

## GENERAL EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

General education has always been an integral part of Dordt College's four-year academic program. By means of such studies students receive a broad exposure to different aspects of creation, develop different dimensions of their personalities and abilities, understand connections between specialized fields of study, and prepare for full kingdom citizenship in God's world. While the description of and rationale for general education have evolved over time, its importance has never been seriously questioned. Dordt College accepts general education as a necessary and desirable part of college level curricula.

This attitude comports well with external requirements. North Central Association (NCA) expects each of its accredited undergraduate institution to "include a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry."<sup>1</sup> General education has been defined by NCA as that component of the curriculum that is "not directly related to a student's formal technical, vocational, or professional preparation," that is "part of every student's course of study, regardless of his or her area of emphasis," and that is "intended to impart common knowledge, intellectual concepts, and attitudes that, every educated person should possess."<sup>2</sup>

To retain affiliation with NCA, an institution must demonstrate the centrality of its general education program in the overall curriculum and indicate the role of general education in fulfilling the mission of the college. Each institution must also show that its "faculty have ownership and control over the general education curriculum through active participation in appropriate governance structures" and that its "faculty systematically and comprehensively review the general education curriculum."<sup>3</sup>

The General Education Committee (GEC) is Dart's institutional vehicle for helping to fulfill these requirements and goals. Formed in October, 1992, after the Curriculum Task Force had been discharged, the GEC was adopted as the normal way to supervise, assess, and reform general education. The GEC thus addresses the task set forth in the 1989 Strategic Planning Committee Report, *Renewing Our Vision*: "to establish goals and objectives for general education requirements and to develop (with departments and divisions) a set of course offerings that meet these goals and objectives."<sup>4</sup>

The mandate of the GEC stipulates two main sets of duties: to articulate and maintain a framework for the General Education Program (GEP) that is consistent with the mission of the college; and to supervise the operation and development of the GEP as a vibrant, coherent program. The present document addresses the first task: to formulate a conceptual framework for the GEP. Supervision of the GEP will take place within the context of this framework. It includes at least three tasks: regularly assessing how well the program is fulfilling its general mission and is achieving specific goals and outcomes; sponsoring GEP curriculum renewal and development projects; and encouraging faculty development in the area of general education.

Our intention in what follows is to specify how the principles, parameters, goals, and student outcomes of the total curriculum may be realized in the GEP. While some overlap with the document *Framework for Dordt's Educational Program* is unavoidable, we assume that statement as background for this one and concentrate here more particularly upon general education. We also assume as

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<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from a draft version of NCA's general institutional requirement GIR 16. It appears in the October 1993 issue of **Briefing** (Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 6), published by NCA's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> This formulation comes from the 1983 **Statement on General Education** by NCA's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

<sup>3</sup> **Briefing**. Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> **Renewing Our Vision**, Goal 2-2, Initiative 5.

foundational those documents on which the earlier *Framework* document rests: *Scripturally Oriented Higher Education*, *The Educational Task of Dordt College*, and *Renewing Our Vision*.

The first section of the outline sets forth several principles that provide a basis for our approach to general education, and it also formulates a mission statement for the GEP. The second section lists a number of curricular goals and student outcomes for GEP, organized according to the four coordinates used in the *Framework for Dordt's Educational Program*. The third section discusses organizational matters, and it points out a number of parameters for curricular design. The fourth section discusses the character of the GEP and identifies the main tasks that enable the GEP to carry out its mission and objectives as part of the overall curriculum. Though it stops short of recommending a detailed model or a set of courses, this section indicates how the four coordinates of the GEP can be coherently addressed to accomplish the mission and main tasks of the program. We anticipate that the entire document, but particularly the third and fourth sections, will be useful in our further work, both for curriculum evaluation and curricular reform. The final section spells out some guiding principles for the process of curriculum development and implementation in the GEP. This section states how we intend to proceed as we continue to work at the tasks given in our mandate.

## **Conceptual Framework for the General Education Program**

### **I. Basis of the General Education Program**

#### **A. Foundational Principles**

The mission of Dordt College is to develop and share insights and abilities that will, sustain life-long responsible kingdom service in today's world. Dordt's GEP provides the foundation and context for the college's educational response to this task. Our approach to general education is grounded in our recognition of the following features of creaturely existence:

##### **1. Integrality of Creation**

Reality forms a unified whole of closely interconnected parts that may not be partitioned into disjoint compartments of specialization. The GEP should acknowledge this coherence, and it should engage students and faculty in studies that employ appropriate ideas, perspectives, and methodologies to develop a comprehensive understanding of contemporary issues.

