System-wide Core Competencies: Recommendation to the General Education Council
from the Subcommittee on Core Competencies (10/16/2013)
Approved by the GEC: 10/17/2013

The Core Competencies Subcommittee of the General Education Council (GEC) was charged to propose a set of core competencies that may be shared across the system. This report presents those recommendations and briefly discusses the committee's deliberative process.

For this discussion, core competencies were defined as the desired skills or behaviors developed from the beginning of a student's general education through completion of the undergraduate degree. Core competencies include skills and behaviors such as writing, thinking, and problem solving that are not discipline-specific. Disciplinary knowledge areas, such as humanities, social sciences, math and science, although important to general education, were deemed different than competencies. As such, specific content knowledge areas were not considered for inclusion in the set of core competencies.

The work of the Core Competencies Subcommittee was aided by review of the General Education programs across the constituent institutions; several recent articles on learning outcomes, competencies, and general education; and the report of the Faculty Advisory Council (FAC), "Our University, Our Future: A Faculty Vision for UNC Strategic Directions."

From this review, the subcommittee observed that there is much overlap between the literature on core competencies and the general education outcomes currently sought across the system. As employers and professional schools have called for more college graduates skilled in writing, problem solving and critical thinking, similar emphases have emerged on the UNC campuses.

In addition, it was noted that each campus approaches the development of competencies through widely diverse general education and upper division across-the-curriculum frameworks. Each campus's approach is designed to support the institution's specific mission and goals. The subcommittee believes that it is important for each campus to retain its flexibility in approach to their students' educations and that doing so will not hinder the identification of a set of core competencies to be shared across the UNC system.

The subcommittee therefore turned its attention to identifying a set of core competencies for discussion. The review of the literature, coupled with an analysis of the campus-based general education programs, revealed that the variety of competencies necessary for success in the 21st century global knowledge-based economy is enormous and ranges from basic writing and reading skills to behaviors such as teamwork and intercultural competence. In an effort to narrow the focus, the committee considered the work of the FAC, which highlighted the similarities of core competencies across the system. The list of potential core competencies that emerged from the subcommittee's review correlates well with employer surveys as well as the literature on best practices and outcomes for general education. These competencies include the following:
    1. Critical Thinking
    2. Critical Reading
    3. Written Communication
    4. Oral Communication
    5. Information Literacy
    6. Creative Thinking
    7. Global Learning

In a survey conducted in September 2013, faculty from across the system were asked to review these seven competencies and to rank their top three choices for system-wide core competencies. The faculty were also offered an opportunity to write in alternative choices for their top three rankings. Almost three-thousand faculty members (including faculty from all 17 campuses) responded to the survey. The majority of the respondents were tenured and tenure-track faculty, although responses were also obtained from non-tenure-track faculty, administrators, and academic support staff.

Critical Thinking and *Written Communication* were the respondents' clear top choices for system-wide competencies (see graph, below). All other competencies received significantly lower numbers of votes. Moreover, among the more than 900 written responses to the survey's open-ended request for comments and/or additional suggested competencies, critical thinking and written communication received the most comments. Many respondents emphasized the need to ensure that our graduates can write clearly and persuasively and linked this necessity to the needs of today's employers. Similarly, critical thinking was endorsed as a essential 21st century skill. Again, many of the comments were linked to today's global knowledge-based economy.
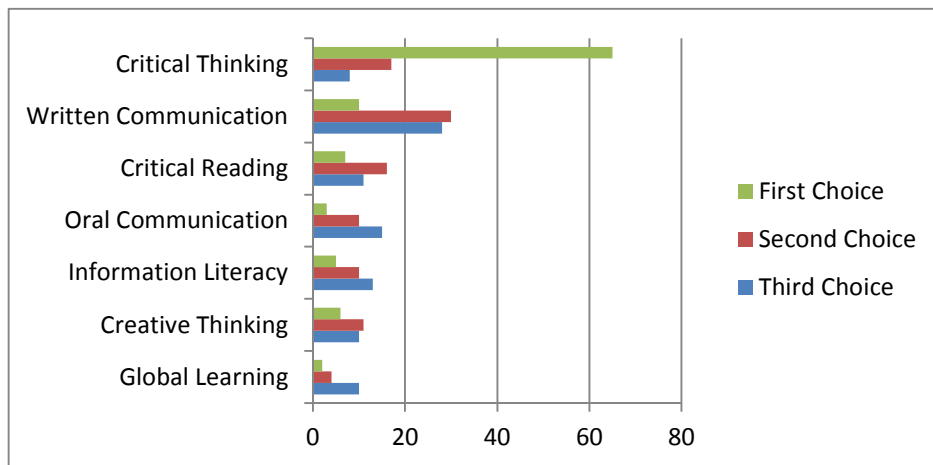
The survey, which garnered 2822 responses (58% tenured and tenure-track faculty, 22% non-tenure-track faculty, 6% academic administrator, and 8% academic staff) from across the UNC system, clearly identified *Critical Thinking* and *Written Communication* as the competencies to recommend for the system-wide core.

