

## **The University Conversation on General Education 2006 Report**

(Reported to the FGCU Faculty Senate on February 16, 2007)

### Introduction

In the spring of 2006 the FGCU General Education Council initiated a new concept in university collaboration with the staging of *The University Conversation on General Education*. Members of the community, students, staff, and faculty joined in two forums to share their perceptions of the FGCU General Education Program. Their discussions were guided by the following set of questions:

- What do you believe is the purpose of a General Education Program?
- What types of courses should be included in a General Education Program?
- Should the General Education Program prepare students for their majors? If so, how?
- Should the General Education Program play a role in preparing students to be productive and responsible citizens? If so, how?
- What do employers and other communities external to the university expect from a graduate of FGCU, and what is the role of General Education in meeting these expectations?

The goals of the University Conversation were twofold: (1) to provide an opportunity for all constituents to express their opinions about General Education at Florida Gulf Coast University and (2) to increase the level of input to the General Education Council, thereby improving the Council's ability to make effective and broadly supported recommendations for change

The General Education Council has analyzed the results of the Conversation to identify salient issues, beliefs, and goals expressed by the participants. An explanation of the methodology employed and the results of the Conversation follow.

### Methodology

The intent of the University Conversation was to capitalize on the experiences and opinions of key constituents of the general education curriculum. Consequently, a methodology was employed that took full advantage of the individual and collective knowledge and perspectives of participants. Each participant was a representative of at least one group of constituents: students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members, including employers and volunteer organizations.

Upon arriving, participants received a colored card corresponding to the constituency he/she represented. The seats at each table were also color-coded, guaranteeing that every discussion group included representatives from each constituency. Following brief introductory comments by University leaders, discussion groups engaged in a conversation guided by a facilitator and prompted by the questions delineated above. This process yielded valuable information while also demonstrating the importance of learning in action. Diverse group membership provided a unique opportunity to share multiple perspectives and to process that information in a synergistic manner. The civil exchange of views on general education from diverse constituents provided

invaluable information to the General Education Council on both the unique and shared expectations of the General Education Program stakeholders.

Conversation facilitators were selected and trained in advance to insure consistency in the group discussions. Most facilitators participated in both sessions. Notes summarizing the discussion of the five questions were recorded and submitted by each facilitator. In addition, participants were asked to complete the Participant Feedback Sheet prior to leaving the venue. This sheet gave participants the opportunity to reflect privately on the discussion and to offer additional feedback. Finally, a debriefing session with all facilitators was conducted following both forums.

The University Conversation on General Education used a qualitative approach to obtain descriptive data about the General Education program. A semi-structured interview technique was used to ensure that the same information was covered in all of the focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were used because they are very stimulating and the resulting group synergy has the potential of uncovering ideas and constructs that might be missed in individual interviews. When participants have the opportunity to hear other participants' responses, they then have the opportunity to make additional comments that go beyond their original response. This provides high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in context of the views of others.

### Participation

The Conversation was described and participation was solicited through the campus-wide distribution of a flyer (Appendix A). In addition, the General Education Director, the General Education Council Chair and representative Council members extended in-person invitations at meetings of the FGCU Faculty Senate, Deans Council, Senate Leadership Team, Advisory Council, Staff Advisory Council, Student Government, Administrative Services, Student Services, Center for Civic Engagement, and the leaderships teams for each of the five Colleges. Campus-wide email invitations were sent through the Office of Academic Affairs. Copies of the forum questions were distributed in advance.

Two separate Conversation forums were held, on March 30 and April 5, 2006. At each forum, there were 8-10 people per table.

March 30: 11 students, 13 faculty members, 10 staff/administration, 2 community members  
April 5: 39 students, 14 faculty members, 11 staff/administration, 3 community members

### Data and Analysis

The Colaizzi Interpretive Approach, as outlined by Colaizzi (1978), was used for data analysis.<sup>1</sup> The Colaizzi approach involves: 1) reading discussion notes to get a sense of the whole; 2) extracting significant statements from the discussion notes; 3) organizing the significant statements into themes; and 4) abstracting themes to a higher level and sorting them into theme

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<sup>1</sup> Colaizzi, P. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. Vaile and M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 48-71). New York: Oxford University Press.

clusters. Each abstracted theme and theme cluster was referred back to the original notes to validate accuracy and fit.

Responses for each of the five questions were summarized to encompass the general flavor of the responses. This resulted in a shorter but more compact list of responses for each question (Appendix B). The individual written responses on the Participant Feedback Sheet were summarized using the same process (Appendix C).

A second analysis was completed by reviewing both the Composite Facilitator Report and the Summary of Individual Participant Written Feedback. From this summarized grouping of responses, distinct themes were identified and organized into six categories: knowledge base, disciplined behavior, skills/competencies, community involvement/diversity, job preparedness, and faculty expectations and standards (Appendix D).

### Findings

The following summaries of each of the six categories reflect the general content of the responses in each of the categories.

Knowledge Base – Participants noted the need to introduce students to the nature of the various academic disciplines as well as interdisciplinary learning. It was emphasized that local, national, and global issues need to be woven into content areas so that students are able to experience concrete and practical applications for their learning.

Disciplined Behavior – Participants indicated that the two years of General Education need to provide opportunities for students to develop effective personal characteristics such as self-discipline, responsibility, respectfulness, open-mindedness, time management, accountability, trustworthiness, and ethical behavior.

Skills/Competencies – Participants strongly supported a General Education Program that is focused more on the development of skills/competencies than on course content. Participant responses indicated that they considered content to be of great importance, but also consistently identified the need for the competencies to be taught across the curriculum, and that the General Education Program should provide an arena in which students develop proficiency in skills or competencies such as writing, reading comprehension, listening, public speaking, mathematics, information retrieval, and use of technology. Also noted in this area is the need for students to develop skills in working with groups, effectively dealing with conflict, and learning to adapt to change. In addition, participants noted that critical thinking and decision making grow out of these competencies and are major expectations for the General Education experience.

Community Involvement/Diversity – Participants strongly endorsed education that provides multi-cultural, global, and ecological perspectives, a clear understanding of one's role in a democracy, and the development of leadership skills and the ability to effect change.

Job Preparedness – Participants linked the information in this category with the behaviors and competencies noted in the previous categories. In order for students to become prepared for the workplace, they need to be exposed to a variety of careers, broadly experience world and community issues, and learn to be productive and responsible community members.

Faculty Expectations and Standards – Participants reported their belief that the development of competencies is imparted more through instructors' expectations/standards than through the content of the curriculum. An open environment for learning and expressing ideas is essential for the educational process.

### Conclusions

The participants supported General Education as a university experience that should help students master a well-rounded, basic body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will (a) become the foundation for a variety of major academic areas and (b) provide a basis for life-long learning. *The Conversation on General Education* confirmed that General Education is complex, involving much more than the compilation of a list of courses regardless of how carefully and thoughtfully they might be selected. Indeed, a General Education Program is more than the curriculum. It is essentially a culture. Implicit in the development of this culture is the necessity for continued communication among all concerned constituents (students, faculty, staff, administration, the Library, Student services, and the external community) so that a general understanding of both the connectedness among the disciplines and the growth of necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions can be collectively and purposefully developed in the FGCU General Education Program.

The Conversation Report and Appendices are available the FGCU Marlin SHARE drive: Faculty Governance\Faculty Senate Teams\General Education Council.

Appendix A: Flyer for *The Conversation on General Education*

Appendix B: Composite Facilitator Report

Appendix C: Summary of Individual Participant Written Feedback

Appendix D: Emerging Themes Drawn from Appendix B and C