##### **2. Diversity in Creation**

Reality contains a wide variety of things having many different properties and relations. The GEP should help students and faculty explore in general ways the broad diversity and richness of creation, and it should challenge them to serve the Lord in all areas of their lives.

##### **3. Universality of Human Experience**

Everyday life presents all of us with common situations, concerns, and responsibilities. The GEP should enable students and faculty to tackle perennial issues and themes and to develop insight into shared areas of life and culture from a distinctly Christian point of view.

##### **4. Cultural and Environmental Matrix of Contemporary Life**

Today's world forms a global village of many cultures tied together by a vast web of natural, technological, and social interconnections. The GEP should make students and faculty aware of these relationships and shared environments, and it should also expose them to cultures, traditions, and ways of life different from their own in ways that exhibit the identity and the underlying assumptions of those cultures and that celebrate cultural diversity within the Kingdom of God.

##### **5. Communal Character of Christian Life**

Christians are knit together as members of the body of Christ and have a joint responsibility to present a Christian witness to the world. The GEP should provide a communal setting in which students and faculty can encourage and challenge each other to develop and apply their God-given talents for the benefit of the whole community. The GEP should help students and faculty with widely different specialties, training, and interests learn how to work together with a unified purpose, contributing according to their diverse abilities.

## 6. Contextual Character of Learning

Genuine learning must exhibit breadth as well as depth, which requires an understanding of the context of whatever is being studied. The GEP should provide students with broad overviews of the religious, structural, and developmental contexts that are important for pursuing a program of study at Dordt College and for living their lives as members of God's Kingdom.

## 7. Ability Base for Learning

College level education requires advanced learning skills. The GEP should provide students with learning experiences that develop and practice the basic competencies common to most disciplines, and it should also cultivate those abilities that are needed for maintaining life-long learning.

## 8. Assessment of Learning

Learning progresses through stages that build upon each other. The GEP should regularly evaluate the students' success in meeting the goals of the program in order to identify areas that require their attention and further development. The college should also assess students periodically to determine whether the GEP is having the intended effect on the student body as a whole.

## 9. Contemporary Relevance of Education

The purpose of education at Dordt College is to develop and share serviceable insight and promote responsible Christian action in today's world. The GEP should help students and faculty become more aware of the current state of the world regarding those matters that affect us all and that should be addressed in common.

## 10. Personal Commitment and Beliefs

Christian service must be motivated by a deep desire to share God's love. The GEP should press students to examine their beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and practices, and it should give them biblical guidance in this pursuit so that they will be personally prepared to take up their task as agents of reconciliation in God's world. The GEP should help equip students to lead lives of committed Christian service, lives that glorify God and show loving care and appreciation for everything God has created.

## B. Mission Statement

*The General Education Program prepares students for faithful, ongoing Christian discipleship in the common areas and responsibilities of contemporary life and across all vocations. It articulates the general religious foundation and the overall structural and cultural / historical contexts for other curricular programs, and it provides a forum for addressing issues of common concern on that basis.*

## II. Curricular Goals and Student Outcomes for the General Education Program

### A. Religious Orientation

#### 1. Christ-Centered Basis of Life and Learning

The GEP initiates, promotes, and supports biblically directed scholarship in such a way that Students

- a. Acknowledge Christ as Lord of all creation and recognize the kingdom context of life and learning;
- b. Accept the authority of Scripture as divine revelation and know how it relates to Christ as the Word Incarnate and to creational revelation;
- c. Learn how to read Scripture, making use of Reformed hermeneutical principles;
- d. Can articulate the main events, themes, and teachings of the Bible;
- e. Can discern the implications of Christ's Kingship and other biblical realities for understanding, coping with, and transforming contemporary life.

#### 2. Reformed Worldview

The GEP develops a cohesive Christian worldview within the Reformed tradition in such a way that students

- a. Recognize the centrality of faith and worldview commitments for all people and all aspects of life and culture;
- b. Show an appreciation for and an understanding of a mature Reformational worldview;
- c. Learn how to identify and challenge the dominant worldviews and spirits of our age in the light of God's Word;
- d. Show an increasing desire to serve the Lord in all aspects of their life.

