

Report on the SUNY General Education Foreign Language Area  
Academic Affairs Committee  
April 28, 2015

## Summary

This report is a result of the Academic Affairs Committee's examination of issues related to a proposed motion to adopt alternate ways of satisfying the SUNY Foreign Language General Education category. The Committee wishes to provide this information to the Faculty Assembly to assist in any future deliberations on these issues.

## Background

In May 2014, the Academic Affairs Committee issued a clarification of the status of foreign language waivers within the context of the changes to the SUNY General Education requirements adopted by SUNYIT and effective fall semester 2013. This clarification stated that because the changes to the SUNY General Education requirements mandate no longer required students to satisfy the Foreign Language area in order to complete their General Education requirements that waivers of the Foreign Language requirement would be discontinued. The rationale for this clarification was that under the new General Education policy that there is no longer a requirement to waive. [Appendix A].

In fall of 2014, a motion was introduced to Faculty Assembly to establish alternative methods for meeting the SUNY Foreign Language General Education category [Appendix B]. The Faculty Assembly referred this motion to the Academic Affairs Committee to review and to report on that review.

The Academic Affairs Committee has studied the issues related to the Foreign Language category extensively over the past year. The length of these discussions reflect the complexity of the issue and the significance of the questions and implications that our examination raised. To put it simply, the issues raised by our discussion of the Foreign Languages extend well beyond the narrow issue as to how to address the General Education Foreign Language category itself. As a result, the Committee arrived at a consensus that any proposal to establish alternative means to satisfy the Foreign Language category should be considered within the context of these broader issues.

What follows reflects the questions the Committee examined and discussed; the responses reflect the consensus arrived at by the Committee.

## What is SUNY System Policy and Guidance?

The SUNY "Guidelines for the Approval of State University General Education Requirement Courses" specifies the appropriate standard for satisfying the Foreign Language category:

The first college semester, or above, of a foreign language constitutes an approvable course in this category. It is acknowledged that campuses have widely differing practices and available resources for the assessment of foreign language preparation. **Previously acquired language**

**competence may be determined by a standard measure selected or developed by the relevant faculty and should demonstrate the student’s readiness to enter the second college semester of foreign language study. In the case of local exams aligned with discontinued Regents Exams, this would mean passing Checkpoint B with a score of 85 or above. Use of local exams aligned with former Regents Exams for this purpose is at the discretion of the campus.** Many campuses have, and are encouraged to have, language requirements that go beyond the minimum established by the Board resolution [**emphasis added**].<sup>1</sup>

The committee also requested clarification on this guidance from Deborah Moeckel, Assistant Provost for Assessment and Community College Education. Her communication emphasized the following: 1) that it is the responsibility of faculty in the discipline (i.e. “relevant faculty”) to determine whether a student has attained the required level of competency; 2) that it is neither common nor a best practice for faculty to utilize high school course completion (i.e. grades) to assess competency.<sup>2</sup>

### **Should high school work meet college requirements and, if so, under what conditions?**

One of the initial issues discussed by the Committee is whether a student’s high school work should be utilized to meet college-level requirements. On this point, there was agreement that *in principle* the expectations for college work are and should be different (i.e. higher) than those required in high school. That said, we recognize that there are valid mechanisms to allow students to earn college credit in high school, in particular Advanced Placement coursework followed by a defined score, usually 3 or above, on the standardized College Board tests. The Committee does not question the value of these mechanisms. However, we think that in general blurring the distinction between high school-level work and college-level work is detrimental to our educational mission and our students’ education.

### **What is the status of the Foreign Language curriculum at SUNY Polytechnic Institute (Utica site)?**

While the Committee agreed upon the above principle, it also recognized that there are (rare) situations where the difference between achievement in high school and achievement in an introductory level college course are likely similar; e.g., the language proficiency achieved through several years of high school instruction vs. what can be achieved in one semester of an introductory level college language class. That said, it is important to recognize that the issue at SUNY Poly is in part a reflection of the status of the foreign languages at SUNY Poly – that is, SUNY Poly offers only introductory language courses and does not have the curriculum or resources to provide placement into intermediate and advanced level language courses for students with previous language experience. This results in a situation where a student with language experience who wishes to satisfy a General Education category through study in the same foreign language can do so only by taking an introductory course.

