

Response to Letter from Senators Mark Stegeman and Mae Smith, for University of Arizona Faculty Senate Meeting, October 7, 2024

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Shortly before the September 9, 2024, meeting of the Faculty Senate, Senators Mark Stegeman and Mae Smith circulated a written letter (henceforth called the “Letter” for simplicity) to accompany Senator Stegeman’s oral remarks at the Senate meeting that day. Stegeman is the appointed chair of the ad hoc General Faculty General Education Committee (henceforth “Committee”), which has existed since early 2023, and Smith is the chair of one of its subcommittees. Since last spring, I have also been a member of the Committee, after becoming the (also Faculty Chair appointed) chair of the University-Wide General Education Committee (UWGEC), a separate, ongoing shared governance body.

I want to acknowledge that the Letter was careful to state that the views expressed were those of its two authors alone and had not been endorsed by the Committee. Since the Letter was never circulated for comments and suggestions from the full Committee, however, there were some unfortunate errors or misunderstandings that I believe should be clarified to ensure that the Faculty Senate has a more complete and accurate view of developments in General Education. In fact, Senator Stegeman has expressly asked me to describe these errors or misstatements more specifically for the record, which I take as a good sign of a commitment to open and honest dialogue (although, regrettably perhaps, the result is not as “concise” as he had hoped it would be!) I also want to state up front that I have no reason to believe there was any intent to mislead the Senate on any of these points, and, being close to these conversations, I am aware of the sincere concerns motivating claims that were made, even if they were inadvertently stated in a way that, in my view, convey erroneous impressions.

My intent is therefore not only to make the corrections that I believe should be made to the Letter for clarity, but also to use them as an opportunity for helping the Faculty Senate better understand some key issues and developments with the new General Education curriculum. The views that I express below are my own from my vantage point as UWGEC Chair on behalf of the whole faculty of the University, although I have pre-circulated a draft of this response not only to Senators Stegeman and Smith, but also to the Executive Director of General Education and members of UWGEC for any comments and suggestions they may have to improve clarity or accuracy. Here are the inadvertent errors or misunderstandings in the Letter that I would like to correct:

1. The Letter states that there is “no required natural science content (unique among major public universities that we have yet surveyed)” in the new General Education curriculum. This is incorrect. **All students are required to take at least one Exploring Perspectives-Natural Scientist course**, and they may also choose any or all of their three Building Connections courses to include natural science content as well. Thus, within the 7 courses students take for Exploring Perspectives (EP) and Building Connections (BC) credit, between 1 and 4 of those courses taken will have natural science content. This is certainly a noteworthy change from the past General Education curriculum, both in allowing greater student agency and in reducing the number of required courses exclusively in each area, in order to make room in the curriculum for the BC courses integrating multiple perspectives, which are one of the new curriculum’s most innovative and noteworthy features. Notably, having just one EP course from the Natural Scientist perspective is also exactly the same as for the other three EP areas--Humanist, Artist, and Social Scientist--which is also different from many other universities. It is possible that we could consider requiring students to take at least one BC course that also includes a natural scientist perspective, which is an idea I have floated before (or indeed even one from each of the four perspective areas!) but this would require careful consideration of the significant tradeoffs from the complexity this would add to students’ progress toward degree completion.

The reason behind the Letter’s statement of no required natural science content seems due to the belief that some courses are being approved for EP-Natural Scientist without having any disciplinary natural science content in them. In my view, it hardly seems possible to teach a natural scientist’s perspective on any subject without also teaching natural science content about that subject, and I believe that UWGEC’s deliberations about specific courses, since I became chair last year, have clearly reflected this interpretation. Fundamentally, though, it needs to be clarified that there is a “Natural Scientist” requirement in the new General Education curriculum. We can still have a worthwhile discussion about if we should consider adjustments to require more natural science (or any area) or even whether the shift from content to perspective-taking has benefited students. The shift toward “**perspective taking**” in the new General Education curriculum—understanding each discipline’s distinctive methods and tools, its ways of thinking, knowing, and doing—rather than prescribing content, is a noteworthy shift. I think this change has proven to have net advantages, but others may disagree.

2. The Letter raises another issue about “possible further postponement of the four Attributes,” claiming that their implementation date “has been repeatedly postponed, most recently, with ABOR’s approval, to Fall, 2026,” and that “comments from administration

have suggested possible further revisions, potentially including dropping some or all of the Attribute requirements.” This is inadvertently misleading in at least two different ways: First, there has only been one, carefully considered, formal postponement of making the attributes into tracked graduation requirements, which shifted the timetable forward from Fall 2024 to Fall 2026, in order to allow more data to be gathered about how students were navigating the curriculum and, most crucially, to allow inclusion of Civic Learning as part of the package. Thus it has not been “repeatedly postponed,” but just once, and for good reasons that were shared across campus and approved through shared governance. Second, **the Attributes themselves have not been postponed**, just their enactment as graduation requirements that must be tracked for all students. Thus, courses qualifying for BC and EP credit in General Education are only approved as Gen Ed courses if they demonstrate strong alignment with 1 or 2 of the attributes already in the policy – Writing, Quantitative Reasoning, Diversity & Equity, World Cultures & Societies – and students are already taking courses that include these elements. As many course proposers know all too well(!), UWGEC has tried to be diligent about ensuring that courses are well aligned with their chosen attribute(s) to be approved, even if this requires revisions.

