The Critical Role of General Education

ETS on the Critical Role of General Education

A general education curriculum plays a critical role in ensuring students have the broad knowledge and essential skills needed to succeed — as citizens, as employees and as lifelong learners. In addition, robust general education activities encourage students to think critically in a complex, information-driven economy, understand cultural differences in an increasingly global society, and make connections and analyze information across various disciplines and contexts.

Many higher education institutions devote vast amounts of time and resources to ensure their general education program is effective and aligned to their mission. Student learning assessment is an essential aspect of the process. For this reason, student learning outcomes (SLO) assessment activities have steadily increased across campuses in the United States over the past decade. This increase has continued in parallel with a shift in focus from assessment to meet accountability requirements to assessment to improve teaching and learning.

As institutions have increased their assessment activities, one notable trend is the use of multiple assessment tools to gain a more complete view of the impact of general education on students. According to a 2013 study by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, over 80 percent of institutions surveyed used a variety of tools for their various assessment needs.[1] These tools include surveys, rubrics and standardized assessments.

A major advantage of this holistic approach is that it can provide more compelling data than a one-size-fits-all assessment tool. Assessments should be selected based on an institution's mission and goals, while recognizing that each has benefits and limitations, and must be fair, reliable and valid. For example, developing homegrown measures of student learning is an excellent way to engage faculty members and ensure that the assessments are aligned to learning outcomes. However, ensuring the validity, reliability and fairness of the assessments every year can require considerable resources. And if assessment development is not done well, the data may be inaccurate, resulting in invalid decisions.

ETS has applied its expertise in assessment development to create the *HEIghten*™ Outcomes Assessment Suite, a flexible approach to assessing general education SLOs. Modular, actionable and easy to implement, the suite is a comprehensive, research-based tool that can be used in conjunction with internally developed assessments for curriculum improvement and accreditation. Institutions can choose the skill modules that align with their general education learning goals, including Critical Thinking, Quantitative Literacy and Written Communication, with additional modules under development. The HEIghten modules also allow institutions to add their own questions.

As higher education institutions are challenged to demonstrate student learning for multiple purposes, ETS will continue to support them with research-driven assessments that provide the all-important data they need. In collaboration with *Inside Higher Ed*, we are pleased to bring you information that will help you achieve your general education learning goals.

David G. Payne
Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Global Education Division
ETS

For more information on the HEIghten Outcomes Assessment Suite, visit **www.ets.org/heighten**.

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[1] Kuh, G. D., Jankowski, N., Ikenberry, S. O., & Kinzie, J. (2014). *Knowing What Students Know and Can Do: The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in US Colleges and Universities*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Introduction

New college students ask one another "what's your major?" Politicians and pundits opine about the subjects students should be encouraged to pursue (or not) as majors. Yet experts say that general education may be as important as, if not more important than, the major when it comes to determining the quality of undergraduate education.

The articles and essays in this compilation explore some of the trends and debates about general education – on individual campuses and generally. There is no one single approach that seems best for general education, given the great variation of institutions' missions. But these articles reflect the importance that many professors and academic administrators place on general education.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to cover general education. Your comments on these articles and your ideas for future coverage are welcome.

--The Editors
editor@insidehighered.com
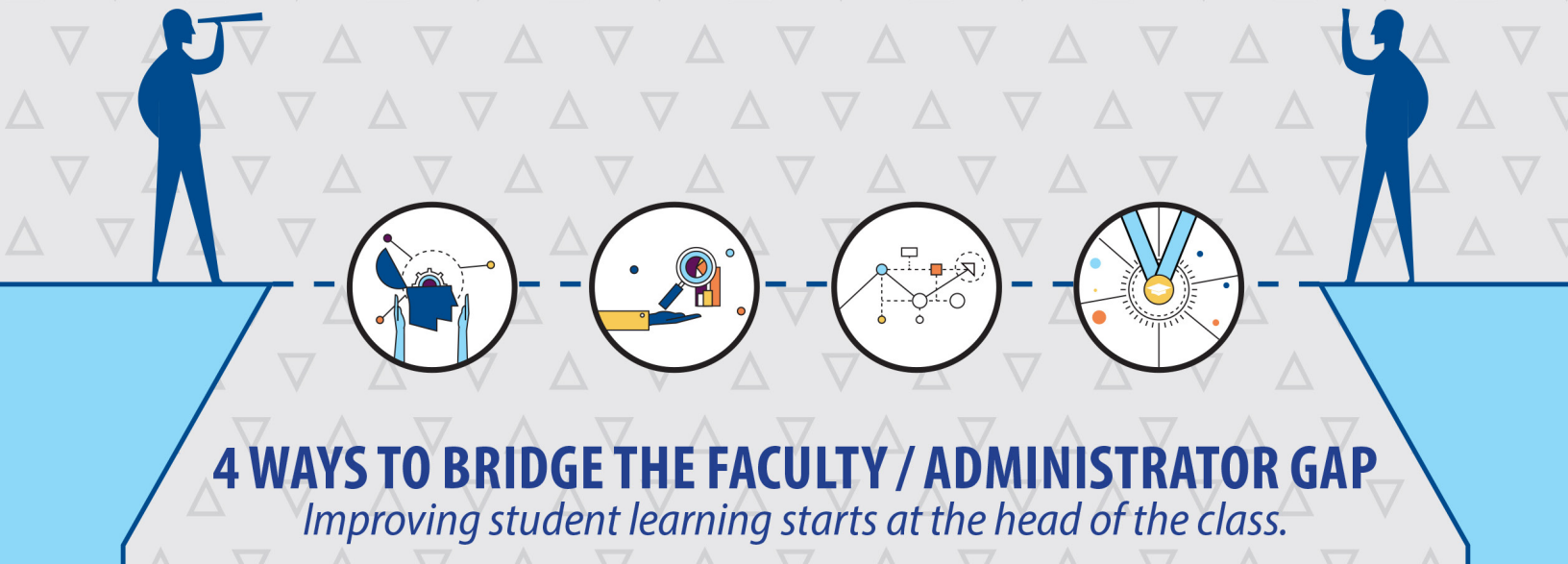
4 WAYS TO BRIDGE THE FACULTY / ADMINISTRATOR GAP
Improving student learning starts at the head of the class.