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<sup>1</sup> SUNY, “Guidelines for the Approval of State University General Education Requirement Courses SUNY.” Revisions to these guidelines were made 5/30/12 to reflect the development of local exams to replace discontinued Regents exams in foreign languages.

<sup>2</sup> “[I]t is rare for university faculty to accept competency in a subject are based solely on completion of high school courses. Usually, in fact, quite the opposite is the case.” D. Moeckel, Assistant Provost for Assessment and Community College Education, email communication.

While such a situation is clearly not ideal, the Committee is in agreement that addressing the lack of language course options offered by the institution by granting satisfaction for the Foreign Language General Education category is not the optimal means by which to address the issue.

### **What are the potential General Education implications of the proposed motion?**

While the proposal to establish alternate means for demonstrating that a student has sufficient competency is focused on the Foreign Language category, the Committee notes that the impact of adopting such an approach potentially impacts a student's entire general education. This is because in contrast to the previous General Education policy that required students meet all ten General Education categories, under the new SUNY General Education requirements students are required to meet 5 of 8 (both Basic Communication and Mathematics are required). Moreover, SUNY Polytechnic Institute (Utica) has a local science requirement that in effect establishes that one of the five selected areas be a natural science. While students would still be required to take a total of 30 credits of General Education courses (the proposal does not grant credit for demonstrating competency), allowing students to meet the Foreign Language requirement through high school coursework reduces the number of additional required categories to three of six college-level courses, potentially narrowing a student's general education experience well beyond that which was already achieved through the adoption of the changes adopted by SUNY Polytechnic in fall of 2013.

The underlying issue for the Institute is a philosophical one: what do we want a college student's general education experience to contribute to a student's overall educational experience? We think that acting to potentially narrow that experience without first articulating the principles that we want that educational experience to express is premature.

### **What are the respective roles of faculty expertise and faculty governance?**

The guidance provided by SUNY makes clear that the responsibility for determining alternate means of demonstrating sufficient competency in an area lies with the local faculty in the relevant discipline. The responsibility of faculty in the discipline for oversight of courses in their discipline was, furthermore, affirmed by the SUNY Polytechnic Institute (Utica) Faculty Assembly in 2014.<sup>3</sup> Given these responsibilities, it is not at all clear that determining the standard for demonstrating satisfactory competency in a specific discipline is an appropriate role for Faculty Assembly to take.

### **What are the larger issues raised by the proposed motion?**

While the proposed motion is directed at the Foreign Languages, it is evident that the issues it raises extend beyond these specific disciplines. In particular, the motion proposes that a college requirement be satisfied through a demonstration of achieved competency rather than through satisfactory completion of an approved college-level course.

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<sup>3</sup> At its meeting of November 20, 2014 the Faculty Assembly of the Utica location adopted the following resolution: "SUNY Poly reaffirms that management, oversight, curricular development, and hiring decisions must be overseen by faculty in the respective disciplines."

The Committee is concerned that adopting such a method establishes a precedent for adopting competencies as an acceptable method for meeting other degree requirements. While we did not extensively study or come to any conclusions about the desirability of competency based education, we are able to conclude that it proposes a fundamentally different way of thinking about the role and mission of educational institutions, the nature of the educational process and experience, and the role of faculty within that educational process. Given the far-ranging implications that competency based educational models raise, the Committee recommends that faculty proceed cautiously and deliberately in experimenting with these models.<sup>4</sup>

### **How do other SUNY campuses address the role of foreign languages in relationship to General Education requirements and degree requirements?**

A review of policies at other SUNY campuses reveals a variety both in the place that the languages have in that campus' curriculum and in how those campuses address the Foreign Language General Education category.

