Spring 2008 Cohort Responses

As you reflect back over your experience with Westmont's General Education program, what do you understand as the primary goal(s) of the program?

1. Over the course of four years at Westmont, I have found that the primary goal of the General Education program is to give each student a chance to experience education outside of their chosen major. As a theatre arts major, being required to take science classes seemed tedious at the time, but I have learned about the unique similarities between what I do in the theatre and what my biology major friends do in the lab. The General Education program gives us all a chances to eat from the buffet of the college before choosing our main course.

2. As far as I can understand, the primary goal of the program is to train your mind to think in a variety of ways, ways that in sum total comprise a Christian Liberal Arts Education. We learn to think across a wide range of disciplines and to think of these disciplines in a Christian context (as well as applying an academic lens to our faith for perhaps the first time). It wants to educate us into being able to understand a wide range of concepts, because that actually prepares us for the real world.

3. The primary goal was to provide a liberal arts education from a Christian perspective.

4. My understanding of the GE program, as I look back over the last four years, is that the primary goal of the GE program is to ensure that students receive a well rounded, faith centered education. The overarching theme of the GE program, at least in my experience, has been the development of the breadth of knowledge that allows one to effectively love and engage in the world in a way that is honoring to God and His will.

5. My understanding of the GE program’s goals is that it strives to create well rounded students that are able to critically think through problems. I think the program equips students to look at problems from many different points of view and from there decide on the best course of action.

6. to give students a broad sweep and general appreciation for learning
How well have these goals of the General Education program been articulated? What contexts (e.g. public presentations, syllabi, advising sessions, classes) have the most potential for effectively communicating a coherent vision of the goals of General Education? In your experience, which contexts lived up to their potential? How? What would help the other avenues live up to their potential?

1. Unfortunately, I do not think that the specific goals of the program have been effectively communicated to me. I have taken it upon myself to try to understand the reasons for taking the classes I have taken. I believe that public presentations, in class discussions and advising sessions are the best way to effectively communicate to students. I have found it hard to understand why, for instance, History of Western Art will cover a history GE, while History of Theatre will not. The program is confusing to navigate on one's own, and the guidance of those who wrote the program would be the most effective. I have sat in advising sessions with professors who are even confused by the changes and the classes that need to be taken.

2. These goals haven't been articulated all that well, and neither have the details of the program. I wouldn't know them that well at all if I hadn't had to stay up late scrutinizing the GE website by myself every night before registering for a new semester. Other than the presentation during what I think was Perspectives (which we don't have any more and which makes this even less well articulated) none of the professors who advised me during my time at Westmont (and there were 4, counting a perspectives session where misadvising led to an extra semester of classes than would have been necessary), none of the professors had an understanding of the system beyond the requirements satisfied by their individual classes, as anything other than boxes to be checked off. Syllabi were sort of effective in explaining what each class hoped to achieve, but by no means contributed to an overall coherent understanding of the comprehensive program. It would be great if the philosophical perspectives or the historical class that we all have to take could lay it out a little.

I learned nothing about the life sciences from Dr. Smith's general psych class my freshman year, only the APA style. I learned very little in Dr. Whiteman's Intro to Christian Doctrine class...and Dr. Robbins' World History in Christian Perspective class was not really a class at all but freewheeling quasi-philosophical discussions around massive tests that had nothing to do with the material. I didn't really get a picture of what we were trying to learn.

I did enjoy Dr. Roger's physics of music class, as well as Dr. Fisk's New Testament and Dr. Longman's Old Testament. I enjoyed them because the instructors were able to teach me things about subjects where I had very little background, and I was able to use these new understandings in a lot of my other Westmont classes, and my faith.
More consistency among the classes, as in ALL of the GE options living up to the names of their respective categories, would have been nice. We didn't take the classes because we wanted to, but to satisfy graduation requirements, and many times this felt like being forced through a professor's hoops or being trained as a proto-history major, proto-psych major, or what have you, instead of a genuine learning experience.

3. I feel like the goals have been well articulated, unless I completely missed their meaning. I don't believe that I've ever had them specifically defined aside from the documents given to us in the catalogs and a few other documents presented during my freshman year. I heard a lecture on it when I was here for the Monroe Scholar Candidates' Weekend, but I don't really remember what was said as that was a rather nerve wracking experience. I think maybe a little spiel could be worked in during the first chapel of the year as this would allow all students to hear it and hopefully with that and all the documentation everyone would have a basic understanding.