True, there has been some discussion, especially triggered by concerns about whether the tracking of attributes as graduation requirements will add too much further complexity to navigate for student progress through the curriculum, and whether most or all students will take enough courses addressing these attributes without us even needing to track them independently as graduation requirements. This is an ongoing and vital debate. I am personally a skeptic about whether we will be able to avoid tracking them, to ensure students meet our expected outcomes for General Education, but I am sympathetic to concerns that meeting category requirements is already quite complex for students to navigate. So we will need to keep discussing this. But no one in the Office of General Education, nor on the General Faculty Committee, that I have heard, has suggested that the attributes themselves not remain as vital parts of courses offered for BC and EP, as they are already now, or that they aren’t centrally important to addressing curricular goals.

3. The Letter also raises a concern about the (lack of) “implementation of a mandatory Civics curriculum, as required by ABOR,” stating that “The Refresh curriculum submitted to ABOR for approval in 2021 omitted this component.” However, Spring 2021 is now 3.5 years ago! This statement, while reflecting genuine concern about not including Civic Learning as an attribute from the beginning, as Senator Stegeman and I (among others) were concerned about at the time, unfortunately omits mention of any further reports to ABOR that have discussed the University of Arizona’s efforts toward implementation of this

curricular component, nor the extensive faculty deliberation across campus about it. Moreover, it is worth noting that the later policy revision to General Education, referenced in #2 above, which postponed the date for tracking the Attributes as graduation requirements, and was approved through shared governance, directly referenced the ongoing incorporation of Civic Learning as a primary reason for moving this date to Fall 2026!

It is true that the new General Education curriculum that made its way through shared governance and ABOR approval back in 2020-21 knowingly deferred the addition of the Civic Learning (aka American Institutions) requirement while awaiting further discussions with the other two state universities and ABOR about how to interpret the requirement and also since this was a wholly new requirement and thus justified more extended deliberation across campus. At the time, many of us were impatient about this, and perhaps skeptical about whether Civic Learning was going to be implemented through a faculty-centered process of deliberation. (Shortly after joining UWGEC, I was even one of two co-signers of a proposal authored by Sen. Stegeman to postpone implementation of the new Gen Ed for a short period!) To leave the story off there would be quite misleading, however. A faculty task force, on which both Sen. Stegeman and I served in 2022-23, was convened by the Office of General Education (OGE), generating draft student learning outcomes and some initial discussion about implementation models. After this, the **OGE presented updates to ABOR on how the University of Arizona was incorporating Civic Learning**, including required collaboration with the other two state universities about how to assess Civic Learning, which is one of the ABOR required assessment areas for General Education, along with Writing, Quantitative Reasoning, and Critical Thinking.

In the past few years, to seek feedback on developing ideas, many presentations of different models for implementing Civic Learning have been discussed at UWGEC and the Undergraduate Council, especially through its Curriculum and Policies subcommittee. Moreover, two well-attended faculty forums on Civic Learning were convened in February 2024 to gather input more widely, and the Office of General Education then formed an advisory group, which is still meeting, for all who were interested in offering feedback. Input on the advantages and disadvantages of the specific alternative models has also been sought from the General Faculty Committee itself, and the OGE and I worked with the Committee (before I was on it) in its development of a faculty survey. Although this arguably has delayed the movement of specific proposals through the shared governance process, the valuable responses obtained through this survey, even if it took longer than we were initially hoping, suggest numerous concerns and issues we need to consider when implementing Civic Learning. Senator O'Leary, who also sits on the Committee, has undertaken valuable structured analysis of the free responses, which was not included in the Committee's first report, and I hope this can also be shared with the Faculty Senate.

I suspect this part of General Education, by the end of this academic year, if not already, will have received more faculty deliberation than any other part of the new curriculum, largely due its deferral from the original plan. Since that deferral, based on my experience, the OGE has demonstrated a commendable commitment not only to including this as a well-integrated, vital part of the Gen Ed curriculum but also to undertaking a deliberative campus-wide, faculty-centered process of conversation about it. As someone who has long advocated for faculty to take ownership of this ABOR requirement and show that we could implement it in a way that is both faithful to ABOR guidelines and consistent with our core commitments to pluralism, academic freedom, autonomy, and faculty authority over the curriculum, I, for one, am happy to take “yes” for an answer from the Office of General Education on this important collaboration with faculty governance! So, far from them simply “omitting” this, the Office has made this a vital and central part of process of shared governance over the past 2-3 years. Despite some initial deference to the General Faculty Committee to take the lead on communicating with the Faculty Senate, and also allowing space at the Senate for addressing the unusual confluence of various other crises on campus the past few years, I now stand ready as the faculty UWGEC Chair to communicate more often myself to the Senate, and I know that the OGE would also like to provide its own deeply knowledgeable perspective and vital information to the Senate.

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As a final comment, I gratefully acknowledge the legitimate concerns behind the Letter’s statements, even those that I have sought to correct or clarify in this response, and I agree that these are all vital issues for us to discuss, at UWGEC, Undergraduate Council, Faculty Senate, and across campus. I will now be seeking to do more as the chair of UWGEC to help advance understanding and deliberation about General Education at the Faculty Senate, and I look forward to further discussions about these and other concerns with the members of the Committee and with the Faculty Senate as a whole, among others. By the same token, I also highly value the input and wisdom at the Office of General Education and have found them to be a willing and eager partner in shared governance with faculty. While I have not always agreed with everything, and have sometimes pressed for changes to policies or procedures, such as to streamline the course proposal review process, I have found the Office’s leadership to be committed to genuine consideration of new ideas, meaningful faculty deliberation, and a robust model of shared governance. If we work to develop a “culture of communication and cooperation” with the OGE, as the General Faculty Committee’s charge states as its first task, I firmly believe we will be able to work together to address our common interest in and dedication to the success of the University of Arizona’s curriculum for General Education.