No matter where you are in the process of implementing your student learning outcomes (SLO) program, you won't get very far without the support of your institution's faculty members. Administration and faculty must work togeter to obtain the vital metrics that drive learning improvements, and present a united front to meet the demands of a diverse set of stakeholders — accreditation agencies, governing boards, parents and students.

Whether you are just beginning to evaluate your goals and needs, or you are about to implement an assessment, a cooperative strategy will foster more accurate results that reflect the knowledge and skill level of your student body.

EMBRACE AN IMPROVEMENT MINDSET

Building consensus starts with agreement that the endeavor benefits everyone. Using student learning data to "check the box" depletes faculty interest in how such information can help them in their classrooms. It is vital to show faculty that your administration will be transparent in how data from the program will be used. Transparency is promoted in an environment where an institution allows faculty members to participate in the development of SLO programs and be key players in determining how the assessment data should and will be used.

PROVIDE FACULTY WITH CONTEXTUAL DATA ABOUT YOUR INSTITUTION'S STUDENTS

Faculty should have an understanding of your student body's learning level before beginning an assessment. Whether it's domain-specific knowledge, general education skills or noncognitive skills — such as study skills or student motivation — this big-picture perspective helps faculty members modify their individual teaching approach to improve learning. Usable information flowing from your SLO program empowers faculty to enhance the learning experience in their classrooms.

Faculty members have a more nuanced understanding of their students. Faculty should be able to review the assessments taken by their students to help identify performance standards that are appropriate. Mutual understanding of performance levels by a representative sample of students should hold weight in setting expectations of student performance.
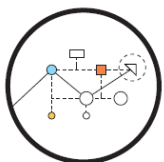
SUPPORT RESOURCES TO DEVELOP QUALITY PROCEDURES AND PROGRAM DESIGN

Your institution's investment into learning improvement requires some form of assessment. If that investment's infrastructure is deficient, the investment is wasted. A display of commitment to provide what is needed builds participant confidence and can strengthen faculty interest in the process.

REWARD PARTICIPATING FACULTY

Faculty members who provide helpful feedback and work to ensure their students participate in these assessments should be recognized for their commitment to the SLO program. Consider allowing faculty to submit research to journals that focus on student learning to increase the desire of the faculty to collect assessment data. Other ways to reward faculty could include allowing faculty members to use assessment activities as part of their service component to the university or granting release time to participate in assessment activities.

Having the right tools and knowledge for your cooperative strategy helps drive improved learning and institutional effectiveness. Visit the *HEIghten™ Outcomes Assessment Suite* website to learn more about Educational Testing Service's expertise in assessing student learning outcomes for your general education cirriculum, or contact heighten@ets.org.

News

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

8 Professors, 43 Students

By Paul Fain

Southern Utah University goes all in with an experiment on general education, combining 13 courses into one year of material that eight professors jointly teach.

The way most colleges teach general education to undergraduates is hopelessly broken, according to a group of professors and administrators at Southern Utah University.

Introductory-level courses typically are designed to be the first in a series for students who eventually major in that discipline. But their relevance to nonmajor, general education students is far less apparent, said Scott Wyatt, Southern Utah's president.

Those students tend to get buried in specialized material, he said, like vocabulary that becomes a framework for future courses. And the scattershot, buffet model to general education courses means much of the material students learn is not connected to a coherent, holistic curriculum.

"This is the worst part of your educational experience," said Wyatt. "We're pushing it out on the margins."

Yet despite calls by many to improve general education, including a decades-long push by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, colleges have an incentive not to mess with status quo. That's because general education courses are generally cheap to teach.

