

To: Faculty Senate
Cc: UWGEC, Undergraduate Council, Office of General Education
From: Mark Stegeman (Chair, ad hoc faculty committee on General Education)
Date: October 8, 2024¹

The Office of General Education has proposed a tight timeline for the adoption and implementation of a university-wide Gen. Ed. Civics curriculum. For the following reasons, the ad hoc Committee believes that this timeline is unrealistic and inadvisable and has adopted, by a 13-1 vote on October 7, the following statement, which explains its position in detail. (Two members, who did not vote and have not been engaged with the issue, are excluded from this count.)

**ASSESSMENTS, CONCLUSIONS, and CONSIDERATIONS for the FACULTY SENATE
concerning further revision of the Refreshed General Education Program**

ASSESSMENTS

A) A careful and successful implementation of Civics will take more time than is allowed by imposing new course requirements, with sufficient seats, for students entering in Fall, 2026.

We admire the work done to date, including the enormous work done to solicit, support, and approve proposals for at least 550 courses within the Refreshed General Education program.

It takes nothing away from this admiration to point out that the university's challenging recent circumstances have slowed the Civics implementation work to the point that previous targets for a quality implementation are unrealistic.

We offer nine reasons to support this assessment. Different committee members rank the importance of the nine points differently, but by an overwhelming vote we believe that, taken together, they support delay.

1) *The views of the incoming permanent provost are unknown.* The new provost may disagree with the approved program and pause or reconsider its implementation, leading to confusion, delays, ill feeling, and wasted effort. Instead of trying to rush one concept forward, this year provides an excellent interval to turn current or new proposal concepts into detailed plans that can be assessed and compared through a university-wide process that includes many stakeholders.

Moreover, it seems *unreasonable to impose on a new provost the immediate burden of implementing a major curricular change, into which they had no input or opportunity for review, followed by immediate accountability for unanticipated issues, complaints, delays, and mid-course corrections.*

¹ This revision corrects an error in what is now fn. 4.

- 2) *The funding model is unknown.* It imposes considerable risk on the colleges to proceed with a major curricular change, when it is hard for them to know how to respond to or plan for proposals having unknown revenue implications.
- 3) *The faculty and other stakeholders are exhausted and stressed* from several years of controversy, leadership changes, and ongoing budget cuts. Other issues currently have more immediate impact and press harder for rapid resolution.
- 4) *Any material change to the General Education program is a massive curricular event for the entire university, which deserves serious Senate engagement and review.* It will almost immediately affect tens of millions of dollars of resource allocation and tens of thousands of students. Big curricular changes are exactly the domain over which the Faculty Senate and other internal stakeholders should be exercising early and thorough, not cursory, oversight.
- 5) *The discussion of Civics has had too little representation reflecting UA's status as an HSI, in a state situated on vast areas of native lands.* This could be remedied, at least in part, by additional appointments to the ad hoc committee.
- 6) *The currently posted alternative Civics implementation models, helpfully presented by OGE and UWGEC for consideration, lack too many details to be meaningfully assessed and compared.* Aside from the uncertain budget implications already mentioned (point (2)), the proposals lack key details:
- a) *Scope of the American Institutions curriculum.* Inside and outside of the committee's anonymous survey of last year, UA faculty have suggested additions to ABOR's required topics, including comparative systems of government and (particularly relevant for Arizona) governance of the Native Nations. Such topics could strengthen the program pedagogically, increase student interest, and allow more academic units to participate, but they do not yet appear in any of the models. Adding content topics will take time (who sets the curricular standard?) and presumably affect the comparison of implementation models.
 - b) *Incorporation of ABOR's required civic skills.* NAU covers civil discourse through three mini-attributes, one of which must be incorporated into each major course, across the university; ASU covers civil discourse and civic engagement in a separate course: Governance and Civic Engagement.
The implementation models posted for UA are vaguer, stating simply that any curriculum model must incorporate civil discourse and civic engagement. Information and data literacy, critical competencies that ABOR mentions explicitly, are barely mentioned.
 - c) *Staffing.* The ad hoc committee's faculty survey (drawing about 500 responses) showed that staffing any Civics program with enough faculty who are qualified and interested in teaching the wide range of topics required by ABOR will be a challenge for any implementation model. Unsurprisingly, the challenge increases as the scope of topics covered in a single course increases.² How to maximize student exposure to content area experts already scattered across the various colleges, when budgets for new hiring are tightly constrained, is a substantial question. It should play a significant role in the assessment of models.
 - d) *Granting (incoming and outgoing) transfer credit.* Some implementation models may make this easier than others.

² The committee's February report to the Faculty Senate summarizes some of the findings from the faculty survey.

