

**SUNY Plattsburgh**  
**Proposed Changes in the General Education Program**

Prepared by the Deans' Cabinet  
Endorsed by the President's Cabinet  
September 2009

The proposed changes in SUNY Plattsburgh's General Education Program listed below are intended to lower the costs of the program and, as much as possible, maintain or enhance program quality, while continuing to meet SUNY requirements for general education.

In addition to the potential benefits described in connection with each proposed change, most would have several associated advantages:

- a) SUNY Plattsburgh's attractiveness to transfer students (and reputation within SUNY as a transfer-friendly comprehensive college) would be enhanced because transfer students who came to the college with the SUNY general education requirement in the relevant area completed would not have to take another course.
- b) The demand for cross-registration of Branch Campus students at ACC would be lowered, easing pressure on both ACC and SUNY Plattsburgh, since there would be fewer lower division courses that our students were required to take (because of SUNY Plattsburgh general education requirements that exceed those of SUNY), courses that SUNY Plattsburgh, by agreement with ACC, cannot offer at the Branch Campus.
- c) The excess credits (over 120) completed by our students at graduation (18 for transfer students, 13 for students entering as freshman, based on Spring 2009 data) may be lowered, and the college's graduation rates thereby enhanced.

Proposed Changes:

1. Reduce the foreign language requirement to the minimum established by SUNY—competency at the first semester college level—and explore alternative ways to help students master skills to enhance the level of competence achieved by students completing the first semester course.

Rationale: When a second semester of foreign language was included SUNY Plattsburgh's general education program, it was assumed that the level of foreign language competence acquired in high school was going up, and that most students would enter the college proficient at the first semester level, and therefore have to take no more than one three-credit course in a foreign language to meet the second semester college level requirement. As the competence of entering students increased, we expected to raise our foreign language requirement higher, to third and then fourth semester college

level, so that all students, no matter what their majors, would complete their college education with a significantly enhanced level of foreign language competence, yet with only three credits of foreign language required as part of their college program.

Unfortunately, the foreign language competency level of our entering freshman students has not increased as anticipated, so the college has had to offer many sections of first semester foreign language courses as well as the second semester courses, and our general education program has effectively required six credits of foreign language rather than three. Similarly, the foreign language requirements of the community colleges from which most of our transfer students enter have not increased, so that transfer students who may have satisfied the foreign language requirement at the previous institution still need to take a second semester foreign language to complete Plattsburgh's general education program.

While the Deans' Cabinet remains committed to the value of foreign language learning for all students, the goal of second year college competence for all does not appear to be achievable in the current educational context. Rather than requiring a second semester college course, we propose that alternative means of helping students master skills be explored with the aim of increasing the competence of students completing the first semester course.

Potential cost saving: \$42,000 per year, less up to \$10,000 per year in years 1 and 2 to support exploration and implementation of alternative means of helping students master foreign language skills. This estimate takes into account that some sections of second semester foreign language courses would still be needed for the college's 638 education majors (as of Fall 2008) as well as foreign language majors (47), LAS and CAS majors (16), and other students pursuing foreign language study as an elective. It also takes into account that many of the students who do not take a second semester foreign language course will enroll in some other three-credit course, but that this course is likely to have an enrollment cap of 35-40 rather than 25.

2. Reduce the mathematics requirement to the minimum established by SUNY—competency at the elementary college mathematics level—and design and implement one or more general education courses that would meet the SUNY learning outcomes while exciting students about mathematics (for example, by emphasizing the use of mathematics to analyze issues of public interest).

Rationale: SUNY accepts as meeting the system-wide mathematics requirement MAT 101 or equivalent. Our current general education program requires students to demonstrate competency in arithmetic and basic algebra through an exam administered by the Mathematics Department, through SAT or ACT scores, or through previous college course work before taking one of our required courses. When students don't meet this competency requirement, they must take MAT 101 (which approximately 300 students per year do). Most the community colleges from which Plattsburgh receives transfer students have a mathematics general education requirement consistent in level with the SUNY minimum; therefore, many of our transfer students must take an additional course at SUNY Plattsburgh even if they have satisfied the mathematics requirement at their previous college.

Most students complete Plattsburgh's general education mathematics requirement through MAT 161 Introductory Statistics. For many years there has been a high failure

rate and high drop and withdrawal rates in MAT 161, possibly in part because the course is not specifically designed for a general education audience. Even so, three rounds of general education assessment indicate that a disappointing number of students completing MAT 161 and other courses that meet SUNY Plattsburgh's general education requirement fail to meet one or more of the five SUNY learning outcomes in the math area. The Mathematics Department has recently designed a new general education course, MAT 133 Math in Context, that may help to address the first issue (and possibly also the second). Nevertheless, the deans believe that non-math and non-science students would be better served by a course that brings them to the SUNY-required competency level in mathematics with an emphasis on real world problems, similar in the latter respect to MAT 133 Math in Context. Ideally, these students would leave SUNY Plattsburgh with a more useable sense of mathematics and its role in the modern world and a more positive view of the subject matter.

Potential cost saving: \$20,000 per year, less up to \$5,000 per year in years 1 and 2 to support to the development of one or more new courses (and appropriate delivery mechanisms) that would meet the SUNY learning outcomes in mathematics and enhance the students' appreciation of the role of mathematics in the modern world. This estimate takes into account that many students would continue to take MAT 161 and/or other courses currently meeting the mathematics general education requirement because these courses are required for their majors (math and science majors, majors in business and economics, computer science, information technology, nursing, nutrition, social work, sociology, and criminal justice) or due to general interest and that others would take an alternative three-credit course with comparable course enrollment limits.