Those courses lack expensive laboratories and often are taught in huge lecture halls. So a classroom of 500 students in Psychology 101, particularly when taught by adjuncts or graduate assistants, can be a cash cow for that department.

"They're treated as a revenue builder by most universities," said John Taylor, an associate professor

of biology and faculty fellow for academic affairs in the provost's office at Southern Utah, a public university located in the largely rural southwest corner of the state.

Wyatt and a team of faculty members last year hatched a plan to reinvent how general education works at the university. Their solution, dubbed Jumpstart GE, began in fall 2015 with 43 students. It's certainly a different approach. And while the experiment is too young to show any real learning outcomes, experts said the concept shows plenty of promise.

The first-year students are taking the full 34 credits for their general education requirements this year -- the equivalent of 13 courses. But all that material has been converted into one course that eight profes-

sors from different disciplines are teaching jointly.

The class meets every day from 9 a.m. until noon. Two to four professors are there at any time, working with students on material from the introductory courses they typically teach. But the professors also collaborate in those lectures and discussions, making connections for students across typical subject-matter boundaries.

Learning objectives are anchored to a specific theme, which will change each year for students in the pilot project. This year is organized around the question "What is freedom?" The course is divided into six-week chunks, in which students work in groups to explore specific aspects of the overarching theme.

"Every discipline provides an answer or a part of the understanding," said Wyatt.

For example, the class used Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a central text. The English professor taught about the novel. An art historian led discussions on Mississippi River art. And Matt Barton, a professor of communications, used the book as a jumping-off point to teach about racial identity and social media.

Professors said they have learned from each other in the course.

"You have to be on your game," said Barton, adding that professors call on each other in class. "That's fun and a little bit scary."

But with that welcome challenge also come efficiencies. Professors said they don't have to cover material from other disciplines, which they often do in normal courses. For example, Taylor can leave the writing instruction to the English professor and focus instead on biology. Each professor gives grades within their own discipline.

Faculty for the Jumpstart GE program at Southern Utah U

Barton said he's a big fan of the experience so far, which he says has been freeing for him and students.

"General education is not some rite of passage" in the Jumpstart GE program, he said. "It actually has a purpose."

Build the Foundation First

Wyatt has big goals for the project. He thinks it could be a model for other institutions to imitate. And he thinks the approach to general education will be a selling point for the university, which enrolls roughly 7,700 students.

"We actually believe that we can brand ourselves as a general educa-

tion college," he said.

It's already working, said Wyatt, with several students having enrolled in the program who otherwise would have gone to other universities.

While the experiment is too young to judge, several experts said, the approach is worth watching.

"The institution -- top to bottom -- should be commended for taking educational risks," said Karen Gross, the former president of Southern Vermont College and former senior policy adviser at the U.S. Department of Education. She called the experiment bold and thoughtful.

Students with remedial needs are not eligible to participate in the group-course approach to general education. Neither are those in certain majors with stringent intro-level course requirements, particularly a few majors in STEM fields, such as pre-med.

However, Taylor said he's convinced Jumpstart GE can work for most majors.

"Just give us that first year and let us build a solid foundation," he said.

Wyatt agreed, predicting that more students will stick with STEM majors when introduced to those disciplines in this format. He also thinks more students will graduate in four years when they start in Jumpstart GE.

"The departments get 100 percent of their students' attention for

three years," he said.

Students who arrive at the university holding substantial credits from Advanced Placement or dual enrollment courses from high school will not be eligible for the program. However, those students and ones who major in ineligible disciplines can participate in a less ambitious version, called mini-Jumpstart, in which a few courses are combined into one semester that a group of professors jointly teach.

Next year the mini versions will enroll 400 students, said a university spokeswoman. The full Jumpstart GE will expand to two sections of 48 students, she said, and those sections are filling up. The themes will be national parks and "an active America."

Students who complete Jumpstart GE will earn a general-education certificate from the university, which other institutions in the Utah System of Higher Education will honor. That means transferring students will not lose any of the 34 credits they earn in the unusual program, at least if they transfer to another public institution in the state.

The course material is drawn from existing courses, Wyatt said, meaning that the program has not caused any financial aid or accreditation problems.

Gross said a big test will be how well students do in their majors after the first year of Jumpstart GE. The project will require sustained support from the university's leadership, she said, and participation by "top of the batting order" professors.

"Change doesn't occur often" in higher education, said Gross. "And when it does, it's usually tinkering at the edges. This isn't that." ∎

Rethinking Gen Ed

By Colleen Flaherty

Amid concerns that requirements may not mean much to students or professors, Harvard and Duke Universities both look to curricular changes to improve undergraduate education.

General education programs at their best impart to undergraduates basic knowledge in -- or at least exposure to -- a variety of disciplines, and provide some sense of how to study and live in a thoughtful way. Their iterations on different campuses are also supposed to embody the values of a particular institution.

But how often do they meet that mark? Two institutions concerned that their general education programs were somehow falling short -- Harvard and Duke Universities -- have initiated the massive undertaking of reform.

