

Principles of a Revised General Education Curriculum

1. *The foundational essence of general education will shift toward learning experiences that produce understanding of the process of inquiry and help students develop critical thinking skills.*

We should intentionally set knowing how to learn and think as an essential goal of a general education program. At its best, general education establishes a foundation for critical and thoughtful approaches to solving problems and strengthening intellectual development. Beyond the texture of disciplinary problems and issues, the general intended outcome is the development of evidence-based thinkers; students capable of understanding what critical argument demands and what it offers as a way of understanding ourselves, others, and the world around us.

While content knowledge is both desirable and necessary, ensuring that students acquire a deep understanding of discipline-specific knowledge cannot be the primary goal of general education, and is best left to the major requirements.

2. *The general education curriculum will consist of no more than thirty credit hours of course work.*

The current University Studies Program imposes a minimum of forty credit hours of course work, or one-third of the total credits in typical undergraduate degree programs. This said, it is also true that a significant portion of the required course work in USP, notably the pre-major courses that satisfy the disciplinary-based requirements, can also be applied to course work in the major. This is the practice of having courses “double-dip” as credits in the major and USP. However, pre-major courses are designed, as they should be, to emphasize the content knowledge of a specific discipline, often at the expense of developing the broader learning objectives of general education. There are inherent tensions, which are often irreconcilable, between the goals of a course in the service of the major, on the one hand, and general education, on the other hand.

Courses approved for inclusion in a revised general education program will need to meet, first and foremost, the approved learning outcomes of the appropriate constituent element of a revised general education curriculum. If, on the whole, a revised curriculum no longer allows students to use pre-major or major courses to satisfy general education requirements, it would be unnecessarily burdensome for students to be expected to satisfy more than thirty hours of general education course work.

3. *A revised curriculum will intentionally identify and strengthen the connections between coursework in general education and the major.*

In the current USP, writing, oral communication, and quantitative reasoning are taught mostly through independent courses detached from those that satisfy disciplinary requirements. There is also a deep divide between general skills courses and those taught

within the major. This disarticulation makes general education courses, and the skills they are meant to develop, appear separate from those taught within majors. This separation also hampers any opportunities to use USP classes to enhance learning in courses taught within majors. The recent change in the writing program, which encourages development of writing-intensive courses within majors, underscores the value of linking the experience of the major with general education. More possibilities for interconnections exist, and we should strive to achieve them.

4. *A revised general education curriculum will include a first-year curriculum with significant involvement of full-time faculty, designed to smooth the transition from high school to college.*

The broad goal of the first-year curriculum should be to provide students a set of integrated learning experiences that facilitate the successful transition to UK by highlighting the academic strengths of a research university and acculturating undergraduates through common study in the discourse and practice of intellectual inquiry. The first-year curriculum will be anchored by courses that (1) ask students to explore the epistemologies that inform and shape the nature of intellectual inquiry within the three broad knowledge areas - the arts and humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural and physical sciences; (2) are typically taught by full-time faculty members; and (3) provide a common experience for all first-year students, one that is premised on intellectual engagement and addresses forthrightly issues attendant to the transition from high school to college.

5. *A revised general education curriculum will include a course in quantitative reasoning.*

Our students need a grounding in logic, understand the rudiments of probability, recognize statistical patterns, model formulas, and test statistically-based hypotheses throughout their lives. Similarly, they need a skill set that enables them to comprehend basic quantitative data, equips them to understand fundamental issues in fiscal and monetary policy, and provides them with the analytical tools for managing their personal finances. To that end, the revised curriculum should move away from a requirement that emphasizes competency in mathematical computation and toward one that addresses the components of quantitative literacy.

6. *The general education curriculum will lay the foundation for effective citizenship in a pluralistic society and an increasingly interconnected world.*

We must help our students understand the contours of the American society in which they will live and work as productive citizens. That understanding requires reflection and analysis of what it means to be a member of our society; it also demands a nuanced appreciation for how that meaning differs depending on who we are. Appropriate courses will adopt multidisciplinary perspectives and include both historical and contemporary analysis of American institutions and social organizations. The demands of productive

citizenship require students to understand the meaning of cultural competency and the value of human diversity. As a tool for social success, it is important that our graduates appreciate the role that culture plays in influencing individual behavior, attitudes, and beliefs.

The realities of contemporary life necessitate that graduates see themselves as participatory members not only of local or national communities, but also increasingly as members of a world community. Students need to grapple with the question of what it means to live in a truly interconnected world. They may, of course, achieve this outcome via a focus on the interactions of different peoples and nations in the historical past, as interconnectedness was a salient feature of the ancient and the early-modern world, and not simply of the contemporary world. Unfortunately, research suggests that when compared to their counterparts in many other industrialized countries, U.S. students have little understanding and knowledge of world affairs or cultures different from their own. The goal is for students to understand social, political, and economic principles and practices that differentiate cultures, as these have evolved over time and place and as they are manifest in the present. Equally important is the need for students to understand the emerging economic interdependence and social collaboration that underlies globalization.

Furthermore each graduate must be introduced to the life of the mind as it informs moral decision-making, ethical conduct and personal responsibility. Our task should be to help prepare them to act ethically in situations of great complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability. Life does not always present itself as a problem to be *solved*; it often appears as a dilemma that must be *resolved*. In these situations, knowledge alone is inadequate. A graduate who has had little experience in thinking about moral dilemmas as a student is not prepared for the world she or he will inhabit.

7. *The curriculum will specify learning outcomes and the processes for the systematic assessment of those learning outcomes.*

The articulation of a comprehensive set of student learning outcomes is the necessary first step in the development of a new curriculum. This first imperative of curriculum development is no less true for general education than a program of study in an academic major. Only after we have decided what our students should master across the cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal dimensions of learning can we begin to fashion an effective assessment strategy. Indeed, the dialectical relationship between student learning outcomes and assessment is fully revealed when one poses an elemental assessment question, “Does our curriculum accomplish what it sets out to do?” Any viable general education proposal will assert what the curriculum sets out to do. The implementation of a comprehensive, systematic and ongoing set of assessment activities, designed to help us determine the efficacy of our general education curriculum, must then be an integral component of the implementation process that follows.