Old Westbury’s Response and Comment to the General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) Report

(drafted by Danielle Lee and Ashlee Lien)

Old Westbury appreciates the GEAC recommendations in their attempt to clarify the values and guiding principles that undergird SUNY’s General Education (GE) requirements. Old Westbury has long included SUNY GE requirements as part of the College’s “Liberal Education Program” (LEP), and it will require significant adjustments to include the proposed changes to SUNY GE. Each of Old Westbury’s degree program offerings provides a rigorous, engaging, substantively rich educational focus for our students. They are excellent degree programs, with Program Student Learning Outcomes that are tied to our Mission, but in and of themselves they cannot carry the full special experience of being a student at Old Westbury, with its focus on interdisciplinary approaches to learning and the strong emphasis on civic engagement and social justice. It is therefore in our Liberal Education Program that Old Westbury has taken special pains to instantiate our Mission – to make the curriculum a clear and attractive manifestation of what makes Old Westbury unique and prepares students for an ever-changing and growing global economy.

While we welcome GEAC recommendations as guidance to help our campus further develop and strengthen our liberal education programs, we are disappointed to see the Proposed GE Framework appears to be counterproductive to that initiative. After careful analysis and consultation with the Liberal Education Committee and academic departments contributing to the LEP, we find the proposed framework would significantly dilute the richness of our liberal education programas well as impact our ability to offer a rigorous curriculum. We further believe the new framework will detract from the steady progress we continue to make in the process of aligning our LEP with the principles and values of the AAC&U’s LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, while maintaining the integrity of our campus-based requirements, which stem directly from our College Mission.

As a result of the last SUNY-wide revision to the general education program, our campus decided to maintain a higher requirement of all ten domains in order to maintain the direct connection of the LEP to our Mission. Narrowing the number of required liberal education knowledge areas would again force Old Westbury to choose between weakening the LEP or burdening students with either additional credits at graduation or fewer free electives as part of their undergraduate learning experience. This is particularly true for students who transfer with a high number of credits and would need to take additional core courses to fulfill the LEP rather than transferring in with these credits. Since the last SUNY General Education revision, we have witnessed a resurgence of narrow-minded nationalism and xenophobia in our country and throughout the world. Now more than ever, it is important that we offer students a well-rounded education that exposes students to North American, European, and Latin American, African, or Asian history, as well as foreign languages, to produce informed citizens who can participate in our democracy and engage as global citizens with an open mind. We applaud the GEAC recommendation to require Diversity: Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice as a SUNY requirement. This knowledge area has long been a local requirement for Old Westbury’s Mission-driven liberal education program and we believe it should be a core component of every liberal arts education. Including this as one of the ten recognized domains instead of adding a new domain, however, detracts from other important areas of a liberal arts education.

There are aspects of the GEAC recommendations that raise questions and are problematic in terms of not only Old Westbury’s Mission-driven curriculum but also for the diverse student body of the SUNY system. The proposed requirements underscore our need to reinforce our general education core in order to fulfill our mission as a liberal arts college focused on diversity and social justice. Our students benefit from a broad study of courses across disciplines, which is critical to the fulfillment of our mission. Departments like History & Philosophy, American Studies & Media and Communications, and Modern Languages provide a service to the college by ensuring all students, regardless of their major, graduate with a well-rounded education that has exposed students to a wide variety of cultures and fostered real world learning and global citizenship.

We also strongly oppose the recommendation to make optional six essential general education knowledge areas including Humanities, Social Sciences, the Arts, US History & Civic Engagement, World History & Global Awareness, and World Languages, all of which we deem essential for a well-rounded liberal arts curriculum. Making these knowledge areas optional sends a signal that these subjects matter less, limits student learning, and undermines our mission as a liberal arts college rooted in social justice. At first glance this framework may have the appearance of strengthening STEM by mandating Natural Science for all students, but it actually weakens the rigor of the program by removing critical skill set development by removing the lab requirement and permitting other areas (e.g., Social Sciences) to fill this domain. The point in having all these knowledge areas is not to say one area of knowledge or discipline is more essential or important than others but rather that these collective areas work together to enlighten and engage young minds. As the SUNY General Education Vision Statement claims on page 7 of the implementation guidance, all of the areas together produce a foundation of knowledge and approaches to learning that cultivate the "values and disposition of an engaged 21st century global citizenry." A curriculum devoid of solid foundations in the humanities, arts, histories, cultures, and languages, is a narrow education and may diminish the strong liberal arts education that SUNY provides.