At both institutions, a major concern is that students don't have much sense of what general education is supposed to be accomplishing -- a concern at many colleges nationally. A survey of provosts by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, for example, found that while many institutions were moving beyond basic distribution requirements in their general

education designs, just 9 percent of respondents said they believed all students were aware of their desired learning outcomes.

Varying Visions at Harvard

Harvard's revamped program, which was approved in 2016 by its Faculty of Arts and Sciences, aims to honor the various ways in which professors think about a liberal arts education, and increase student buy-in.

"While many students and faculty highlight the success of specific gen-ed courses, the gen-ed program at Harvard has not yet established a clear and consistent identity among our students and faculty," reads a Harvard program review committee's interim report from 2015. "Moreover, despite its prominence in every student's curricular experience, it plays no defining role in the identity of Harvard College. Most students agree that a well-executed gen-ed program would be valuable, but they are confused about the goals and purposes of the current program."

Faculty members, by contrast, "are more divided about the value of gen ed, some preferring a straight distribution requirement instead," the report continues. "But these results are tenuous in both cases, since much of our discussion with students and faculty revealed confusion about what a general-education requirement aims to be and how it differs from a distribution requirement. … Confusion about this distinction at Harvard stems from the fact that in practice our program

is a chimera: it has the head of a gen-ed requirement with the body of a distribution requirement."

Harvard's only had three general-education programs in its history, and the current program was adopted in 2009. The university didn't plan to create a new program so soon (and arguably still hasn't) but found significant flaws in the first five-year review. Interviews with hundreds of faculty members and students revealed that there was little enthusiasm about the program.

Undergraduates in many cases were seeking out "easy-A" courses to fulfill their distribution requirements for their eight general-education courses, said Sean Kelly, the Teresa G. and Ferdinand F. Martignetti Professor of Philosophy and chair of the program review committee. "They didn't really understand what the point of it was. And they tended not to take the courses in the general-education program very seriously."

Faculty members, meanwhile, seemed split on what they thought a general-education program should accomplish, Kelly said. Some adhered to a more classical ars vivendi model, in which students are exposed to courses that teach them how to live a meaningful life. Others adhered to a more medieval model, in which students gained knowledge in each of the liberal arts (or in an era of numerous such arts, a broad selection). And others still believed in a more Romantic model, in which student choice and self-cultivation were paramount.

Kelly said that Harvard's current program focuses more on the art of living model than anything else, with limited success. In addition to students missing the point, faculty members also reported that such courses were difficult to develop and teach.

"It's a different range of questions -- what's the best way to teach this material so that students will recognize that it's not about what I need to know to go on to the next-level class, but to change the life I'm leading five, 10, 15 years from now?" he said.

Rather than ditch the art of living model entirely, however, he and his committee sought to round it out by incorporating the two others. All three ways of thinking about general education are "legitimate and fascinating," and have a history at Harvard and in higher education more broadly, Kelly said.

So instead of eight courses in different distribution areas centered on the classical model, Kelly and his committee proposed a kind of compromise: four electives in each of four perspectives -- centered on the humanities, history and social sciences, natural sciences, and ethics and civil values, respectively -- plus three more typical university-style course distribution requirements across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering. There's also a required course in quantitative reasoning.

The review committee's final report refers to the improved program as a "4+3+1" model. The first

four courses would come from the following categories: aesthetics, culture, interpretation; histories, societies, individuals; science and technology in society; and ethics and civics.

Guiding questions for professors creating such courses include:

• What does my area of inquiry have to offer of value to the society or culture at large?

• What does a student, who might otherwise have no further education in my area of inquiry, need to know in order to appreciate this value?

• How, in particular, will knowing these things help a student to think differently about his or her ethical decisions or approach differently his or her contributions to civil discourse and action?

The other three required courses are more typical departmental ones -- one each in arts and humanities, the social sciences, and natural sciences or engineering.
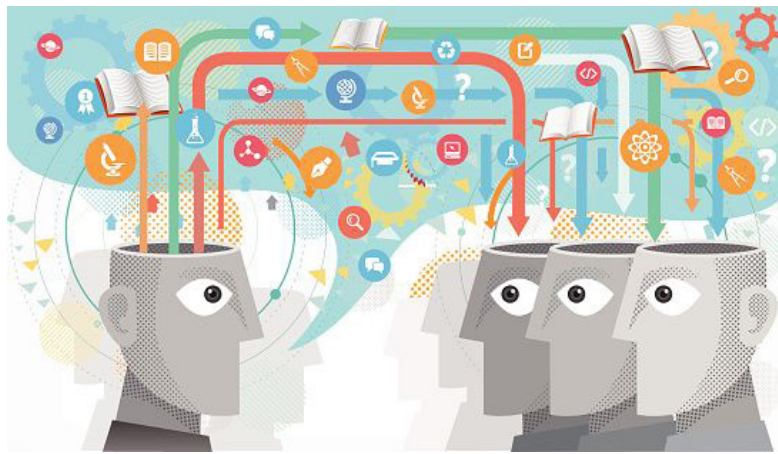
Students may test out of the last qualitative reasoning course, according to the committee.