7) *Civics implementation is inherently connected to other possible changes in the Refresh program. Constraints on the total size (in credits) of the General Education curriculum imply that the consideration of alternative implementations of Civics is hard to separate from other possible changes (e.g., in UNIV 101 and 301, the Natural Science component, the Building Connections component, and the currently scheduled imposition of the four extant Attributes). Adding Civics curricula to a program that was not originally designed to accommodate it complicates implementation, and the committee’s anonymous faculty and advisor surveys both show that complexity for students and advisors is a pressing concern.*

Dozens of responses to the advisors’ survey offered very negative comments about the planned imposition of mandatory Attributes in Fall, 2026 (e.g. “dreading,” “nightmare,” “[will] confuse students immensely,” “WAY TOO CONFUSING,” “PLEASE DO NOT INSTITUTE THE ATTRIBUTES.”).

Separately, respondents to the advisors’ survey offered sharply negative assessments of students’ perceptions of UNIV 101 and UNIV 301: over 85% of advisors who responded said that their impression of overall student opinion of the value of these courses was either 1 (mostly) or 2 on a scale of 1-5. Many advisors added written free responses about students’ reactions to 101 or 301, which were overwhelmingly negative (e.g. “waste of time,” “busywork,” “pointless”); only one of those free responses reported mixed student opinions. Someone who has taught 101 wrote “we... spend 16 weeks repeating very similar content which could be covered in 2.”³

The point is that many issues deserve discussion, even if no changes are ultimately made.

In addition to the structural connections between various possible changes, the confusion caused by piecemeal changes (e.g. advisor comments such as “Can we just get through 4 years without a change?” or “Another change, really?”) is a second reason to group any changes together into a single package. Considering packages of changes complicates the assessment of options for implementing Civics.

8) *After an implementation model is approved internally and by ABOR, actual implementation will require resolution of various other issues.*

a) *ABOR’s American Institutions requirement emphasizes content rather than methods of thought, which is the deliberate emphasis of the Perspectives and Building Connections courses in the current Refresh. This difference may affect the relative roles of colleges and departments, OGE, and UWGEC in setting and enforcing the curricular standards for Civics and reviewing proposals.*

b) *How many courses will be offered, and will that number be limited (unlike in the current Refresh)?*

c) *What process will promote viewpoint and content diversity in Civics offerings? Many responses to the committee’s faculty survey last Spring expressed concerns related to free speech, viewpoint diversity, and outside interference in content. It also seems important to engage student interest by offering courses having different disciplinary or philosophical orientations.*

d) *Considering the above issues, what will be the process for inviting proposals? How much time will faculty have to prepare them? And how long will it take to review them?*

e) *What process will ensure that enough seats are offered, in-person and online, in any semester, in a variety of time slots? Preliminary data from the committee’s recent survey of undergraduate advisors show that the availability of seats for various Refresh categories, in-person and online, is a surprisingly acute issue. More than 40% of advisors reported that, over the course of three recent semesters, they took exceptional steps at least twice, because they could “only address a student’s [General Education] needs by reaching out*

³ Reported data from the advisors’ survey are preliminary, because a small number of late responses are not included. The committee’s next formal report to the Senate will report complete data from that survey.

to colleges or departments to expand available seats or make other special accommodations.”⁴

f) *What will be the sources of funding for the development of new curricula or co-taught courses?*

9) *There is considerable sentiment among the faculty, outside of the inner core of persons most engaged with the implementation, that outreach on the Refresh and especially the Civics mandate has been thin.* Reasonable or not, this shows up clearly in the ad hoc committee’s anonymous surveys of the teaching faculty and the undergraduate advisors.

When asked whether the G.E. Refresh process (development and implementation), over the past 4-5 years, included “adequate opportunities for input from the academic advising community,” 13% said that opportunities were “adequate” or “excellent,” while 70% said “minimal” or “not enough” (the rest were unsure).

December’s faculty survey on Civics had a response rate of 20%, presumably with over-representation of persons who had some awareness of the requirement, due to self-selection. Even so, 65% of persons who self-identified as coming from outside SBS had “never heard of” ABOR’s mandate to teach American Institutions. Another 23% “knew little about its specific requirements.” (The percentages including respondents from SBS were slightly lower.)⁵

NAU conducted a long and thorough process for collecting faculty, staff and student input on its new General Education program, including Civics. We summarize this process from materials that NAU has submitted to ABOR, with direct excerpts from its 2021 proposal package in quotes.

AY 2019-2021 [two years]

NAU’s Liberal Studies Task Force met biweekly for a year to develop a General Education proposal, response to ABOR’s new General Education policy. During the second year: “Following an extensive feedback and revision cycle (two full cycles of review and feedback by all academic committees and colleges, and the student governing body),” the proposal was unanimously recommended by three shared governance committees and presented to the Faculty Senate in March. The Senate cast a 91% approval vote in April, with the requirement that NAU “conduct capacity and implementation modeling.” ABOR approved the proposal in September 2021.