## B. Creational Structure

### 1. Overall Structure and Character of Creation

The GEP provides a general framework for understanding how our world is structured and for contextualizing specialized courses and programs, and it also presents the broad contours of different kinds of human response to creation so that students

- a. Acknowledge all of reality as the creation of God and under-His sovereign rule;
- b. Appreciate both the rich diversity and the coherent inter-relatedness of creation;
- c. Recognize themselves as responsible creatures subject to creational law within a variety of given conditions;
- d. Learn to think about issues in the light of creational structures and God-given norms;
- e. Exhibit a basic understanding of broad fields of study with regard to their main themes, principles, methods of inquiry, interconnections, and contributions to contemporary life.

### 2. Integral Structure of Learning

The GEP provides learning experiences for developing a comprehensive holistic approach to understanding contemporary issues so that students

- a. Understand how particular disciplines fit into the overall curriculum;
- b. Learn how to combine insights from their fields of specialization with those from other fields.

### 3. Educational Responsibility and Competency

The GEP introduces and cultivates those learning skills and attitudes needed to develop, share, and apply serviceable insight across all programs and in every day life so that students

- a. Develop, the academic skills needed to discover, understand, and communicate. knowledge. in various fields of study;
- b. Develop, the interpersonal skills needed to work cooperatively with others in community;
- c. Develop the personal traits needed to live responsibly before God and in harmony with the rest of creation.

## C. Creational Development

### 1. Unfolding of Creation

The GEP provides a general framework for understanding how the world has unfolded and for contextualizing specialized courses and programs, and it also presents the main contours of the development of various historically important civilizations so that students

- a. Appreciate the dynamic nature of reality as the progressive disclosure of the potential within creation;
- b. See the formation of civilizations as the cultural embodiment of communal human responses to God, and thus as fundamentally religious in motivation;
- c. Understand how historical developments (events, institutions, theories; inventions, artistic responses) have shaped our present world and Western culture in particular;
- d. Are acquainted with the main landmarks and turning points in the history of Christianity, especially within the Reformed tradition, and are aware of the role that Christianity has played in the development of Western culture;
- e. Understand and appreciate the main features and developments of some culture(s) other than their own.

### 2. Cultural Mandate and Human Task

The GEP presents the divine obligation given to human beings as image bearers of God to develop and care for His creation (the cultural / stewardship mandate) so that students

- a. Understand and value their calling to participate in culture formation as image bearers of God: as ruling stewards and care-takers of His world, and as citizens of His Kingdom;
- b. Show respect and concern for the creation and work for justice and peace between races, genders, and human social groupings.

#### D. Contemporary Response

##### 1. Timely and Relevant Concerns

The GEP addresses main areas of common everyday life so that students

- a. Are aware of the scope and magnitude of our communal human responsibility in today's world;
- b. Are familiar with the pressing problems of our culture and our age and can begin to articulate Christian solutions to them;
- c. Are able to identify areas where they can be of service, matching their talents and resources with needs.

##### 2. Ongoing Responsibilities

The GEP provides the general resources and opportunities needed to prepare for life-long learning so that students

- a. Can develop personal initiative and apply their learning to new situations;
- b. Can develop an integral Christian approach to the important issues of contemporary life;
- c. Can work cooperatively with others to generate serviceable insight and seek genuine solutions to problems;
- d. Can communicate their ideas and vision effectively,

##### 3. Christian Lifestyle and Kingdom Service

The GEP promotes a life of communal Christian discipleship and prepares students for service in today's world by providing opportunities for active participation so that students

- a. Cultivate a close relation to God through prayer, worship, and study of Scripture;
- b. Develop the attitudes, character, and behavior that demonstrate the acquisition of biblical insight (wisdom) and that promote a life of Christian discipleship;
- c. View their cultural responsibilities in the light of Christ's Kingdom;
- d. Learn to set priorities and act accordingly;
- e. Learn practical strategies for effective service and responsible dialogue in environments that are largely opposed to Christian principles and action.

### III. Organizational Contours of the General Education Program

#### A. Administrative Structure

The GEC is responsible to the Academic Council for developing program protocols and traditions that will maintain the coherence, continuity, and quality of the GEP and that will encourage cooperative ownership of the 'program by the faculty.

##### 1. Staff for GEP

Faculty teaching in the GEP should be chosen from across a broad range of disciplines and should be known for their desire and ability to implement the goals of the program; few, if any, should teach solely in the GEP. This will encourage the various curricular programs to keep in touch with the GEP and one another. Members of various departments will have an opportunity to help shape the GEP in a way that keeps it relevant to their concerns, and the GEP will be able to exert a reciprocal influence on more specialized programs and majors. Ability to contribute to the GEP should thus be a consideration when new faculty members are hired.

