When we do something infrequently, it’s usually for a reason. Sometimes it’s because there’s minimal need (for example, a good house-paint job usually lasts for about ten years, so most homeowners don’t check the exterior’s paint every couple of months). At other times, it’s because the task is fraught with difficulty (for example, we all know that Social Security needs fixing, but achieving a consensus on workable reform seems almost impossible).

Reforming a University’s General Education Program is in the “fraught-with-difficulty” category. In fact, when a reform is successful, it is considered newsworthy. That’s what happened a few years back when Portland State University engaged in major General Education reform. And in some ways, that’s what’s happening now as a result of General Education Program reform at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM).

I offer this essay as my personal reflections on UHM’s General Education Program at the end of 2002. My reflections are informed by my long tenure as a faculty member here (28 years); my work on both the System and the UHM General Education Task Forces mentioned below; and my work, since Fall 2001, as Faculty Administrator of the Faculty Senate’s General Education Office. While the work I describe has involved hundreds of faculty members and a score of administrators, the opinions I offer are all my own.

General Education at UHM Pre-2001

General Education requirements and offerings at UHM changed little between 1971 and 2001. Although General Education reforms during the ’60s were achieved under the banner of “Student Choice,” the General Education curriculum quickly solidified into a rather rigid menu of requirements and options. Since most Arts and Sciences departments had at least one class on that menu, there was little momentum away from the status quo. For decades, all UHM students needed a minimum of 40 credits to satisfy Core requirements. Many colleges had additional Core requirements.

When change in General Education requirements did occur, it always involved additions. In the ’80s, the long-standing Arts and Sciences second-language requirement became a University requirement. For many students, that meant an additional 12 to 16 credits. In the late ’80s, the Faculty Senate added five Writing-Intensive classes as a graduation requirement. For the most part, students didn’t protest this “addition” because it could be met through courses in the Core and in their majors. What’s more, success in Writing-Intensive (WI) classes soon became known
among students as advantageous in job interviews.

By 1995, virtually every Mānoa student needed approximately 56 Core and Graduation-Requirement credits, plus five WI classes, in order to receive a bachelor’s degree. Arts and Sciences students, who received the majority of bachelor’s degrees, needed approximately 64 credits. Students in certain professional schools needed 60 more credits for their majors. Add the requirement of upper-division electives and the limited range of menu choices and you have no surprise: most UHM students required five years to earn a bachelor’s degree.

**The General Education reform movement begins**

By 1995, more and more faculty and administration conversations involved questions about our undergraduate requirements. Post-graduation surveys highlighted growing dissatisfaction with the scope and inflexibility of Core requirements. Departments found that they could not add new requirements for majors, however significant might be new knowledge in a discipline, without pushing students toward six years as undergraduates. More and more individuals were admitting, privately and then publicly, that it was not healthy for any program to go 25 years without systematic review. That was especially true of General Education, which affected each and every student.

By the mid ‘90s, the full University of Hawai`i was finally functioning more as a System. Thus, when discussions about General Education reform began in earnest in the UHM Faculty Senate’s Executive Committee, there was consensus that we’d best attempt it as a System. Thus was born a two-year endeavor to review and reform UH’s General Education requirements as a System. The endeavor was overseen by the System’s Council of Faculty Senate Chairs; led by a troika of UHM, Community College, and 4-Year College Senators; and staffed by a UHM Professor of Education.

The endeavor produced reams of useful data and generated faculty discussion across the System. It highlighted common needs. But the logistics of achieving System consensus across many islands seemed to keep good ideas from gaining steam. The reform effort wasn’t gathering momentum.

During the second year of that endeavor, problems involving undergraduate education at UHM, where most System students sought bachelor’s degrees, became pressing. Recurring fiscal crises virtually eliminated any possibility of initiative and program development. Transfer students in particular were complaining about the lack of fit between UHM General Education requirements and typical requirements elsewhere. Both freshman and transfer-student enrollments were dropping. Faculty members knew that the upcoming WASC accreditation special visit study had to address these realities. So, in the Fall of 1998, the UHM Faculty Senate created its own Task Force on General Education and Graduation Requirements, chaired by Senator Eldon Wegner.
The General Education reform effort gains momentum

The new Task Force began quickly, because the System effort and the State’s ongoing fiscal crisis had made our needs clear. Through weekly meetings, informed by periodic open forums and Senate discussions, the Task Force created a draft Plan for General Education by May of 1999.

Fall 1999 saw nearly weekly forums on aspects of the new General Education plan, forums that were open to both faculty and students. Especially heated were discussions in two areas: maintenance of the universal second-language requirement and how Hawai‘i should be highlighted in graduation requirements. (One example of how the two areas merged: the language requirement became the “Hawaiian or Second Language Requirement.”) In November 1999, Senator Wegner held a joint meeting of the UHM Task Force and representatives from each UH System campus. General reaction to UHM plan was positive, since the overall plan was seen as flexible and inclusive.