AY 2021-2025 [four years]

Since initial ABOR approval, NAU is spending four years preparing for implementation, including one change in the curriculum that was made at ABOR’s request in response to negative media coverage of the new program. NAU adopted this extended implementation period even though it pre-approved all its previous Gen. Ed. Courses for the new program, eliminating a major process from UA’s implementation model.

AY 2025-2026

The new General Education program will be required for entering students.

⁴ The survey indicates that seat shortages are slightly more acute for in-person sections, especially for the Arts and Humanities Perspectives. Among online courses, the relative shortages are in Foundations courses, especially Math Foundations, and the Arts Perspective. Some advisors expressed concern that implementing the Attributes requirements may exacerbate shortages.

⁵ These data were previously reported in the committee’s February report to the Faculty Senate.

UA's official faculty input process for the implementation of a Civics curriculum began with the creation of the Civics Task Force in Spring, 2022.⁶ This group met for about a year and developed draft learning outcomes, which as far as we know never entered a comment, revision and approval process. After a year-long gap, we applaud the recent creation of the Civic Learning and Civic Knowledge group, which has met once. Presumably due to the recent string of events affecting UA's management, the activity of these two groups does not compare to NAU's vigorous process in 2019-2021.

If we roughly align UA's current progress to NAU's situation sometime in 2020, then from that point five more years will have elapsed before NAU requires entering students to take Civics courses. This may be slower than necessary, but it suggests that OGE's current target of full implementation in less than two years is impractical. Nothing to date, in UA's implementation of the Refresh curriculum, suggests to us that this target is realistic.

B) There is no apparent need to implement Civics on such a fast timetable.

Against the advantages of slowing the process down, we see minimal disadvantages, from the institutional viewpoint.

10) *An obvious way to avoid a confusing sequence of changes to the General Education curriculum is to postpone the Attributes rollout (rather than to accelerate the Civics rollout), to allow any changes to occur together.* The Regents probably share our understanding of UA's changed circumstances, and there is precedent. ABOR allowed UA to postpone the original Spring 2022 rollout of the Attributes without formal approval but without apparent protest.

11) *The curriculum rollout is already, in practice, chronologically detached from the tri-university Civics assessment.* The timing of the assessment, which is on schedule due in part to excellent work by OGE, no longer seems relevant for decisions about the timing of the implementation of the Civics curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

The committee applauds the excellent work done to date, but we believe that NAU's process suggests that much more collaborative work, feedback from the campus community, and possibly revision, would be appropriate and useful before taking a thoroughly vetted proposal to ABOR. Building a higher degree of consensus seems especially important at this time and could lead to a much smoother Faculty Senate approval process than the controversial and highly contentious Senate meeting that occurred in 2021, surrounding UA's original Refresh proposal to ABOR.

Moreover, things done quickly are often not done well. If the institution assigns high priority to the pedagogical quality of the General Education program, then this argues against haste.

For its part, the ad hoc committee plans to work this semester on points (6) and (7), to advance the development and assessment of alternative proposals for the implementation of Civics. Processing input from a wide range of stakeholders could lead to the best model being “none of the above.” In short, we believe that much progress can occur during this academic year, without trying to accelerate the process beyond what is prudent or reasonably possible.

We will also work to build a rough alternative timeline, which will display a hypothetical sequence of steps toward a well-vetted revision of the Refresh, including implementation of Civics. This may help to guide planning and to clarify the rationale for amending the Fall, 2026 target.

CONSIDERATIONS for the FACULTY SENATE

- A) The Senate may wish to consider endorsing parts or all of this assessment, partly as a signal to other decision-makers.

- B) The Senate may wish to ask the ad hoc committee to work with faculty leadership to set up a Senate study session devoted to General Education, with no action items permitted, to allow meaningful engagement and input from all interested Senators. The committee would suggest that this be done when more data and more complete proposals are available, to facilitate a productive discussion.

Affirming members

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Michelle Halla | (Libraries) |
| Tania Leal | (Humanities) |
| Matthew Mugmon | (Fine Arts) |
| Tarnia Newton | (Nursing) |
| Anna O’Leary | (SBS) |
| Ethan Orr | (CALES) |
| Kelly Potter | (Engineering) |
| Jennifer Ravia | (CALES) |
| Kirssa Rickman | (SBS) |
| Joellen Russell | (Science) |
| Mae Smith | (Education, emeritus) |
| Mark Stegeman | (Management) |
| Keith Swisher | (Law) |

⁶ The ad hoc Committee Chair was a member of this task force.