January 7, 2019

Dear Oregon Tech Community:

The remaining members of the General Education Review Task Force (GERT Force) would like to provide our perspective on the General Education Reform Advisory Committee (GERAC) report dated October 5, 2018. The GERT Force members appreciate the conversations that have served to move this work forward and the countless person-hours of faculty on GEAC and in the Office of Academic Excellence. Extensive analysis and increased clarity on the GERAC recommended model has been provided by Seth Anthony in his [report](https://www.oit.edu/faculty-staff/provost/gerac) dated December 31, 2018. Our primary motivation for this letter is to emphasize the importance of all elements of the Essential Studies model and to request a postponement of any decision regarding implementation until new academic leadership is on board and has had an opportunity to review the original work of the GERT Force.

The original charge of the GERT Force was three-part:

1. Review the current general education program and current best practices in general education
2. Provide a rationale for general education at Oregon Tech that would guide more regular review efforts in the future
3. Propose a reformed general education model for Oregon Tech and outline an implementation plan

The results of the GERT Force work were documented in the group’s [final report](https://oregontechsfstatic.azureedge.net/sitefinity-production/docs/default-source/provost-documents/general-education-review-docs/report-of-the-general-education-review-task-force.pdf?sfvrsn=c4389560_0). In summary, the group determined that the general education program at Oregon Tech had not been significantly reformed since 1983, lacked a rationale to guide changes to the program, and retained a dated, discipline-based, disconnected, a la carte approach to general education. The group also determined that general education reforms are active around the country and are focused on high-impact practices including outcomes-based models, interdisciplinary experiences, and signature work. The rationale for general education proposed by the group, and attached to this letter, seeks to articulate a general education program that supports Oregon Tech’s mission and strengths by aligning coursework and experiences in all academic programs with the institution’s Essential Student Learning Outcomes (ESLOs). The qualities of the general education program are articulated in the final section of the rationale.

The model that the GERT Force proposed, after three years and three rounds of model mapping and revision involving all academic departments and other stakeholders, was called Essential Studies. Its key attributes are

1. alignment of vertically integrated coursework into six ESLO pathways
2. integration of programmatic coursework with foundational and vertically integrated general education coursework
3. synthesis of the ESLOs in the junior year via the Essential Studies Synthesis Experience (ESSE) course
4. student demonstration of the ESLOs at the highest level of performance in a capstone experience

Finally, the GERT Force recommended (and initiated) an alignment of committees devoted to academic excellence: the General Education Advisory Council (GEAC) and associated ESLO committees, the Commission on College Teaching (CCT), and the Assessment Commission. Ultimately, the plan was endorsed by a unanimous vote of Faculty Senate on April 5, 2016. Subsequent turnover in key executive administrative positions, specifically the president and provost positions, effectively halted progress on implementation of the plan. Interim leadership was uncomfortable making the decisions necessary to move the work forward, despite a clearly articulated implementation plan that allowed for phased implementation starting with the freshman year requirements. In fall of 2017 Dr. Nagi identified Essential Studies implementation as Goal 4 in his [short term action plan](https://oregontechsfstatic.azureedge.net/sitefinity-production/docs/default-source/president-documents/convocation/short-term-action-plan.pdf?sfvrsn=db166567_4) and in spring of 2018 Provost Kuleck formed GERAC to review the model and recommend an implementation plan.

GERAC’s charge was to develop a plan to overcome barriers to implementing Essential Studies. Four lenses (academic, student, transfer, and budget/workload) were identified as the group considered the impact on various stakeholder groups and operations at Oregon Tech. The group formed subcommittees associated with each of these lenses. The academic lens subcommittee sought to identify the fundamental components of the Essential Studies model in order to consider them each individually. On the basis of this work, the other lenses provided relevant input.