While we support efforts to decolonize the general education curriculum by removing the emphasis on western cultures, the current proposal makes it virtually impossible to seriously encounter both Western Tradition and Major Cultures. The current division between the American Experience, Western Tradition, and Major Cultures domains educates students on a variety of regions, cultures and religions in their own terms. The collapsing of the Western Tradition and Major cultures may result in some colleges offering courses in the global impact of Western Civilization rather than a more robust view of global society. This risks returning the teaching of world history as a march of Western civilization, an assumption that it is the only civilization to truly exhibit history. In the present ideological climate, only exposure to new ideas and cultures can prepare students to be active, informed global citizens. In addition, the definition of the American History and Civic Engagement knowledge area removes the US and the world contextualization component, resulting in a uniquely "American" chauvinism at a time when global citizenship and civic values, which are only vaguely defined in the new knowledge area, are urgent as ever. Many of our students have limited prior knowledge of even significant events in American history, let alone those taking place in Europe or throughout the world. These proposed changes suggest that merely taking one European course *or* one course on Latin America, Africa, or Asia would be adequate. This will further narrow students’ exposure to history courses and will only serve to increasingly promote social “tunnel-vision." The phrase “broad outline” in the proposed learning outcome of “World History and Global Awareness” is the operative one: with this domain, students will only attain a surface understanding at best of one particular part of the world in one particular period of time. At worst, they will not take any history courses at all. Likewise, having an optional World Language requirement impacts the ability of students to gain a more intimate understanding of another culture, inter-and intra- and cultural communication and further impairs global awareness. In our current climate, these skills are essential for becoming civically-minded and engaged global citizens.

Old Westbury offers a significant number of classes within the Creativity & the Arts domain. Reducing the requirement for this domain will surely impact the number of students who enroll in the Visual Arts major after taking a general education art course. Moving such study to the sidelines will impact the overall quality of a liberal arts education. Students in the Arts learn to develop their own individual voice and recognize accomplishment in a unique manner that adds to their development as an individual and as a member of society. The Arts provide multiple means of expression that reach audiences on many levels. Our campus’s Arts program prides itself on the rigor of its curriculum. Visual expression is a powerful form of communication in present society. Developing an awareness of how to critically create visual messages is an essential skill as our global society depends more and more on social media and other digital mediums of communication.

Although it seems Natural Sciences may benefit from being a required knowledge area, the "minor" changes to the natural sciences learning outcomes are problematic and weaken STEM offerings. We strongly believe that the laboratory component, now optional for the Natural Sciences knowledge area, is integral to meeting the learning outcomes. In addition, the guidance makes it clear that a social science course or another similar field may be considered as a natural science course. Conflating these two distinct knowledge areas further weakens the liberal arts education and makes it more difficult to prepare students to pursue STEM disciplines. With misinformation and "alternate facts" rampant in the media, especially in matters related to health and environmental issues, it is imperative that graduates from our college have the foundation to interpret information and research in the natural sciences.

Finally, we are especially concerned that removing any knowledge area will make it difficult for Old Westbury to continue to meet the standards set forth by the AAC&U. Middle States supports Old Westbury’s integration of LEAP’s “essential learning outcomes” through our LEP and the assessment of the LEP with their associated VALUE Rubrics. In particular, the GEAC proposal diminishes LEAP’s four “essential learning outcomes,” most notably by curtailing students’ “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world.” In our recent review, our Middle States Evaluation Team noted our transition to LEAP as a worthy and positive development. We very strongly believe the new GEAC framework will pull us out of alignment with our current LEAP integration. We look forward to seeing the final implementation guidance for the SUNY General Education program incorporating our concerns.