A few SUNY institutions have adopted policies that accept high school grades in language coursework to meet the Foreign Language category, most notably the University at Albany<sup>5</sup> and Binghamton University<sup>6</sup> (although the latter has established a higher standard than that proposed). These campuses, however, appear to be in the minority. In contrast, many campuses have adopted language requirements beyond the SUNY General Education category. Stonybrook University requires a second-semester college language course or equivalent and does not accept high school coursework as an equivalent.<sup>7</sup> The University at Buffalo has a two-semester language requirement for most students and does not recognize high school coursework as an equivalent.<sup>8</sup> SUNY Cortland requires between one to four semesters of foreign language coursework depending on degree and does not recognize high school coursework as equivalent.<sup>9</sup> Other campuses that have adopted language requirements beyond that mandated through SUNY General Education include Geneseo and New Paltz.

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<sup>4</sup> For an initial review of competency based education, see Chris Sturgis, "Evidence?," *Competency Works*, 26 Nov. 2012 at [www.competencyworks.org/resources/evidence/](http://www.competencyworks.org/resources/evidence/). Complex models of multiple-point assessment and review are proposed, and a strong criticism of the idea of a single standardized-test to measure equivalency, in Liesbeth K.J. Baartman et. al., "Evaluating Assessment Quality in Competency-Based Education: A Qualitative Comparison of Two Frameworks," *Educational Research Review* 2: 2 (2007), 114-129, on ScienceDirect. Lack of clarity (e.g. what is "direct assessment" vs competency-based, or are they the same) amidst private-foundation pressure to adopt in competency based models in the United States continues in Paul Fain, "Taking the Direct Path," *Inside HigherEd*, 21 Feb. 2014 ([www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/21/direct-assessment-and-feds-take-competency-based-education](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/21/direct-assessment-and-feds-take-competency-based-education)). Meanwhile, the US Department of Education, "Direct Assessment Programs: Processes for Evaluating Risk for Title IV Eligibility Need Strengthening To Better Mitigate Risks Posed to the Title IV Programs," 30 Sept. 2014, Control Numer ED-OIG/A5N0004 ([www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/fy2014/a05n0004.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/fy2014/a05n0004.pdf)) finds similar problems, and also rejects accrediting agency acceptance as a single, useful criterion.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.albany.edu/generaleducation/foreign-language.php](http://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/foreign-language.php)

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that Binghamton has different requirements for different schools. See [www.binghamton.edu/general-education/foreign-language/index.html](http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/foreign-language/index.html)

<sup>7</sup> See [sb.cc.stonybrook.edu/bulletin/current/policiesandregulations/degree\\_requirements/entryskills.php](http://sb.cc.stonybrook.edu/bulletin/current/policiesandregulations/degree_requirements/entryskills.php)

<sup>8</sup> See [undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/degree/gened.shtml](http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/degree/gened.shtml)

<sup>9</sup> See [www2.cortland.edu/departments/modern-languages/placement.dot](http://www2.cortland.edu/departments/modern-languages/placement.dot)

In short, it is evident that there is no single approach to the foreign language category; quite the opposite, there is significant diversity in how the foreign languages are addressed across SUNY campuses. With this in mind, we believe that SUNY Poly should adopt an approach that is consistent with its own mission and needs as well as consistent with SUNY policy.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The more we examined the issue, the more we came to the conclusion that alternative means of satisfying the Foreign Language category beyond those that already exist (e.g. demonstrating competency on a College Level Examination Program [CLEP] test) need to be considered within the context of broader issues that require careful examination and discussion. Our recommendations, endorsed unanimously by the Committee, are as follows.

**Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that changes that impact a particular General Education category should be reviewed within the context of the institution's General Education requirements as a whole.**

The rationale for this is that the current General Education requirements have changed the relationship between individual General Education categories. Whereas the previous General Education policy treated each silo discretely (a student needed to meet ten discrete silos), the current SUNY Poly policy treats some silos discretely (namely Basic Communication, Mathematics, and, in effect, Natural Sciences) while it “bundles” the remaining silos and provides students flexibility in how to meet the remaining silos (i.e. requiring the student cover 4 of 7). As a result, changing how a student meets any of the remaining seven silos impacts the remaining General Education requirements that student is required to meet. Given that the General Education requirements as a whole play a significant role in fulfilling the institution's mission to provide “the breadth and depth provided by a sound and comprehensive liberal arts education” and “prepare students to live in a dynamic and diverse world by demonstrating the interconnectedness of knowledge, peoples, and cultures and emphasizing the importance of continuous learning,” changes that potentially impact the ability to fulfill this mission should be considered holistically.<sup>10</sup>

