LE Forum I: January 30, 2017

Summary of Participant Opinions and Perceptions

Many participants felt that the current LE model should be revised to better serve students and to alleviate the burdensome process of LE certification for faculty. Most asked questions rather than drawing conclusions about how LE should function in the future. Some of the primary focus areas of the discussion included: “What skills should LE requirements instill in students?,” “How does LE currently function for students and faculty at UMN-Twin Cities?,” and, “What modes of teaching and learning would benefit students the most?” Notes from the conversation mostly fit a “brainstorming” approach to the discussion, with some tables voicing strong opinions that identified polarization between topics, such as interdisciplinary coursework versus department-specific classes, comfort of students versus rigor of courses, LE as teaching practical skills versus teaching “ways of knowing,” and courses prioritizing writing skills or communication defined broadly.

Most of the conversations were student focused, but several discussions focused on faculty autonomy and argued that LE should be managed at the departmental level or by the faculty senate. Several groups expressed the thought that current funding processes create rivalry between departments, in that departments with more students receive more funding, encouraging faculty in smaller departments to use LE requirements to entice students rather than to deliver LE themes. A fairly common discussion found the current LE review process arbitrary and time consuming for faculty: the process is overly syllabus focused and the courses are not reassessed on a regular basis. Additionally, many faculty were frustrated that courses taught in specific departments do not automatically fulfill liberal education themes for that discipline (e.g., history courses fulfilling the historical perspectives theme).

In defining a liberal education, many groups hoped to prepare students with strong critical thinking skills to carry into life. People voiced concern about students’ ability to filter information and choose sources, both in the classroom and socially, politically, and professionally. Many participants agreed that liberal education should prime students to be well-rounded, active citizens, but there was variation in the transferable skills cited as important. In order of popularity amongst tables (high to low), the following skills were mentioned: Collaboration and communication skills, information/media literacy, bias awareness, data analysis, global perspectives (a few hoping for a University-wide language requirement), writing skills, and research skills. Several groups voiced concern that transfer students and AP/PSEO/CIS students miss key components of the UMN-TC liberal arts experience when they skip certain classes, particularly in the areas of equity and
diversity and college writing. Several tables noted that an ideal LE model that creates excitement and curiosity in students, and empowers them to manage their own education. With student wellbeing in mind, participants mentioned that LE courses could do more to address variation in student’s learning styles, provide more choices and course information to students (searchable syllabi), and have faculty trained in cultural competency. They felt that the current LE requirements put additional pressure on already stressed students, offer too few choices with little flexibility, and serve as a course checklist rather than an interconnected educational “path.”

A commonly discussed solution to UMN-TC’s perceived LE shortcomings was to incentivize students to take classes outside of their major/department/college and to encourage faculty to collaborate between varying disciplines. Nine tables positively referenced the interdisciplinary model of Grand Challenge courses. A few groups were resistant to interdisciplinary LE, citing a department’s capacity to deliver rigorous and expansive coursework, and the benefit of delving into specific subject matter rather than providing a surface-level primer for multiple fields. A few faculty sought to reduce or eliminate theme requirements, while others liked the topics, but found the implementation questionable and the amount of requirements burdensome to students. One solution mentioned was to create LE learning objectives rather than courses so students may participate in diverse experiences at the University. Faculty cited many existing resources as aligned with LE goals: the libraries, UMN learning and development outcomes, student groups, study abroad, UROP, HECUA, the OED Diversity workshop, as well as many classes within their disciplines that offer LE resources to students. Such a model requires an integrated LE system, and could conclude with written or presentational reflection component, giving students greater autonomy over their education.