The subcommittee supports the survey results and recommends the adoption of *Critical Thinking* and *Written Communication* as core competencies for UNC system institutions. We have several reasons for this recommendation.

First, the subcommittee recognizes that critical thinking and written communication already exist as campus-wide learning goals on each of the UNC campuses. For example, at UNC Wilmington a major general education goal is that all "students will integrate multiple methods and perspectives to critically examine complex problems" and at UNC Greensboro general education "provides students with the foundational knowledge, skills, and values necessary to be critical and creative thinkers." In terms of written communication, UNC Chapel Hill considers "the ability to communicate effectively" a "foundational" skill that must be achieved by all students. Fayetteville State University requires all students to "comprehend, analyze, and evaluate the effectiveness of various forms of written and spoken communication" and to "assemble original written and spoken communications that display appropriate organization, clarity, and documentation for a given purpose and

audience." And, on several UNC campuses, the importance of written communication is evident in cross-disciplinary writing programs that extend beyond traditional lower division general education programs and into upper-division and disciplinary offerings. Similar statements of the importance of critical thinking and written communication can be found on the websites of all 17 campuses. Thus, it is clear that the UNC institutions already hold these two competencies as essential to an undergraduate education.

Second, both critical thinking and written communication can be realized through a myriad of courses and subject matter, thus allowing for diverse methods of implementation across various general education and across-the-curriculum programs within the system. Consider that the AAC&U defines critical thinking as "a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion." Courses in disciplinary areas across the campuses can and do develop students' competency in critical thinking. Similar observations can be advanced for written communication. The AAC&U Value Rubric describes written communication as "the development and expression of ideas in writing …. [that] can involve working with many different writing technologies, and mixing texts, data, and images…" and reminds us that "written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum." Again, there is much evidence that campuses are already invested in a variety of writing-across-the-curriculum programs that include assignments such as laboratory reports in the sciences, response papers in the humanities and social science courses, and capstone project reports in many disciplines.

The selection of *Critical Thinking* and *Written Communication* as system-wide competencies will allow campuses to retain and enhance their in-place mission- and constituency-specific writing and critical thinking curricula and to retain the autonomy to complement these core competencies with other skills and knowledge relevant to the campus mission and goals. The subcommittee reiterates that the expanse of competencies relevant for personal and professional success is great. However, how such competencies correlate with other campus-specific goals is varied. Some UNC campuses are engaged more heavily in sustainability, for example, while others are focused on globalization. Adopting two system-wide core competencies allows the campuses to customize their general education curricula and focus while advancing the UNC goal.

Finally, on a purely practical note, the subcommittee believes that adopting two system-wide competencies will result in a much more manageable assessment task than would the adoption of a longer list of competencies. As is mandated in the charge of the GEC, system-wide assessment of these core competencies will be necessary. The subcommittee is confident that identifying and implementing assessment strategies for a core of two strong and clearly important competencies, while not trivial, is a task that our campuses can achieve. A first step in this process is clearing defining the selected competencies. The Core Competencies Subcommittee of the GEC will recommend UNC system-specific definitions and subcomponent lists for the *Critical Thinking* and *Written Communication* competencies by the end of November 2013.