Risk or Laziness?

The committee also proposed that one of the general-education courses may be taken pass-fail, at the discretion of the instructor, to encourage students to take risks and enroll in something in which they may not necessarily get a top grade. Despite limited, arguably counterintuitive

evidence to suggest that students who take courses pass-fail may actually outperform those who take them for traditional grades, Kelly said there's been some controversy surrounding the issue. Some professors don't believe in pass-fail, or in having students taking a course pass-fail in the same section with those taking it for a grade.

In the end, the idea of offering a pass-fail option in one course seemed like a compromise, he said. (A separate, existing policy could allow students to take the three other distribution requirements pass-fail.)

Budget issues plagued the rollout of the current general-education program in 2009. While no budget currently exists for the new changes, Kelly said 2008-9 was a particularly "inauspicious" time to be starting a new curriculum. His committee's final report makes clear that the proposal needs resources to succeed, and Kelly said he hopes "alumni and donors will see this as worth their support."

Regarding the program's success

over all, Kelly said he's not in the business of predicting the future. But he said he's hopeful, based on faculty participation so far. "I was here in 2006-7 when we discussed the original program, and the tenor of discussions is dramatically different," he said.

The next challenge will be administering and transitioning to the new program -- another huge effort. Kelly estimated that it won't actually be adopted until after 2017 at least.

Edward J. Hall, Norman E. Vuilleumier Professor of Philosophy and chair of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' standing Committee on General Education, reiterated that the general-education program voted on wasn't new, but rather an enhancement of what's already in place.

The "primary mission of courses in this program is to focus on some problem or issue likely to be of significant importance to the lives of our students, postgraduation, and to draw on the instructor's scholarly expertise and intellectual insights in such a way that, coming out of the course, students will be able to grapple with that problem or issue in a much more sophisticated fashion," he said.

In requiring just four such courses, instead of eight, Hall continued, the enhancements make it possible to ensure a high level of course quality and rigor. Whereas designing

the previous number of courses to allow students to fulfill their requirements was probably "too tall an order" for the faculty, he said, the new number of eligible courses -- 120 to 150 -- seems more manageable.

Hall differed from Kelly a bit regarding the pass-fail option, saying he wasn't sure it was a good idea. In any case, the faculty will be watching to see what effects it has on student engagement. "If it leads students to take risks, delving into courses outside their comfort zones, then that's great," he said. If it "leads them to phone it in, in gen-ed courses taken pass-fail, then we'll need to change the policy."

Making Duke Distinct

Unlike Harvard, Duke did intend to take a hard look at its general-education program for most undergraduates, Curriculum 2000, which has been in place for about two decades. That's not because it was failing but rather because, as at Harvard, there seemed to be little enthusiasm for it -- particularly as two-thirds of professors have left since it was adopted. While Curriculum 2000 emphasizes areas of knowledge, methods of learning and classroom innovation, a new program presented for the first time in early 2016 seeks to streamline requirements, foreground the liberal arts and put Duke's stamp on general education. And because it stress-

es student agency and designing one's own educational pathway, it's tentatively being called Experience Duke, Deliberately.

"We have both a responsibility and an opportunity to reassert and reimagine the value of a liberal arts education," reads a report from the curriculum review committee. "The liberal arts and sciences landscape is both under siege and in flux. The value of the liberal arts is contested

> **If it leads students to take risks, delving into courses outside their comfort zones, then that's great. " If it "leads them to phone it in, in gen-ed courses taken pass-fail, then we'll need to change the policy.**

in no place more than here in North Carolina, where a narrow utilitarianism dominates debate about public higher education. At the same time, knowledge, what constitutes it, and how it is created and shared continues to evolve."

Duke's redesigned curriculum "needs to embrace the challenges of this new ecology creatively and deliberatively," it continues. Graduates "still need to be ethically responsible, able to engage multiple languages and logics, be theoretically versatile, able to mount sophisticated arguments and able to deploy appropriate data and evidence. But how we cultivate this sensibility, these perspectives and capabilities needs rethinking at Duke and beyond. Our students need more than ever to be challenged and empowered to be intellectually and personally creative,

agile and resilient."

The proposal is guided by the committee's assertions that "simple is good" and "simple and more scholarly is even better," based on feedback from students that too complicated a general-education program would hold them back intellectually and experientially. At the same time, the committee says, the program should be a Duke signature. Students, faculty and staff in interviews "asked for something bold, something inspirational and something that reflects the very best of what Duke is today. Good is not good enough at Duke. Many believe that Duke can, and should, be known for its curriculum."