**Recommendation 2: The committee recommends that any action with regards to the Foreign Language category should consider the overall role of General Education for preparing graduates to work and live in an increasingly globalized environment.**

In considering the role of general education in general and the foreign languages in particular in contributing to the institution's mission, the Committee began to ask whether instead of narrowing the role of the languages we ought to explore the possibility of expanding the role of the languages in our

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<sup>10</sup> “Our Mission,” *SUNY Polytechnic Institute Undergraduate Catalog, 2014-15*.  
[sunypoly.edu/apps/catalog/undergrad/our-mission/](http://sunypoly.edu/apps/catalog/undergrad/our-mission/). “SUNY Poly Mission Statement.”  
[www.sunyit.edu/coo/mission](http://www.sunyit.edu/coo/mission)

curriculum. This was reinforced by our examination of language requirements at other SUNY institutions. We therefore think it would be worthwhile for the institution to explore the value of adopting a foreign language graduation requirement. Such a discussion could explore innovative models for providing more opportunities for language education such as intensive summer courses or professionally focused language courses. Such a dialogue should include our current language instructors.

**Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that prior to adopting any additional competency based approaches for satisfying degree requirements that the faculty and institution engage in a thorough study and dialogue about the appropriate role of competency based educational approaches in relation to the institution's educational mission.**

Given the impact that competency based approaches have on fundamental issues such as the role and mission of the educational institution, the nature of the educational process, and the role of faculty within the educational process, we recommend that the institution not adopt competency based approaches in an *ad hoc* manner. To do so establishes precedents that potentially limit the faculty's ability to thoughtfully consider critical issues of curriculum, subject matter, and methods of instruction. While we are not making a judgment about the value of competency based models, we are convinced that these models need to be carefully studied and considered. We also emphasize that we are not recommending any changes to limit or restrict existing competency based approaches already in effect at SUNY Polytechnic Institute.

**Recommendation 4: With regards to the motion proposing changes to how students can meet the SUNY General Education Foreign Language category, the Committee recommends no action.**

The Committee is cognizant of the arguments in favor of allowing high school language experience to meet the SUNY Foreign Language General Education category. However, we weighed these arguments in light of the following: 1) the SUNY Provost office's guidance on the issue, in particular the guidance that the best practice is either to: a) utilize a standard measure to determine competency; or b) utilize foreign language faculty who are qualified to assess students' competency; 2) the impact that recognizing high school work to satisfy the Foreign Language category could have on the overall General Education experience of the student; and 3) the implications that adopting a competency based approach to satisfying a General Education requirement could have. In addition, the Committee is particularly sensitive to the issue as to whether faculty governance bodies should be involved in determining standards within a particular discipline, encroaching upon an area that is normally under the purview of disciplinary expertise.

In light of these issues, the Committee recommends that no action be taken on the proposed motion.

## Appendices

Appendix A: Clarification of the SUNYIT Foreign Language Waiver Policy (May 2014)

Appendix B: Resolution on Foreign Language General Education Category (Fall 2014)

Clarification of the SUNYIT Foreign Language Waiver Policy  
Academic Affairs, May 28, 2014

Academic Affairs reviewed the current foreign language waiver in light of changes to the SUNYIT General Education requirements effective Fall 2013 (hereafter referred to as GenEd-3).

**Clarification of the implications of the new SUNY General Education policy adopted by SUNYIT effective Fall 2013 (GenEd-3) on the Foreign Language Waiver policy:**

Effective Fall 2013, and upon recommendation of the Academic Affairs committee, SUNYIT adopted the new SUNY General Education policy (GenEd-3). The Academic Affairs committee's discussions at that time addressed the status of waivers of General Education requirements and concluded that under GenEd-3 all waivers would be discontinued.

Because this understanding of the status of waivers under GenEd-3 was not clearly promulgated to students and advisors, the Academic Affairs committee has determined that it is appropriate to grant waivers of the Foreign Language requirement for students who have applied for them as of May 28, 2014.