In December 1999, the full UHM Faculty Senate adopted the Task Force’s General Education Plan. The campus now had a new General Education Program set to begin.

The process of the new General Education Program’s implementation begins

The UHM faculty soon discovered that it had done the easy work of General Education Reform. The hard work lay ahead.

Three issues dominated reform efforts during the three semesters between the Senate vote and the Fall 2001 date of the new requirements’ going into effect.

The first involved Board of Regents (BOR) endorsement of the new General Education Program. While all parties saw the advantages of the new Program, questions were raised in some quarters about the UHM-centered processes whereby the Program had been adopted. Most parties agreed that System reform of General Education would have been the preferable course. Some parties insisted that it should have been the only possible course. In point of fact, Mānoa was not alone in following what appeared to be a “go it alone” process. The same decision had been made by the faculty at UH Hilo, the campus with the System’s only other full 4-year undergraduate program. It was perhaps no coincidence, then, that the Regents adopted new, independent, General Education Programs for both UHM and UHH in June of 2000.

The second issue involved faculty governance. The new General Education Plan called for total faculty governance. Since the faculty had previously played an essentially consultative role in General Education, governance processes had to be developed from scratch. Particularly problematic were issues relating to membership of the various General Education committees. Thus, it took a full year of discussion to produce a General Education governance document. The document was approved by the Senate at the end of 2000, nine months short of the new requirements’ becoming effective.
A third issue took over the main faculty governance body during its first semester. The agenda of the interim General Education Committee, composed of nine faculty members, became dominated by college and school requests for waivers from the Hawaiian or Second Language requirement. This issue remained a source of contention between professional-school faculty and Arts-and-Sciences faculty. By the end of 2000, some schools had achieved the waiver they sought, but not to the delight of all.

The main victim of the lengthy debates over governance and language requirements was the General Education Program itself. By early 2001, it was clear that the development of new General Education courses for Fall 2001 would not be possible. The Senate was forced to craft a plan whereby existing courses would be mapped to new requirements, thus buying time for the various faculty General Education committees.

**General Education at UHM Today**

The full-on effort to implement the new General Education Program began in September 2001. By then we had Faculty Committees to oversee implementation (the General Education Committee); to review Core-course proposals (the Foundations Committee); and to implement the Graduation Requirements involving Focus courses (committees involving Contemporary Ethical Issues; Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Issues; Oral Communication; and Writing Intensive classes). Staff support for the several committees is provided by the General Education Office, a unit that was essentially an extension of responsibility for the Mānoa Writing Program, the office that had long supported Writing-Intensive classes.

It soon became clear that governance by faculty committee would not be easy. Indeed, the faculty knew of predictions that faculty governance on such a grand scale would prove impossible. Perhaps the challenge implicit in that prediction was one factor that motivated the faculty committees to do an enormous amount of work during AY 2001-02. As a result of that work, students began Fall 2002 with a full range of courses that had been designed for the new General Education Program.

**Advantages of the new General Education Program**

The advantages of the new Program are several.

1. The Program allows significant tailoring of General Education course choice to individual student needs and goals. The old requirements were an instance of “one size fits all.” The new requirements offer significant new options in each student’s first-year Foundations curriculum, in Diversification courses, and in Focus courses.

2. The Program enriches the first-year curriculum. Many students will continue to benefit from the existing two-semester World Civilizations sequence. Other students
will choose from new and modified courses that present global and multicultural perspectives through anthropology, art, religion, music, and geography (the list may well expand). First-year mathematics and logic courses have been modified to emphasize symbolic reasoning. Old and new courses provide more variety in the linkages offered to freshmen in First-Year Learning Communities.

3. General Education course designations are determined by a class’s meeting of hallmarks, not by departmental affiliation. Faculty committees spent a great deal of time working out hallmarks for each component of the new Program. These hallmarks involve a course’s content, scope, emphases, and, perhaps most importantly, methods of inquiry and critical thinking. Faculty Boards review course proposals to ensure that the General Education hallmarks are met. Course proposals may come from any department.

4. The General Education Program emphasizes UHM’s uniqueness: our Pacific roots in a globalizing world. Hallmarks for Foundations and Focus areas require designated courses to include content that involves Hawai‘i and Pacific perspectives within global contexts. Focus requirements involving Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Issues and Contemporary Ethical Issues are intended to engage students with 21st-century social realities.

5. The new General Education Program is under faculty, not departmental, ownership. All governance entities are composed of faculty members from diverse disciplines. Any department can propose courses for General Education designations. Thus, the meaning of “our” in “our General Education course” is far more inclusive than it was previously.

6. The new General Education Program is dynamic; it is designed to undergo constant assessment and renewal. All General Education designations are time-limited: the effectiveness of Core designations must be assessed in a course’s fifth year as a condition of renewal. Focus designations maintain for only two years before mandatory assessment. The entire General Education Program is subject to ongoing assessment by the faculty General Education Committee. (Several assessment plans are under consideration. As of this writing, the most developed of those plans envisions a 12-year assessment cycle with three 4-year emphases.)

