BENCHMARKING ANALYSIS

General Education Core Curriculum

February 2024

In the following report, Hanover Research presents the results of a benchmarking analysis of higher education core curricula, specifically highlighting themes, core credits, and general requirements among six peer institutions in the nation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of general education core curricula at six peer institutions in the nation, Hanover recommends that the institution:

CONSIDER WHETHER TO STRUCTURE GENERAL EDUCATION COURSEWORK TO ALLOW FULFILLMENT OF MULTIPLE REQUIREMENTS.

By allowing students to complete multiple requirements with one course, students will be able to complete their general education requirements with more efficiency. In turn, students will be able to begin taking major-focused classes while still completing core coursework. However, the institution may find its general education curriculum diluted if this approach is pursued too far. In fact, many of the benchmarked peer institutions do not appear to allow students to fill multiple requirements with one class. Therefore, the institution will need to prioritize its general education fulfillment policy, alongside key curricular areas that demand a single-counted course, when redesigning its core curriculum.

INCORPORATE INSTITUTIONAL-SPECIFIC THEMES FOR ITS CORE CURRICULUM, BUT ALSO CONSIDER CATEGORIES FOR SKILLS-FOCUSED COURSEWORK.

Hanover found that reviewed institutions often divide their general education distribution requirements into "themes" and "disciplines" to ensure that the required coursework aligns with the College's mission. Benchmarked institutions will often use overarching themes as an umbrella to house specific disciplines, which streamlines the organization and categories of general education requirements. The institution can utilize this approach when assessing the types of programming it considers necessary for its students to complete prior to graduation.

KEY FINDINGS

Half of the benchmarked institutions allow students to choose from a variety of coursework to fulfill their general education requirements. The other half require students to take specific writing and math classes. This can include introductory mathematics courses such as algebra, statistics, or calculus or can be unique quantitative reasoning or analysis coursework. Academic writing requirements are also common among benchmarked institutions, but classes also vary depending on the institution.

Experiential learning is not often a required component of core classwork. Only two out of the six reviewed institutions require that their students participate in a culminating experience as part of their general education requirements. If the institution is considering requiring experiential learning as part of its curriculum, it might pursue a mandatory capstone or internship rather than a study abroad experience. However, it is not a significant trend among reviewed institutions.

Without significant outliers, the reviewed institutions require an average of 42 general education credits. Hanover excluded Hollins University in this count because of its higher-than-average core credit requirements (at least 72 credits). However, with Hollins University, the average is 47 credits. In developing a new core curriculum, the institution can consider an average of 42-47 general education requirements in order to align with reviewed institutions.

Industry experts are concerned that general education requirements are delaying students' degree completion. Concerns center around the extensive nature of core requirements and whether or not students find general education helpful. Alternatives to the traditional version of general education would be reducing the number of required credits, increasing certificates or other in-course credentials, or encouraging interdisciplinary and experiential learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

To assist the institution as it redesigns its core curriculum, Hanover conducted a benchmarking study to determine how peer institutions structure their general education requirements. The analysis aims to provide insight into interrelated research questions about general education themes, credit requirements, and fulfillment policies.

The following analysis is based on a review of information drawn from institutional websites as well as publicly available data sources. Hanover selected six institutions, prioritizing institutions that highlighted the methodology behind their core course structure.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are current trends in higher education core curricula and what types of fields are required for students to complete?

How many core credits are required at peer and aspirant institutions?

How flexible are the general education requirements of peer and aspirant institutions?

SELECTED INSTITUTIONS

National

Flagler University

Westminster College

Southeastern

Huntingdon College

Maryville College

Aspirants

Centre College

Hollins University

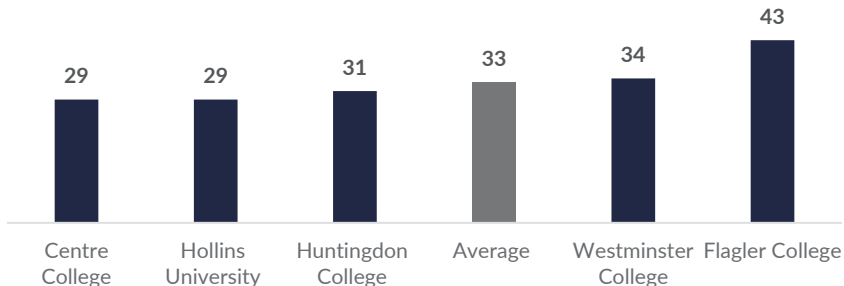## GENERAL EDUCATION TRENDS AND TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE MAJORS

MINIMUM CREDITS REQUIRED

Hanover excluded Hollins University (Hollins) because of its significantly higher credit count. However, with Hollins, the average credit requirement for general education courses is 47.