4. The goals of the GE program have been communicated well in all of my class syllabi, and while all of my professors encouraged me to review the goals in the syllabi, many discussed them in class as well. I don’t feel, however, that it’s particularly necessary to communicate the goals at the beginning of the class. It’s important that the professors know the goals well and know how they plan to achieve them in their classes, but I did not receive any benefit from knowing the goals at the beginning of class myself. I could only see how the goals were met and understand their meaning upon reflection. I wouldn’t want to create some dreadful assignment associated with reflection on GE goals, but I think it might be more worthwhile for professors to spend some time in discussion at the end of a class, representing the goals and asking students how the goals were met for them through the class. Reading the goals at the beginning of a class, it sometimes seemed that professors had to stretch the material to come up with ways to meet the goals, but the goals were always powerfully met within the class. As I look back, it doesn’t seem as though any stretching of the material was necessary, and I recognize and appreciate the unique ways that each of my professors seamlessly communicated and achieved the goals. Once again, however, this appreciation has only come through reflection, and I think reflecting upon the goals is more important than communicating them at the start of a class.

5. From my experience I think that these goals have not been articulated very well. I am not sure that my understanding of the GE program would be clear if it wasn’t for my experience on this committee and my experience working in the admissions office. Students are exposed to the purpose of the program through professor syllabi, but beyond that not very often. I believe that a clear presentation of the program’s goals from the admissions office to prospective students and more discussion about the goals in the classroom would be the most efficient and effective way to educate students to them.

6. I feel like the greatest strength is that we have learned a lot about many different things that lets us weave our own idea of knowledge. As graduation has approached, I have found myself appreciating how many different courses interact with each other.
In your experience, what have been the most and least effective portions of the General Education program? Why/How?

1. I think the most effective portions of the program have been the writing/speech intensive inside and outside of the major. I feel that it is important for us to learn how to write well not only within our chosen discipline, but also outside of that discipline. I have also enjoyed taking art classes and physical education classes, they can be a fun diversion from the daily grind, and get us to think differently.

As far as least effective, I think the serving society General Education requirement was not effective. I worked my hours through the zero units, applied studies class and found myself to be more of a burden on the organization I was working for than a help. Twelve hours is too short an amount of time to be taken seriously. Also, I think that if, within a given major there is a history class that is required, it should count for the students who are majoring in that subject. For example, Theatre majors should be able to count History of Theatre for their thinking historically G.E.

2. Some of the most effective portions have been the classes where the instructors realized that we were taking the class, even as a choice among several, out of requirement. Dr. Rogers' class was a great example of this. I had never taken a physics class before in my life, but he introduced us to the field and shared his love of the subject with us, understanding that many of us were probably not physics majors, or even remotely interested in the physical sciences as a discipline.

The least effective portions of the GE program were when the professor treated it as an intro to a serious study of the major. When Dr. Smith spent one half of the semester making sure we learned the APA style, and the tests were on information a month ahead of the material covered in her actual psychology lectures, it made for a much less effective learning experience, and DEFINITELY a learning experience having next to nothing to do with the life sciences, but everything to do with bringing up psych majors.

In short, the GE classes where the professors effectively account for the fact that not everyone (in many cases no one) is intending to spend their time at Westmont in the major of that class. And its those classes (Old Testament with Dr. Longman, Accounting with Dave Odell) in which I learned and are also the ones that almost influenced my choice of major the most. In fact, I chose my major, Comm Studies, based on taking Messages, Meaning, and Culture entirely by chance.

3. The most effective portion of the General Education program was the requirement of a variety of classes outside of our comfort zones. I may not have enjoyed taking subjects like Philosophy, but they are good for a strong intellectual basis.