The proposed shift would maintain Duke's emphasis on language, cross-cultural competencies and data analysis. But it includes several new elements, perhaps most significantly the Duke Experience -- a multidisciplinary, team-taught, flipped-format course centered on a shared educational experience. According to a proposal, all first-year students would take a common, 10-month course led by five faculty members from different disciplines. Suzanne Shanahan, an associate professor of philosophy, co-director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke and chair of its curriculum review committee, said how and whether the course will center on a given theme is still being debated.

There are concerns about particular themes being more suited to some disciplines over others. But preliminary possible topics include mind and body, climate change, and race and inequality, to rotate every three to five years.

The committee report describes the experience like this:

"For students to understand how to navigate the intellectual terrain and craft their own coherent pathways, they need to experience the diversity of perspectives, logics and modes of scholarship early on at Duke. They need to see them in interaction. ... The Duke Experience would be a truly common first-year experience with shared lectures and perhaps even shared readings. It is a space for deliberative discussion, scholarly writing, analysis and reflection."

Another aspect of the plan is sustained work in a field beyond one's major. Duke already encourages interdisciplinary study, and 83 percent of students conduct work in second field. But the general-education program would bump that figure up to 100 percent, with students required to pursue a second major, a minor, a certificate or an independent sequence. This is about encouraging students to be "intellectually adventurous, and to think about how they can chart a pathway through the curriculum" to uncover the "animating questions" of their studies, Shanahan said. So student's major and secondary field could be complementary, such as political science and educational policy.

Shanahan is currently in Jordan, interviewing Syrian and Iraqi refugees with a group of undergraduate researchers as part of the university's existing Duke Immerse program. That kind of experience parallels the general-education proposal's other element: a mentored scholarly experience.

Students would fulfill it though one of a number of efforts, including but not limited to lab work under a faculty member, independent research, an internship, or an arts or writing project.

The proposal also includes five learning expectations for undergraduates:

• Communicate compellingly.
• Understand other languages, cultures and civilizations, past and present.
• Understand different forms of scientific thought and evidence.
• Understand creative products of the human imagination.
• Evaluate, manage and interpret information.

Faculty members were receptive to the proposal at a meeting in February 2016, but some had concerns, including how first-year writing would fit into the Duke Experience, or how to know what qualifies as a mentored experience or secondary field work.

Additional questions for further consideration included in the report -- and which recall some of Harvard's concerns -- are, "How do we combine this structure with a robust pass-fail policy to further promote academic experimentation?

What student mentoring structure will need to be in place to promote a deliberative engagement with the curriculum and ensure students embrace and meet expectations? How will this be financed? What other academic support structures may be necessary? How will faculty mentoring be recognized and remunerated as part of their overall teaching effort?"

Shanahan said the curriculum committee has lots of work left to do in terms of defining just how the program will work and is still gaining feedback from faculty members.

"Whatever we do, this is an opportunity for people to re-engage with the curriculum and see what they like about it, what's good, as well as what may need to be changed," she said. "This is a process, and it's early, and there's a lot more conversations to be had."

Lee Baker, dean of academic affairs for Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke and associate vice provost for undergraduate education, said the value of the program concept is that students are forced to make strategic decisions about their education. They're "motivated and encouraged to develop their own pathway through the curriculum, taking advantage of the many educational opportunities to demonstrate that they have met the expectations of the curriculum," he said.

Baker added, "This is the liberal arts for the 21st century, where curricular engagements inform the co-curricular and vice versa." ∎

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For Freshmen, Only Full-Time Faculty

By Colleen Flaherty

Governors State University, with many at-risk students, and without much money, opts to fill freshman program course sections with full-time faculty members only.

There are a lot of reasons to place freshmen in courses taught by tenure-line and otherwise full-time faculty members. Research suggests that underclassmen learn best from these professors, as opposed to part-time faculty members lacking institutional support, for example. Full-time faculty members also tend to be around for the long term -- meaning they can continue to support students as mentors throughout their academic careers.

There are also many reasons colleges don't staff introductory courses with full-time professors and frequently rely on part-timers or graduate students. Such an approach can be relatively costly, depending on institution type, and tenure-line faculty members don't all jump at the chance to teach freshmen. Such concerns are particularly acute at financially strapped institutions and ones that aren't known for undergraduate education.

Yet one institution facing a host of challenges has managed to fill its freshman program with full-time instructors -- and in fact says that's

been the secret to its early successes with lower-division enrollment. Notably, this is not the move of a well-financed public or an elite private, but of a poorly financed public institution.

"The hardest courses to teach are the freshman courses -- that's where you're introducing students to critical thinking and writing and initiating them to the academy," said Elaine Maimon, president of Governors State University, which accepted its first freshman class in 2014. "But there's nothing more important to do. ... These students are going to get a strong foundation that they'll carry with them through their four years at university and beyond."

Governors State, based outside Chicago, was founded in 1969 as a "senior university," with undergraduates entering as juniors. It attracted many transfer students and was particularly well-known for its master's degree programs in areas such as counseling and occupational therapy.