Institution	Credits
Westminster College	53
Maryville College	51
Average	42
Centre College	38
Huntingdon College	36
Flagler College	33

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE MAJORS

Similarly, Hanover excluded Maryville College (Maryville) because of its notably high program count. With Maryville, the average major count is 40.

Institution	Majors
Centre College	29
Hollins University	29
Huntingdon College	31
Average	33
Westminster College	34
Flagler College	43

REQUIRED COURSES FOR ALL STUDENTS

Half of the benchmarked institutions allow students to choose from a variety of course options to fulfill their general education requirements. The remaining half tend to require students to finish writing requirements and some math-related coursework unless students place out of these courses. Common courses include the following:

Academic Writing · Seminars · Speech · Math

FULFILLMENT OPTIONS

While specific policies are not always listed, the reviewed institutions largely appear to require one course per requirement. Hollins University is the only explicit exception to this trend since certain courses can satisfy both their perspective and skill requirements.

Therefore, the institution will have to consider whether it would be interested in pursuing a general education curriculum that can be fulfilled by multiple courses or require students to complete each competency individually. Benchmarked trends suggest that individual courses satisfying one requirement at a time is a more popular option, however, the satisfaction of multiple requirements with one course will allow for greater efficiency when completing the coursework.

GENERAL EDUCATION CATEGORIES

Themes

Flagler College:
• Citizenship with Integrity
• Thoughtful Stewardship
• Respectful and Inclusive Community
• Transformative Learning

Westminster College:
• Aesthetics
• Human Development
• Global Perspectives
• Values and Diversity
• Institutions and Society
• Natural Science Inquiry

Maryville College:
• A critical knowledge of self and informed understanding of other
• Proficiency in the use of evidence, empirical data, and quantitative analysis
• Skill and discernment in producing and interpreting forms of human expression
• The judgement and knowledge required for ethical citizenship of nation and world

Centre College:
• Cognition
• Communication
• Community
• Connection
• Creativity
• Critical Thinking

Hollins University:
• Aesthetic Analysis
• Creative Expression
• Premodern Worlds
• Modern and/or Contemporary Worlds
• Social and Cultural Diversities
• Global Systems
• Language Requirement
• Scientific Inquiry

General education curricula clusters can be divided into two discrete sections: "themes" and "disciplines," which serve as distribution requirements. Notably, some institutions use both types of methodologies in developing their general education curriculum. For example, both Flagler College (Flagler) and Hollins University use a combination of both to develop a core group of classes that reflect both general ideals and specific skillsets. Hollins University even divides its coursework into "perspectives" and "skills" to separate the two different categories. Similarly, Flagler College has students complete one class from each "key skill" or "literacy" and notes that each class is centered around a Core Value. A marked difference between the two institutions, however, is that Flagler's themes shape the course topics students need to take while students at Hollins need to take both perspectives and skills courses to finish their general education requirements.

Disciplines / Distribution Requirements

Flagler College:
• Academic Writing
• Oral Communication
• Quantitative Reasoning
• Natural Scientific Inquiry
• Social Scientific Inquiry
• Creativity
• Historical Inquiry
• Social/Cultural Inquiry
• Ethical Reasoning

Huntingdon College:
• Writing and Communication
• Judeo-Christian Tradition and History
• Fine Arts
• History
• Literature
• Mathematics
• Natural Sciences
• Applied and Social Science
• Ethics and Vocational Call
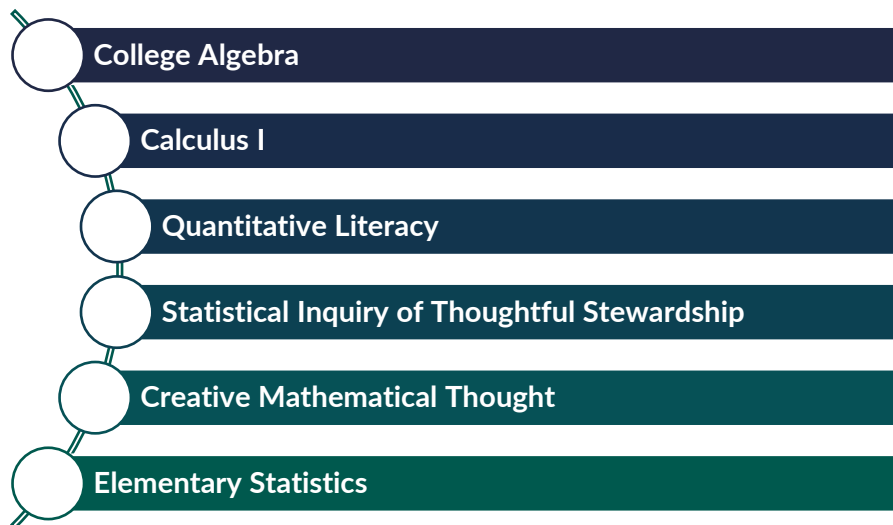
Hollins University:
• Writing
• Oral Communication
• Applied Research Techniques
• Basic Quantitative Reasoning
• Applied Quantitative Reasoning