### 3. Lower the natural science and technology requirement from five to four credits.

Rationale: When the current general education program was designed, it was expected that non-science majors would take one three- or four-credit science class and one or two credits of one-credit courses that were especially designed for general education and that focused on science topics of general interest. In fact, most students take two three-credit courses, either by choice or because not enough one-credit courses have been designed and/or are taught every semester. Reducing the requirement to four credits would retain the option of meeting the requirement with a three-credit course and a one-credit course.

While the Deans' Cabinet recognizes the importance of scientific literacy for the general public and would prefer to have all Plattsburgh students take more science, this change might encourage more students to take advantage of the one-credit course option. Many of these courses provide excellent examples of how science is relevant to current issues, and they are among the few courses at the college explicitly designed for a general education audience.

Potential cost saving: \$10,000 per year. Approximately 1,100 students/year who are not science majors (or in other majors that require more than one science course) would not take one three-credit science course, but they would still have to take the fourth science credit. Most would also replace the three-credit science course with another three-credit course in another subject. Since most science courses in general education are relatively large (average enrollment limit of over 50), the cost of replacing

those three credits within the student's 120 credit minimum would likely result in no savings.

4. Lower the upper-division general education requirement from six to three credits by eliminating the three-credit upper-division requirement that includes "Individual, Society, and Responsibility" and "Arts, Literature, and Interpretation" (as options to one another) while retaining the three-credit "Global Issues" requirement.

Rationale: A second upper-division general education requirement ("Individual, Society, and Responsibility" or "Arts, Literature, and Interpretation") was added to the general education program in 2002, over and above the upper-division requirement that existed for many years in the college's previous general education programs (first with a different second upper-division requirement, later as the sole upper-division requirement). Approving enough courses for these new categories and offering enough sections each semester have proven difficult. Few new courses have been designed for the categories; some of the courses have been moved from the Global Issues category into one of these new categories, lowering the number of seats available in Global Issues; most courses in the category also meet major requirements; some departments are reluctant to propose potentially suitable courses for the category because they prefer to have upper-division courses that are effectively restricted to their majors.

While a six-credit upper-division general education requirement adds to the distinctiveness of SUNY Plattsburgh's general education program and helps to insure that all our graduates (including those who came to us as transfer students) have some exposure to SUNY Plattsburgh liberal arts courses, meeting the requirement has also proved difficult for many students, especially those in professional programs with a large number of required courses and especially transfer students. Some of the latter, in particular, meet one or both of the upper-division general education requirements through transfer courses, thus not gaining the "Plattsburgh experience" component that has been one of the underlying reasons for having an upper-division general education requirement.

Of the current two upper-division requirements, the more recently added requirement is not very well focused conceptually (as exemplified first by the "either-or" nature of the requirement and then by the range of topics included within the criteria of each of the two sub-categories, defined in the General Education Plan of 2002). The longer-standing upper-division requirement, Global Issues, is more focused and is aligned with and supportive of the college's efforts to distinguish itself through concentration on globalization and global issues and also through an emphasis on civic responsibility and good citizenship.

Potential cost savings: \$20,000 per year. This estimate takes into account that many students would need to take an alternative three-credit course to meet the 120 hour graduation requirement, and that for some students this would need to be an upper-division course, to meet the upper-division requirement.

5. Continue to develop alternative ways for students to meet the SUNY learning outcomes in oral communication.

Rationale: SUNY General Education learning outcomes include five in basic communication—two clearly in written communication, two clearly in oral

communication, and one focused on research that could be combined with written or oral communication, or both. Most SUNY colleges meet all five of these outcomes through a single three-credit course. SUNY Plattsburgh requires ENG 101 plus evidence that the two oral communication learning outcomes have been met. This can be done through a course specializing in oral communication (such as CMM 101 and THE 106) or any approved course with an oral communication component. Currently, five departments have identified courses within their majors that meet the oral communication learning outcomes and have had these courses approved for general education credit. Nevertheless, the majority of SUNY Plattsburgh students meet the oral communication requirement with a three-credit course outside their major (CMM 101 or THE 106).

Transfer students entering the college with their basic communication general education requirement completed need to take another general education course (unless they are majoring in one of the five departments that have built the oral communication requirement into their curriculum or they have taken a second course at their previous institution with a demonstrable oral communication component). Together, these factors contribute to the large number of general education credits that are effectively required for SUNY Plattsburgh students.

A survey of departments carried out a few years ago suggests that there are many additional courses offered at SUNY Plattsburgh that meet the oral communication learning outcomes, or could easily do so. In some cases, departments have declined to propose these courses for general education credit because they do not want to participate in the general education assessment program. Thus, the challenge is for departments to identify and/or develop suitable courses, and for departments and the General Education Committee to develop alternative acceptable methods for assessing student learning outcomes in oral communication (outcomes which need to be assessed as part of majors as well as general education when competence in oral communication is among the learning outcomes expected of the major).

Another alternative could be the development of one-credit courses that would meet the SUNY general education learning outcomes in oral communication, perhaps linked to content courses within the general education program and/or within majors.

Potential cost saving: \$30,000 per year, less up to \$5,000 per year in years 1 and 2 to support the development of alternative ways that students can meet the requirements and the exploration, development, and implementation of alternative means of assessing student learning outcomes in oral communication. This estimate takes into account that some sections of CMM 101 and THE 106 would still be needed for the majors that require these courses (all communication studies and human relations and family development majors and the theatre, CDS, computer science, information technology, nutrition, and fitness and wellness leadership as of Fall 2009) and for other students seeking more extensive training in oral communication. It also takes into account that many of the students who do not take a general three-credit communication course will enroll in some other three-credit course, possibly in addition to a one-credit oral communication course, but that the additional three-credit course is likely to have an enrollment cap of 35-40 rather than 25.