Background to the work on General Education

There are several compelling reasons for Portland Community College to reassess the goals of its current General Education curriculum, and how well those goals are being met. These include:

- **National discussion of General Education.** There is currently an intense discussion among higher education stakeholders in the U.S. – in professional academic organizations, at state levels, among faculty and staff within institutions, among employers – about the nature of general education and how it can be designed as a meaningful experience which supports student achievement and success while providing a solid foundation of liberal education. Many students approach general education as a barrier they need to “get out of the way.” As disappointing as that is to faculty, it suggests that we are missing an important opportunity in educating our population. It is in our students’ best interest for PCC to reflect on the content of the national discussion and determine whether, and if so, to what degree, the elements of it are relevant to PCC.

- **PCC Concerns Around Core Outcomes.** PCC states that “all graduates” meet its Core Outcomes, and has defined the General Education requirements as a critical component of ensuring that this statement is accurate. However, the Learning Assessment Council and Degrees and Certificates Committees have been concerned for several years about the validity of this approach. Within PCC’s current General Education course list, there are patterns of course enrollment that individual students can follow which would result in a student graduating without meeting all core outcomes, and many others which would result in meeting some core outcomes only minimally. While faculty have mapped courses with respect to the anticipated degree of attainment by students for each core outcome (on a scale of 0-4), we do not yet have a common understanding of what each really means, let alone what level we expect students to have attained by the time they have earned a PCC degree.

- **General Education Program and Distribution Lists:** Both the national discussion and PCC’s own statement about core outcomes suggest that critical components of a General Education program include intentionality and cohesiveness of design and goals; transparency of those goals to students and faculty; and a good system for assessing outcomes. Our current model of General Education is less a coherent “program” than a “distribution list” ensuring that all students take at least a minimum number of courses from each of three broad disciplinary categories. Our list includes a very large number of courses. Individual students select between 2 and 11 depending on their degree, with only very broad categorical restrictions on their selections. While this list is unquestionably made up of high quality courses, and students are exposed through this structure to a variety of disciplines and approaches, intentionality, cohesiveness, transparency of goals, and systematic assessment are not intrinsic to its design. Many colleges and universities have both distribution requirements, and a distinct General Education program that is defined as meeting specific goals beyond that exposure. PCC should explore whether our current model and its goals are the best model for our institution and our students.

- **The lifting of the restriction on offering majors within the AS, AGS, and AAOT degrees in Oregon in 2015 and PCC’s expected discussion of how majors should be designed at PCC provide a unique opportunity for the college to explore how the General Education and major design and goals should be integrated with each other.**
Some Relevant PCC History:

In 2012 leaders from the EAC (the Chair and Standing Committee chairs) met with the leadership of the LAC, along with the Dean of Academic Affairs and the Director of Curriculum, to consider how assessment of student learning could be more intentionally connected to our existing curriculum approval processes. As the group continued to meet (and added several new participating members) several problematic issues were identified. While a solution to the first point below was identified, proposed, approved and implemented, most of the other points call for a broad and inclusive college conversation.

- Reflecting on concerns raised by faculty that the guidance being given on how to write outcome statements has resulted in some outcomes being difficult (or nearly impossible) to assess meaningfully within the timeframe of their tenure at PCC. A concrete accomplishment of this work group was clarification around the language and expectations of outcomes, while establishing a place in the CCOG to register the more “Aspirational Goals” that faculty value, that often guide instruction, but that cannot and will not be expected to be assessed.

- While instruction and assessment in the areas of the Core Outcomes are understood to be a loosely shared responsibly (often assumed to be occurring in Gen Ed courses), evidence of student learning and/or assessment to improve student learning is neither systematic nor robust. The group started to look for models that might work better for our students, and quickly realized that change might be warranted, but would need to involve conversations at a broader, and deeper level within the PCC community.

- The requirements for a course to be included on the Gen Ed list are an amalgam of every criterion that has ever been considered for Gen Ed at PCC. Initially the questions focused on PCC’s Gen Ed Philosophy statement, but over the years questions have been added that relate to the Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer outcomes, PCC’s Core Outcomes, and some not always clear questions relating to transferability. Some simplification/alignment of our Gen Ed values and criteria for courses would be timely.

- Consideration of criteria that relate to the Core Outcomes raises the question…. do we have the right Core Outcomes? The Core Outcomes were developed in the late 1990s, and have not been reconsidered (except in how they are worded) since then. Do all of the outcomes resonate strongly enough with our faculty to remain as expectations for students? (If a minority of faculty are willing to assess a given core Outcome does that mean it is not really “core”?) Are there others that should be included? This seems like a good time to re-engage the college community in a conversation about what outcomes should really be “Core,” given our responsibility to assess these outcomes in a more thorough and systematic way.

From the NWCCU Standards:
[Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, our accrediting agency]

2.C.9: The General Education component of undergraduate programs demonstrates an integrated course of study that helps students develop the breadth and depth of intellect to become more effective learners and to prepare them for a productive life of work, citizenship, and personal fulfillment. Baccalaureate degree programs and transfer associate degree programs include a recognizable core of general education that represents an integration of basic knowledge and methodology of the humanities and fine arts, mathematics and natural sciences, and social sciences. . . .

2.C.10: The Institution demonstrates that the General Education component of its . . . transfer associate degree programs . . . have identifiable and assessable learning outcomes that are stated in relation to the institution’s mission and learning outcomes for those programs.

9.10.2015