student perspective includes increased interest in the "grand challenges" addressed by the courses, and the willingness of the students to recommend the experience to incoming students.

The student responses also highlight aspects of the program design that can be improved. Students did not report experiencing the kind of connection between the paired courses that the program designers had envisioned. The design of courses and assignments to support the connections between the courses is an area to be addressed in the next iteration of this initiative. The interdisciplinary ideal of improving students' abilities to approach problem solving more effectively by using multiple perspectives was only achieved to a limited extent, as measured by survey results.

Table 5. Student End-of-semester Survey Results

Item	Mean ¹	Percent agreement					
		True	Definitely false	More false than true	In between	More true than false	Definitely true
This course made the ideas in the course exciting to me	3.80	63.7	5.4	6.7	24.2	29.9	33.8
This course helped me to feel more connected to the other students in the class	3.98	70.1	2.2	7.3	20.4	30.3	39.8
This course gave me skills in approaching a problem from multiple perspectives	3.66	57.0	1.0	9.9	32.2	36.0	21.0
This course helped me to learn to integrate different ways of seeing a problem to find solutions	4.24	59.3	1.9	8.9	29.9	35.7	23.6
I believe my instructor for this course cares about me and my learning experience	4.24	80.3	2.5	4.8	12.4	26.8	53.5
This course increased my interest in working on challenges we face around the world today	3.93	70.4	1.9	9.6	18.2	34.4	36.0
The connection between this course and its paired Writing or Communication Studies course was well developed ²	3.39	48.7	8.9	16.1	26.4	24.0	24.7
The connection between this course and its paired Writing or Communication Studies course helped me learn more than I would have from two separate, unconnected courses ²	3.37	47.6	8.8	17.0	26.5	23.5	24.1
Assignments I did for each of the paired courses helped with work for the other course ²	3.48	52.4	6.5	13.7	27.4	30.5	21.9
I would recommend this course to next year's incoming students	3.91	66.9	7.7	6.4	19.0	20.6	46.3

¹ On a 5-point scale² Students were instructed not to respond "if this item is not relevant for your course."

In the final sections we make some recommendations based on these observations, first dealing with course-level improvements, and finally dealing with the structure of the GCI program.

Recommendations for preparing instructors and aiding course-level improvement

- *If there is a continuing commitment to offering these seminars in the first semester and exclusively to first-year students, prepare instructors accordingly. Despite efforts to provide workshop content on first-year students, many of the faculty teaching GCH seminars reported significant difficulty as they encountered the realities in their classrooms. Instructors need help in understanding what first-year students need to succeed in the classroom, what pedagogical strategies may work best, what level of expectations is appropriate, and how to handle classroom management issues. They need continuing support after the semester begins, best provided early in the term as difficulties with expectation levels, student motivation, and college adjustment issues first emerge.*
- *Continue efforts to assist faculty in developing their courses, identifying course learning objectives, and writing clear assignments to realize them. Provide models for learning objectives and outcomes, and examples of how to link activities to objectives, and how to assess them accordingly. This should remain a focal point of the GCI workshops.*
- *Increase emphasis on helping faculty reflect on their successes and failures in achieving their learning outcome objectives as a means for improving those outcomes.*
- *Define clear expectations for interdisciplinary courses and their intended learning outcomes; distribute these to GCI faculty, along with models of effective interdisciplinary courses.*
- *If paired course designs continue as an important aspect of this initiative, encourage faculty to study models of collaboration and have teamed faculty explore together what makes the GCI an interdisciplinary experience for faculty and students. Allow time for this in course development and build in time for continuing collaboration while the course is under way.*
- *Reinforce the faculty intention to engage personally with their students, along with planning and implementation of means to form strong bonds with them; this was a strength of the fall 2010 experience from students' perspective, likely to have a positive effect on student retention.*
- *Reinforce the use of group projects and faculty collaboration on cross-course assignments, as these are likely sources of the relatively strong connection students report to other students in their class.*

Recommendations for GCI Program Design

- *Make explicit choices regarding the program-level objectives for the GCI. What is the purpose of pairing with Writing and Communication Studies courses? Is interdisciplinarity an appropriate aim in teaching first-year students? What exactly does this mean and how would we know if we were getting the result we wanted? Is the first semester the best time for these courses? How can we determine whether our design is cost-effective for achieving our objectives?*
- *Be more explicit about the range of course topics that are consistent with the “Grand Challenge” designation. What will engage students and allow skill development at the first-year level? Can a historical perspective bring more depth to engagement with the present?*
- *Offer GCI seminars during spring term when first-year students may be more prepared to appreciate an interdisciplinary learning experience.*
- *Consider four-credit status for Grand Challenge courses that do not have paired Writing or Communications Studies sections in order to enhance skill learning for GCH seminars.*
- *If GCH seminars continue as first semester offerings, consider means to provide additional support for first-year students adjusting to the demands of the university. Four-credit status might be one approach, along with URI 101 and freshman advising support.*
- *Provide models for Grand Challenge courses and team course designs that reflect the chosen objectives for them.*

Recommendations for the Assessment of the GCI

- *Make assessment-related expectations clear to instructors who are proposing to teach GCI courses, from the announcement requesting proposals, through training workshops and mentoring, and on through the implementation of the courses.*
- *Require that instructors receive training and peer mentor support for drafting learning objectives that are genuine, ambitious, and realistically supported with course activities.*
- *Provide instructors with models of how effective learning objectives translate into intentional course design, therefore reinforcing the connection between course design and proposed learning outcomes.*
- *Plan for the program-level assessment data collection activities from the beginning of the fall semester, including the selection of a late-term assignment for which student work can be obtained for all students in the course. Assure that these assignments specifically target general education outcome objectives, including cognitive objectives (ask, collect, analyze) and integrated skill objectives.*

4/05/11

ⁱ University College and General Education Subcommittee on Assessment of General Education
2010-2011 members:

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