Ultimately, the GERAC “option 2” recommendation was to implement outcome pathways without vertical integration; practice-level general education coursework was recommended to be combined with foundational coursework, due primarily to transfer challenges. Given the concerns of some members of GERAC, the program integration, ESSE, and capstone elements of the Essential Studies model were not recommended for implementation at this time, but continued work toward program integration (via established institutional assessment requirements), ESSE course development (via incentives, piloting, and assessment), and capstone experience research were suggested. These “soft” approaches, as they were described during the GERAC deliberations, amount to a watering down of the comprehensive Essential Studies model that was proposed and reduce the ability of Oregon Tech to realize the ideals outlined in the rationale for general education.

From an institutional perspective, working piecemeal to implement Essential Studies as recommended by GERAC misses a critical opportunity to establish a strong and sustainable approach to general education at Oregon Tech that solidifies what it means to earn an Oregon Tech degree. While the removal of vertical integration via the practice-level coursework can certainly improve transfer challenges, program-integrated coursework, the ESSE, and capstone experience are the elements of Essential Studies that make it a framework for all programs, not just the general education program. Opportunities for students to demonstrate the ESLOs in coursework beyond general education is critical for success in these institutional outcomes and every academic program must participate for this to truly be an institutional effort.

Regarding the general education model specifically, detailed changes to the Essential Studies model were not provided in the GERAC report, but a table intended to show how 55 credits of “example” coursework might align with current general education requirements was provided (GERAC Figure 1) and appears to be part of the recommendation. Continued conversations about model details have revealed this lack of detail as well as a critical need to work with all departments to map their programs to a detailed description of the revised model.

It is worth noting that the GERT Force model was built with student learning as the primary goal, while the GERAC recommendation seems to be aimed at primarily supporting current faculty workload at the expense of curricular quality. With the current understaffing in most GE departments and administration’s projected enrollment growth, this should not be a concern.

Based on the significant misalignment of the GERAC model with Oregon Tech’s rationale for general education, the GERT Force members strongly urge both faculty committees and current administration to postpone any decisions until new leadership is ready to support the implementation. We can each make ourselves available for continuing conversations about the future of general education and broader curricular requirements at Oregon Tech. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to us.

Kindly,

C.J. Riley, Sandra Bailey, Terri Torres, Maureen Sevigny, Maria Lynn Kessler

The General Education Review Task Force

**Essential Studies Rationale**

Given Oregon Tech’s

• applied mission

• diverse student body composed of traditional and non-traditional, first-year and transfer, first-generation, low-income and legacy students

• history of rigorous professional preparation

• established focus on communication

• teaching-focused faculty

• innovative programs and general electives

• established culture of assessment

• excellent placement rates for graduates

• the rapidly changing nature of technology and the world, and

• the fundamental purpose of a university to educate students both broadly and deeply

Oregon Tech will ensure that students are equipped not only with the technical ability to influence and succeed in the world through a particular program of study, but that they will apply their skills and knowledge eloquently, responsibly, collaboratively, objectively, considerately, and in broad contexts beyond the major program. Oregon Tech will provide students with ways to engage in lifelong and professional learning by developing their abilities to effectively

• communicate

• conduct inquiry and analysis in diverse fields

• practice ethical decision making

• work with others

• reason quantitatively

• function individually and within diverse global and cultural systems

In support of these outcomes, Oregon Tech will offer and maintain an Essential Studies program that

• is intentional and scaffolded

• is developmental with Essential Student Learning Outcomes (ESLOs) supported and demonstrated at the foundation, practicing, synthesis, and capstone levels

• prepares active and educated citizens with a sense of personal and civic responsibility as well as a professional career

• provides a broad education in areas outside of the major program allowing for personal growth, broad disciplinary learning, and exploration

• allows students the freedom to choose from a variety of elective courses

• includes upper-division coursework that may be required even for transfer students and is intentionally tied to lower division or transfer work

• provides opportunities for interdisciplinary courses and co-teaching

• incorporates high-impact practices supported by strong faculty professional development structures

• uses a curricular design philosophy that ensures that all cognitive levels of Bloom’s taxonomy are addressed at each level of achievement (foundational, practice, capstone) but that the difference between these outcome levels is the amount of scaffolding and instructor support

• is integrated with major programs with necessary communication and staff supported by the administration and faculty policy

• is reviewed and updated on a regular cycle, based on rigorous assessment data