Academic Affairs reaffirms the original intent of the committee to discontinue all waivers for students under GenEd-3. The rationale, which reflects the consensus of the committee developed from our examination and discussion of the issue over several meetings, is outlined below. Therefore, the committee reaffirms the original conclusion that waivers of General Education Requirements no longer exist for students governed by GenEd-3 effective May 29, 2014.

**Summary of Rationale:**

1. The current Foreign Language waiver policy was adopted within the context of the pre-Fall 2013 General Education Requirements (hereafter referred to as GenEd-2). This policy was informed by two factors. First, all students (unless they were subject to a programmatic waiver) were required to meet all ten General Education silos including the Foreign Language silo. Second, SUNYIT did not offer foreign language courses beyond the 100 level, thus not allowing for the option of placing students with previous language experience into intermediate or advanced-level courses, a practice common at other institutions both within and beyond SUNY. Given this context, waiving the Foreign Language requirement for those students who have language experience roughly equivalent to a 100-level college language course allows students to take courses that are of more educational value.
2. As a result of the changes instituted with GenEd-3, SUNYIT's current general education requirements no longer include a Foreign Language requirement. Students may opt to take a

foreign language as a means towards satisfying the overall requirements for GenEd-3 (5 of 8 silos and 30 credits), but no student is obligated to do so. Given that taking a foreign language is not a requirement, it is the interpretation of the Academic Affairs Committee that there is no waiver to grant for students who are matriculated under the 2013-2014 catalog and GenEd-3.<sup>1</sup>

3. Students who are matriculated under GenEd-2 should continue to have the ability to have the Foreign Language waiver applied under the stipulated conditions. The committee notes that this section of the policy is not contained in the online catalog; we recommend that it be reinserted into the catalog with language clarifying that the waiver applies only to students under GenEd-2.

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee is utilizing the standard definition of a waiver which is the decision of a governing authority to not enforce a right or requirement.

## Resolution on Foreign Language General Education Category

Whereas for many years SUNYIT recognized multiple ways of satisfying the general education requirement for foreign language, and

Whereas SUNYIT continues to grant credit for foreign language for students passing a CLEP exam, or a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam, and

Whereas a student who successfully completes three years of a foreign language in high school has been exposed to that language for 160 (50 minute) clock hours per year, or 480 (50 minute) clock hours over three years, and

Whereas a student who successfully completes four years of a foreign language in high school has been exposed to to that language for 640 (50 minute) clock hours, and

Whereas a one-semester, four-credit college course course in a foreign language consists of 60 (50 minute) clock hours, and

Whereas this faculty has previously approved accepting a grade of 85% or higher on a three-year foreign language Regents, with 480 (50 minute) clock hours of preparation, as prima facie evidence of proficiency in that foreign language at a level equivalent to 60 (50 minute) clock hours of college instruction in that foreign language, and

Whereas this faculty has previously approved accepting a grade of "B" (85) or higher in a fourth-year high school foreign language course, with 640 (50 minute) clock hours of preparation, as prima facie evidence of proficiency in that foreign language at a level equivalent to 60 (50 minute) clock hours of college instruction in that foreign language, and

Whereas this faculty has previously approved several other means of establishing foreign language proficiency and thus meeting the foreign language requirement, and

Whereas proficiency established through such alternate means were noted on general education transcripts with the foreign language category completed signified by the word "yes", indicating fulfillment of that category

Whereas the general education plan effective Fall 2013 continues to incorporate foreign language as a category, though it is no longer required;

Now therefore be it resolved that the faculty reaffirms that the foreign language general education category can be fulfilled by all of the means enumerated in the 2009-2011 Undergraduate Catalog at page 33 with four of those means resulting in earned credit, and another seven means (including a minimum grade of 85 on a three-year Regents foreign language exam, or a minimum course grade of B (85) on a fourth-year foreign language course) resulting in fulfilling the category without earning college credit, and

Be it further resolved that fulfillment of the foreign language category by any of the seven means that do not result in college credit does not reduce the thirty credit minimum required across all general education categories.