##### 2. Resources for GEP

Money should be allocated on an annual basis for GEP operating expenditures, including an appropriate amount for library books, journals, and media resources relevant to general education. Stipends should also be made available for faculty development projects, workshops, and conferences related to the GEP.

#### B. Parameters for Curricular Design

The GEP should be organized to carry out its mission and achieve its goals and desired outcomes in an effective manner. The following indicate several parameters that should be observed.

1. Time Allocation

GEP course requirements should comprise from 30% to 45% of the total curricular degree requirements.

2. Clientele and Core

The GEP should serve the needs of all students, regardless of background, intended major, or vocational aspirations. The GEP should include a common core of learning experiences for everyone. As few exceptions as possible should be made in order to promote a spirit of common purpose among students and faculty.

3. Instruction

Instructional material and pedagogical styles used in the GEP should be suited to the developmental level and academic preparation of the students, should be varied to meet a range of different learning styles, and should actively engage the students.

4. Scope, Spacing, and Concentration

The GEP should be an ongoing, college-length program. Courses should be designed for each year, from freshman to senior, with a higher proportion of GEP courses available to students during their first two years.

5. Program Coordination

The GEP should build a certain amount of program coordination into its structure. This should include vertical coordination, via course sequencing, and horizontal coordination, via course offerings and scheduling of topics. Courses with multiple sections should have a common approved syllabus, sharing the same goals and objectives, and using the same or similar textual materials.

6. Co-Curricular

The GEP should be linked with appropriate co-curricular activities and student life issues so that the entire campus becomes a learning and living environment.

7. Experiential Learning

The GEP should be linked with concrete learning experiences in other programs, curricular and otherwise, to help students relate what they study to their everyday life, both off and on campus.

8. Program Assessment

The GEP should engage students and faculty in regular, systematic assessment of the GEP to determine whether the goals of the program are being achieved, both in individual courses / learning experiences and in the program as a whole.

#### **IV. Curricular Foci of the General Education Program**

##### **A. Character of the GEP**

1. Coherence of GEP

The GEP should be designed as a strongly unified program, not as a loose confederation of courses. Courses and learning experiences that are part of the GEP should meet the appropriate goals and objectives set out for the program and should contribute to the integrity of the program.

2. Centrality of GEP

The GEP has a unique and central contribution to make to the overall curriculum in all four coordinates. In the GEP students are able to examine and develop a religious foundation for all of life; gain a comprehensive overview of how creation is structured, and develop the abilities to experience it in a multifaceted way; learn how the world has unfolded from earliest times into its present form; expand and fuse their knowledge of different fields of study into an enriched coherent understanding of God, themselves, and the world; and confront a range of contemporary challenges that are significant for society as a whole.

3. Role of the GEP in Relation to Other Curricular Programs

Majors, minors, areas of specialization, and professional courses offer focused disciplinary education or specialized training geared toward particular professions. The GEP, in contrast, concentrates on what may be called pre-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and post-disciplinary matters. Its tasks,

namely, are (1) to deal with issues, themes, and competencies that underlie all disciplines and areas of contemporary life; (2) to treat matters that exhibit the integrality of creation and that provide a context of broader meaning for more specialized programs; (3) and to address issues pertaining to how we should live our lives as whole people in today's world. In other words, the GEP provides a broad educational foundation, a unifying contextual frame-work for other programs and courses, and an arena of application that will prepare students for responsible discipleship in communal aspects of everyday contemporary society.

## B. Main Tasks of the GEP

The following points indicate various tasks that the GEP should be designed to accomplish with respect to the overall program. While individual courses and learning experiences, may be weighted more heavily toward one main task than another, they might also be designed to contribute to several of them.