That all changed two years ago, when the university admitted its

first cohort of freshmen. From the beginning, Maimon believed the success of the transition would depend on a strong first-year curriculum and even stronger instruction. The best way to achieve that, in her view, was pairing the institution's best supported, and in many cases most experienced, faculty members -- full-timers and those on the tenure-track -- with the institution's most vulnerable students.

While first-year success is a major indicator of any student's ability to complete college, there's a sense at Governors State that that's especially true there. Students come from urban, suburban and rural areas, and many are first-generation college enrollees. Fifty-five percent are students of color, and 54 percent are eligible for Pell Grants.

That's not to say Governors State didn't embrace the challenge. It actively recruited first-generation students and said it was motivated by a finding from the National Center for Education Statistics that "endangers" U.S. democracy: that the lowest-achieving highest-income

students were more likely to complete a university degree than the highest-achieving lowest-income students.

In preparation for the change, a faculty committee got to work on a new general education program for freshmen, ultimately proposing learning communities around three themes: civic engagement, global citizenship and sustainability. Freshmen are required to be full-time and take at least three courses with the same group of students.

The cohorts remain together through the first semester of their sophomore year. Classes in the freshman program are capped at 30, and freshman composition is limited to 15 students. These class sizes might not impress at elite residential private colleges, but they are far from the norm at institutions like Governors State.

While 30 is relatively small for any freshman course, 15 is especially good for composition classes. The Association of Departments of English, a subgroup of the Modern Language Association, says English teachers should not teach more than three composition courses per term and the number of students in each section should not exceed 15, with no more than 20 students in any case, but many institutions fail to meet that standard. That's despite faculty complaints that to teach composition properly -- with many opportunities to draft and resubmit -- small classes and low

student-per-instructor ratios are a must.

Ann Vendrely, associate provost and chair of the General Education Task Force, said its work was driven by the small class size principle. Beyond that, she said, ensuring "that these new students had a liberal education was important to us, and we felt that full-time faculty were in the best position to deliver that."

Banking on Faculty Buy-In

So after curriculum came instruction -- or rather, convincing faculty members who hadn't taught freshmen in years (or ever) to teach

> " I wanted them to have faculty who would be around all the time, with regular office hours where the students can reach them. "

them. Adjunct professors, who teach about 20 percent of courses, continued to be hired as they once were on most campuses -- to teach upper-level courses, especially those in which they have real-world expertise, such as marketing or education.

In English, for example, tenure-line and non-tenure-track, full-time instructors all are required to teach at least one freshman composition class per year.

By all accounts, there was some initial faculty resistance. But many professors were ready to dive in.

"I thought it was a good idea -- I wanted [the freshmen] to have the best experience possible, and that

comes from the most experienced faculty," said Rashidah Muhammad, professor and chair of English at the time of the transition. "I wanted them to have faculty who would be around all the time, with regular office hours where the students can reach them."

Practically speaking, Muhammad said, it wasn't that big of a transition from teaching upper-division literature courses to teaching composition. For starters, she said, she'd taught composition throughout graduate school. And even though that was years ago, she said, "it's not actually a new way of teaching. ... When you're looking at a novel, you're reading over a life story, or history or politics -- that's what you do. And when you're writing, you're writing about literature, or politics or society, or maybe talking about your life. What rhetorical devices are being used, how did this author signal this to you?"

Muhammad said that the biggest change was probably the age group of the students she was teaching -- 18-year-olds versus older students. But it's been revitalizing, in a way, she said -- "almost like I had a do-over -- or an opportunity to raise your kids differently now that you know what you know. It's kind of a rebirth for me."

Kerri Morris, an associate professor of English, also described teaching freshmen at Governors State as professionally reinvigorating; while she was uncertain about her profes-

sional future a few years ago before coming to campus, she said she can't imagine teaching anywhere other than Governors State now.

"To say that our students are amazing people is an understatement," she said. "This really is a two-way street."

Morris came to campus during the transition to lead the new composition initiative and shore up the Writing Across the Curriculum program. She said despite stereotypes that faculty members try to shirk teaching freshmen, the challenges at Governors State were much more practical. Scheduling was a big issue, she said, in that many professors until that point taught three-hour course sections once a week, often late at night. Working three-day-a-week freshmen courses into their schedules was hard.

Like Muhammad, Morris described teaching literature and composition as something of a spectrum, and found most professors well equipped for it. What professors did need help with was developing a kind of "file drawer" of practical exercises, she said, and breaking down lessons into 50-minute segments.

They also expressed some discomfort with the amount of in-class writing time their students required, thinking that it amounted to "cheating" or getting away with less teaching, Morris said. At the same time, professors were expected to teach more actively when they were in front of the class, since freshmen students don't "take over" a discussion in the same way that upper-level or especially graduate students do.

Another challenge was teaching evaluations. Morris said she had to warn professors that ratings by students were going to go down, because freshmen simply don't know how to complete objectively -- and freshmen haven't failed to deliver on that point. "But it's not like there's just one person struggling with them," she said.