7. General Education involves courses across four years rather than as a lower-division “module.”

8. Coherence within a student’s undergraduate experience is to be designed around a student’s major, complemented by General Education courses across the student’s four years. Data show that students identify themselves by their majors, not by their experiences in sundry required courses. The faculty can enhance each student’s sense of identity by helping students select General Education courses that complement the goals of each major.

9. The flexibility built into the new General Education Program makes a student’s
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Graduation in four years very feasible. The previous Core involved 40 credits from about 140 course choices. The new Core involves 31 credits from among some 1,800 course choices, including more than 1,000 upper-division possibilities. This is a particular boon to the growing number of extra-System transfer students, who no longer have to “backtrack” to take lower-division approved General Education courses.

Challenges to the new General Education Program’s success

As this essay is being written, the new General Education Program is completing its first semester of full implementation. Obviously, a lot of work has to be done for some of the advantages just mentioned to be fully accomplished. I here list a few key challenges that the full UHM community has to meet in the next couple of years.

1. UHM needs a dedicated Administrative Unit to complement the efforts of the General Education Faculty Units. Faculty boards can set policy and review courses but the Administration has to implement policy decisions and ensure that appropriate courses are offered in adequate numbers. Further, Faculty committee membership is constantly changing. The full General Education Program needs not only joint Faculty/Administrative leadership, but also the stability of dedicated Administrative attention that will outlast committee memberships. Significant Administrative support is now provided by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (VCAA). However, that office’s responsibilities are legion, and its staff is small. The Faculty Senate three years ago urged the creation of a dedicated Office of Undergraduate Education. Perhaps by the time of the WASC team’s March 2003 visit, the new Chancellor will have moved to support General Education, a major component of Undergraduate Education, with a dedicated Administrator.

2. What is intended to be “opportunities” in General Education may appear to the uninformed student as a “bewildering array.” The choices presented by the new General Education Program require enhanced student advising if students are to make good choices. The provision of this advising might best be overseen by the eventual Office of Undergraduate Education. Meanwhile, the New Student Orientation Program provides many incoming students with helpful advice on options.

3. The flexibility of General Education is particularly advantageous to students who transfer to UHM from outside the UH System. However, to take full advantage of this flexibility, transfer students need to learn quickly how their previous courses will apply to UHM requirements, something not always possible right now. UHM would be perceived as more student-friendly if we could provide a single portal through which students could expeditiously “count” previous courses and plan subsequent coursework at UHM.

4. Students on other UH System campuses appear to be getting diverse messages on how their current courses will “count” toward the new UHM General Education requirements. UHM and the UH System have to craft a single, clear, student-friendly message about the articulation of courses to UHM’s General Education requirements. Achieving policy to back up such a message will not be easy: policy has to respect the rights and responsibilities of faculty at the degree-granting campus while at the same
time respecting UH BOR directives. But achieving a workable and fair policy should have high priority: it will benefit UH as well as UHM; it will help today’s students as well as tomorrow’s.

5. Effective assessment requires expertise, resources, and effort, as well as changes in the prevailing campus culture. And, as they sing on the oldies channel, “We’ve only just begun.” Efforts are currently underway to convert General Education hallmarks into learning-outcome statements. Supported by dedicated assessment funding from the VCAA, some departments have made significant strides; the English department faculty, for example, is beginning the second semester of its efforts to assess Core courses via portfolios of student work. But resources for the coordination of the larger assessment effort and for its ongoing support have not been identified. Given where the campus is in overall General Education implementation, the amount of attention given to assessment has to be seen as significant. Sustaining that attention, and implementing assessment plans, however, will require far greater concentration of resources and effort.

6. Certain significant advantages of the new General Education Program will be realized only when each Major relates its requirements to the requirements of General Education. Because most faculty attention to date has been involved with the creation of new or revised General Education courses, departments have for the most part not had time to address possibilities for complementarity between major requirements and General Education requirements. A particular need is to look at how student needs related to both critical thinking and information processing can be met through such complementarities.

Future Prospects: Continuously Improving Undergraduate Education

The UHM administration and, particularly, the UHM faculty deserve commendation for their accomplishments in General Education reform to date. But within five years, the General Education Program will no longer be new, and the energy surrounding its implementation today can be predicted to lag. We have to defy that prediction if the full promise of the new General Education Program is to be met.

We can defy that prediction if, as I hope, the assessment efforts designed into the Program are fully accomplished. That hope represents our greatest opportunity for changing the way we at UHM “do” undergraduate education. It holds promise of making us into an ever better educational institution. In this effort, we cannot afford to fail: the people of Hawai`i, of the Pacific, and, increasingly, of the world are depending on our success.