GENERAL EDUCATION COURSEWORK EXAMPLES

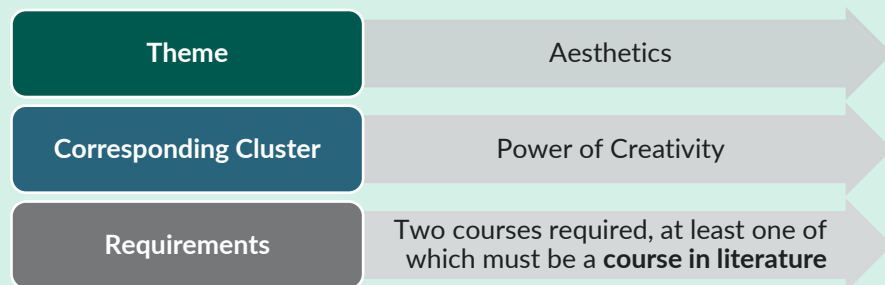## COMMON COURSEWORK: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

All institutions have students take at least one quantitative analysis course which is often, but not always, a traditional mathematics course. However, some institutions allow students to place out of their quantitative analysis requirement (e.g., Hollins University). Additionally, not all general education requirements emphasize traditional math skills or coursework; for example, Flagler's quantitative reasoning course options all center statistical inquiry-related coursework in the humanities. Courses such as "Statistical Inquiry of Citizenship" and "Statistical Inquiry of a Respectful and Inclusive Community" serve as exemplars of creative ways to integrate the mission statement of an institution into seemingly conventional general education requirements.

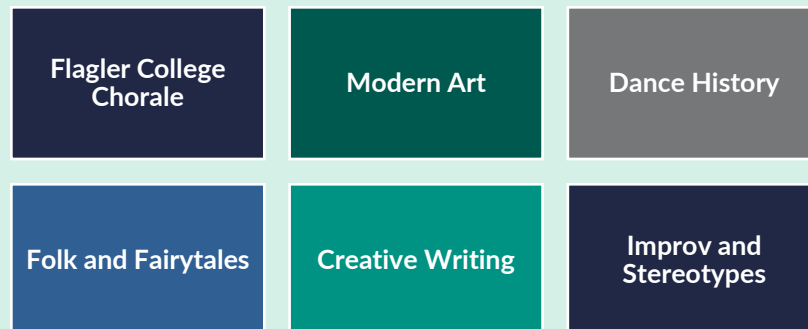The figure below lists examples of required course types among the reviewed institutions:

- College Algebra
- Calculus I
- Quantitative Literacy
- Statistical Inquiry of Thoughtful Stewardship
- Creative Mathematical Thought
- Elementary Statistics

COMMON COURSEWORK: AESTHETICS/CREATIVITY

Four of the six institutions note that their general education curriculum requires students to enroll in courses under a creative- or aesthetic-focused umbrella. This type of coursework generally focuses on arts and humanities-related coursework but can be defined as classes that allow students to "think and act in innovative and creative ways." In redefining its own arts and humanities core curriculum, the institution might consider the kinds of courses that allow students to explore the humanities outside of standardized classes.

Theme	Aesthetics
Corresponding Cluster	Power of Creativity
Requirements	Two courses required, at least one of which must be a **course in literature**

Source: Westminster College

Sample of coursework includes:

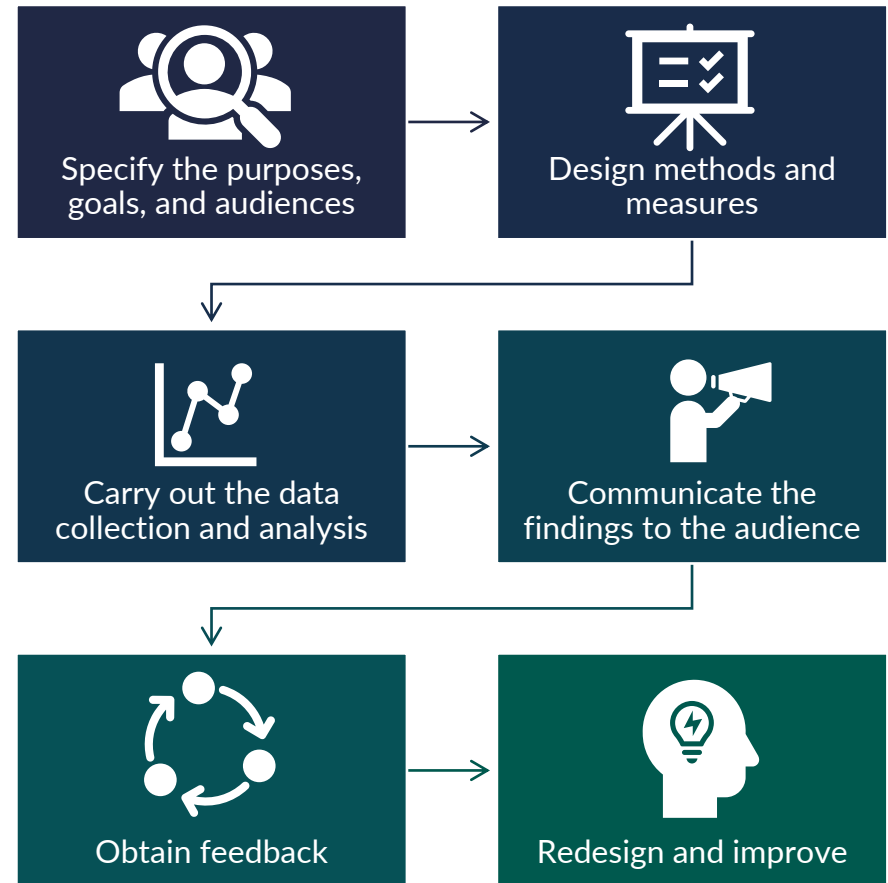|		
Flagler College Chorale	Modern Art	Dance History
Folk and Fairytales	Creative Writing	Improv and Stereotypes

HIGHER EDUCATION

INDUSTRY OPINIONS

Traditionally structured general education requirements have the potential to <u>detract</u> from the quality of higher education. Industry experts, such as Paul Hanstedt, former director of the Center for Academic Resources and Pedological Excellence at Washington and Lee University and current Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Innovation at the University of Minnesota, suggest that general education can detract from the purpose of higher education.

Hanstedt argues that general education requirements are often largely reminiscent of high school curricula and often do not allow university-level students to challenge themselves. Instead, general education should foster interdisciplinary and experiential opportunities, including potential approaches to shared knowledge through in-course credentials or badges that would replace traditional formats, to ensure students are doing more than "siloed data regurgitation."

"Too often, though, our general education curricula don't match our architectural rhetoric, particularly when those curricula are structured around a distribution model"

University of Michigan economics professor, Nicolas Costa, agrees. Costa notes that according to University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts' requirements, students must complete 120 credits to graduate and about 50-60 credits to fulfill their general education requirements. The only way to efficiently work through the general education curriculum is to also fulfill major and minor requirements at the same time; otherwise, Costa believes, "that the extensive general education requirements are, in fact, not worth their opportunity costs."

ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION

Specify the purposes, goals, and audiences	Design methods and measures
Carry out the data collection and analysis	Communicate the findings to the audience
Obtain feedback	Redesign and improve

Source: American University

SPOTLIGHT ON SUSTAINABILITY: UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

University of Vermont integrates four core themes into its general education curriculum; quantitative reasoning, foundational writing and information literacy, sustainability, and diversity. The purpose of these four themes is to encourage the transcendence of disciplinary boundaries and help students develop "competencies that are essential to lifelong learning and responsible citizenship."

Hanover selected the University of Vermont to spotlight because of its sustainability emphasis. The institution might consider using University of Vermont as a paradigm if it decides to feature sustainability in its own core curriculum.

| Fulfilling the Sustainability Requirement	
Courses Required	**Sample of Course Options**
One course or three credits	• Cultural Anthropology • Environmental and Social Reporting • Wildlife Health and Conservation • Ecology and Evolution • Food Waste to Value • Sustainability Cultural History • Environmental Systems • Science of Sustainability • Water Quality Engineering • Forest Conservation • Geography of Water • Earth Materials • Sociology of Disaster • Race, Identity, and Migrant Labor
Rationale	
"At University of Vermont, we recognize that the pursuit of ecological, social, and economic vitality must come with the understanding that the needs of the present be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"	

FOUR SUSTAINABILITY LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students can have an informed conversation about **the multiple dimensions and complexity of sustainability**

Students can evaluate sustainability using an **evidence-based disciplinary approach** and integrate economic, ecological, and social perspectives
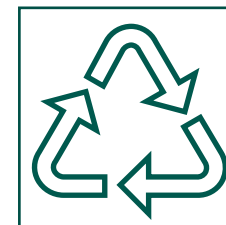
Students think critically about sustainability **across a diversity of cultural values** and across multiple scales of relevance from local to global

Students, as members of society, can recognize and assess how **sustainability impacts their lives and how their actions impact sustainability**

Source: University of Vermont; 2023-24 Catalog