I think one of the least effective portions was the wholly Christian perspective. I think it would have been nice to get a variety of opinions so that more educated decisions could be made. This particularly affected me in Philosophy where we only saw the one side of major debates, such as intelligent design. This was disturbed me as I came from an extremely secular high school where they foisted their opinions on the students and I had a similar feeling here.
4. The most important components of the GE, at least for me, were the thinking historically and thinking globally components of “common inquiries.” The classes that I took to fulfill these credits were invaluable to my understanding of myself, the world, and my place in it. Particularly in a community like Westmont, where all of the students, faculty and staff share the same faith, and where a large number are from a similar culture and socio-economic level, it is important to recognize the world outside of Westmont. These sections of the GE helped me to do that, and both pointed out my own biases and showed me how to better approach the world with an open heart and a desire for understanding. I did come to think more globally and historically through the classes that I took for those components of the GE, and now have a deep appreciation for how knowledge can lead to understanding, love, and reconciliation.

5. At first I was a little unsure about how much I would like or appreciate the GE requirements. However, after taking them for four years I greatly appreciate the classes that I took for the GE program and would consider my education incomplete without them. While I was taking certain classes I was uncertain as to how they would benefit my education or help me to think critically, however, I have found myself referring to what I learned in those classes more and more in everyday situations and/or using the critical thinking skills I learned in those classes much more than I expected.

6. feel like westmont has failed to my expectations of "teaching us how to think" as I feel like that area wasn't as well addressed as the others.
Based on your experience, is there a change that you would suggest? If so, what would it be and why?

1. I would change the serving society requirement. I think that it is headed in the right direction, but needs some fine tuning before it becomes all that it can be. I would try to work more major required classes into the G.E. I would also probably do away with one of the math G.E’s. Most students have that class covered by one class anyways, so it is almost pointless to have two requirements.

2. The curricula that the classes cover varies SO much by professor. I had a horrible experience in Dr. Whiteman's class, but my friends who took Dr. Work still talk about it four years later. Similarly with Dr's Robbins and Chapman, in the same order...If there was some way that the same material could be covered in each class, or any measure of increasing the consistency or actual relation of material covered to material in the category. More accountability in that regard would be make the program more effective.

In addition, more classes could be offered in survey form, like they do with history of western music (music major form) and survey of western music (GE form).

I understand that our class represents the first to come through the system entirely under the GE program and that the current system represents the best efforts on the part of faculty and administration, and the occasional slip-up on the part of individual professors hasn't done too much to compromise an excellent westmont education. That being said, I hope that our feedback will be carefully considered and taken into account as it pertains to the structure of the program.

3. I know that the keeping Westmont as a Christian college is important to everyone, but I feel like there should be a few non-Christian teachers, not necessarily atheists or something maybe just apathetic. I think there should be a little variety within the teaching staff. I have a hard time dealing with people who are vehemently opinionated and try to force others to see the world as they do. I don't really feel like people are given a choice in their beliefs here which I believe is hard for the few non-Christians who come here and the more abundant unsure Christians. I was one of those unsure Christians, wavering between belief and disbelief and I feel like Westmont hasn't helped much in my quandary due to the extremism of opinions within the faculty and the student body.

4. I feel that the GE program has been excellently designed and I appreciate the education I have received as a result of the skilled execution of that program. I have a already suggested that the goals of the GE might best be communicated and understood upon reflection, but I would like to add that I think it might be beneficial to add a component to the GE that requires students to study a religion outside of Christianity. I did not have room in my schedule to take any of the classes on other religions that are offered, and this is something I really wish I would have had time to pursue. I feel, especially after the appreciation for a global and historical perspective that I developed through the GE
program, that a component that looks at other religions would be very beneficial. Westmont is a Christian college, but I believe that knowledge leads to greater understanding, which is, in my opinion, essential for real love and reconciliation, and I must argue that Christians should have some knowledge of other faiths. A survey course may be all that the GE could include, but a survey course covering world religions, and hitting on important contemporary religions within the United States, such as Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Scientology would, in my opinion, be a great asset to Westmont’s GE program.

5. One of the only changes I would suggest is to continue to expand the pool of classes that fulfill the different requirements. I think that the more options available the more likely students will be excited about taking classes in areas other than their major. I also think it is important to work on developing classes within every major that will fulfill the requirements within the Competent and Compassionate Action section. Students are typically looking to fulfill this requirement towards the end of their time at Westmont which is also when they are trying to take all their required upper division elective units within their major. It would be a lot less stressful to have options to complete these requirements that were with your major.

6. I’d want more student projects. One of the best examples of this was Dr. Morgan’s intermediate macro debate project where I feel like A) I learned more than I could have ever in class and B) I learned to think about the subject matter on my own and bring up new opinions and solutions.