### 1. Providing a Broad Foundation (Pre-Disciplinary Studies)

- a. Foundational studies for the overall curriculum
  - i. Basic religious orientation / Reformed perspective
  - ii. Competencies / advanced learning skills
- b. Foundational studies for contemporary life
  - i. Lifestyle choices and interpersonal skills; building community; resource management
  - ii. Attitudes toward social, groups, cultures, the environment; mass media, technology, etc.
  - iii. Learning skills for continuing life-long education

### 2. Providing a Coherent Context (Cross-Disciplinary Studies)

- a. Cross-disciplinary perspectives on fields of study
  - i. Synoptic overview of creational structure
  - ii. Synoptic overview of cultural / historical development
- b. Structure and development of main areas of knowledge across the disciplines
  - i. Natural sciences: mathematics, physical sciences, life sciences, technical and applied natural sciences (agriculture, health, engineering, computer science)
  - ii. Social sciences: psychology, languages, sociology, economics, political science, applied social sciences (communication, social work, business, physical education and recreation, education)
  - iii. Arts and humanities: art, literature, music, theater arts, theology, history, philosophy

### 3. Providing a Forum for Relevant Applications (Post-Disciplinary Studies)

This part of the GEP is meant to introduce students to major themes and issues of importance for contemporary life, and to provide a platform on which several disciplines can collaboratively address them in an integrated fashion. Students and faculty from a variety of disciplines can together explore an issue for which they have the requisite background or expertise. Topics in this portion of the GEP should show the applicability of a wide range of fields of study to a common problem or issue. They should also change over time to remain current and relevant. Possible examples include:

- a. The environment
- b. Cultural diversity
- c. Alienation and intolerance in contemporary life
- d. Poverty and hunger
- e. Population growth and distribution
- f. Self-fulfillment: individuality within community
- g. Friendship, marriage, and family
- h. Mass media and entertainment
- i. Work and recreation
- j. The nature of freedom and law
- k. The role of science and technology in the modern world

## V. Guidelines for Curricular Development and Implementation

### A. Role of the Framework

The conceptual framework articulated above forms the basis upon which the GEC will engage in curricular projects. This provides a common vision of what the GEP is, how it is organized, and what its main tasks are. Each project undertaken should indicate how it fits into the overall program and what it contributes to achieving the goals and outcomes of the GEP.

**B. Role of Faculty, Students, and Staff**

A wide range of faculty, students, and administrative staff should be engaged in making concrete curricular changes, both in the development and testing stages. The GEC does not have the full spectrum of expertise needed to develop and hone all curricular proposals, nor does it have the time, so it welcomes participation by others from outside the committee.

**C. Role of the GEC**

The GEC oversees curricular projects in general education in order to guarantee the integrity, coherence, and balance of the program. It is committed to provide faculty with whatever assistance and direction are needed to facilitate curriculum development in this area. The GEC has ultimate responsibility for finalizing GEP curricular proposals and recommending them to the Curriculum Committee for its approval;

**D. Role of Program Assessment**

Prior to developing a concrete curricular proposal, appropriate justification must be shown for undertaking such a project. This might consist in arguing that it would provide a good alternative or a better educational experience than a present part of the curriculum or in showing that the GEP lacks such a component. New or modified courses may be tried out on an experimental basis for a limited period of time to test their worth prior to proposing them as permanent changes in the GEP or abandoning them. Good ideas sometimes take time to catch on; sound proposals must be given a fair and honest trial.

**E. Process of Curricular Change**

Curriculum development can originate in several ways. It may be initiated by the GEC: as the standing committee mandated to supervise the GEP, the GEC can study various possibilities available for improving the GEP, develop a concrete proposal, discuss and refine it with all interested parties, and then bring the final recommendation to the Curriculum Committee for approval. Or it may arise from outside the committee: the GEC can entertain proposals from faculty, students, and administrative staff at large and provide whatever assistance is needed to develop them into recommendations to bring to the Curriculum Committee for approval. Either one of these two approaches or some creative combination of them may be used, so long as the process adheres to the above guidelines, which identifies the participants in curricular development.

**F. Scope and Speed of Curricular Change**

Changes to the GEP will be implemented in an orderly way. Insofar as is possible, they will be phased in gradually in order to cause as little disruption in the students' programs as possible and to maintain a coherent GEP while it is being modified. These goals will dictate how much change can be attempted at any one time and when it will be effected. However, all changes will be undertaken with an eye to an overall plan for change rather than in a reactive manner on an ad hoc basis.

**G. Faculty Resources**

Curricular changes will require a variety of adjustments on the part of the faculty. Faculty members might need or desire additional training in order to teach courses that lie outside their specialty or that require additional pedagogical expertise. This can be seen as a threat to the status quo; but it can also be viewed as an academic challenge that will keep faculty members vigorous and fresh, as a stimulus to further intellectual and pedagogical development. This is something we believe faculty will welcome, provided adequate time and support are available. Faculty that are willing to teach in the GEP will be given the administrative backing and encouragement needed to prepare them for the task.