Over all, Morris said, when it came

Dorm life at Governors State University, which recently began admitting freshmen to a first-year program staffed only by full-time faculty.

to the faculty, "there was no active resistance, just a matter of envisioning how it would all work." She added, "You've got to meet students where they are. … Not seeing that as an irritant but as an intellectual challenge has been what's made this really invigorating."

Vendrely said there was good faculty "buy-in" for starting the program, and that it's opened up campuswide conversations about pedagogy. There have been some challenges,

however -- such as finding enough professors this year to teach an interdisciplinary freshman humanities seminar.

"We are finding that some faculty are more comfortable teaching the freshmen than others. I think that is fairly normal," Vendrely said in an email interview.

"I think it has helped increase faculty interest in becoming better teachers. We've hosted some professional development on topics like teaching writing and increasing civic engagement. Of course that helps all our students, not just the freshmen."

Muhammad called right now an "exciting time" at Governors State. "We're in our second year with our freshmen now, and there are challenges, of course. We're still working with students who were in high school two months ago, and that means adjustment. But these [second-year] students feel like they own the university, and they're serving on all these committees and it's very exciting to see."

That enthusiasm seems to be translating to retention. Early figures suggest that the university is keeping students enrolled at a rate that's about 10 percent higher than its peers serving similar populations.

Maimon said Governors State is committed to its model, despite incredibly challenging times for Illinois's public institutions; the univer-

sity, like its peers, hasn't seen any state funding this year. (It should be noted that Governors State's model isn't necessarily more expensive than hiring adjuncts to teach freshman courses, and Maimon said that particular practice may be more cost-effective.)

"I believe very, very strongly that the regional publics and liberal arts college have an absolute obligation to have full-time faculty members teach these introductory courses," she said, noting that institutions focused on research and graduate education may have different priorities.

We're smaller and many of us are focused on first-generation college students, and these students really deserve to have top-notch intellectuals working with them, to help them become part of the intellectual life of the university." ∎

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/22/governors-state-u-relies-full-time-professors-teach-all-freshmen

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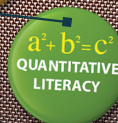## Customized, actionable data to provide evidence of student learning outcomes.

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Computer Science as Liberal Arts 'Enabler'

By Carl Straumsheim

Liberal arts colleges are increasingly exploring interdisciplinary connections to find a place for computer science on their campuses.

Computer science might not be the first field that springs to mind when thinking of the liberal arts, but at some colleges, interdisciplinary computing is seen as one way to connect the department to other disciplines on campus.

Bates College, a liberal arts college in Maine, is one example. The college, which enrolls about 2,000 students, doesn't offer anything resembling a computer science program -- not even a concentration. Given the chance to create one from scratch, the college will in 2017 introduce digital and computational studies, an interdisciplinary program that fits the label of neither computer science nor digital humanities.

"'Digital and computational studies' is a bit more capacious," Matthew R. Auer, dean of the faculty and vice president of academic affairs, said in an interview. "It's inclusive of the notion that we're dealing with the visualization of data, we're dealing with big data. 'Computer science' does have a kind of old-fashioned quality to it."

The program is one example of how a college whose main focus isn't technology is adjusting to the times. That type of change is manifesting itself in different ways across the liberal arts sector of higher education. At Barnard College, students entering in 2016 will experience a new core curriculum with a technology requirement. Also in 2016, Mount Holyoke College will introduce a concentration in data science.

But colleges sometimes face an uphill climb to persuade faculty members to support programs that may fall outside the traditional liberal arts. Some, Bates included, have chosen an interdisciplinary approach, framing computer science as an "enabler" for other disciplines -- a way to help faculty members in other departments introduce computing in their own courses.

Clayton Spencer, who became president of Bates in 2012, said the college is responding to feedback from parents and students who say employers are looking for applicants with a liberal arts background yet who also know how to code.

"The worlds of work and social relationships are all being transformed by digital platforms, computational thinking and the reality of digital connectivity," Spencer said. "It's incredibly important to embed the learning about these platforms and tools in the context of the liberal arts."

That liberal arts vision for computer science has so far gained the support of the faculty body at Bates, which endorsed the college's plan without major dissent. (It also helps that program is paid for. Bates College is using a $19 million gift commitment -- the largest in the college's history -- to hire six new faculty members, three of whom will shape the digital and computational studies program.)

The program, which -- if the college's timeline holds -- will launch in fall 2017 with a full major the following year, will still look familiar to anyone who has spent any time in a computer science department. But once students finish foundational courses in coding and programming, they face a decision about how to specialize. They could choose a "deep dive" in artificial in-

telligence or big data, Auer said, or pick a pathway that leads through a different departments or majors, exploring textual analysis in a literature course or data visualization in a chemistry course.

"It was super important to us that we have a really strong grounding in the classical computer sciences as we build this program as well as the ability to swing into interdisciplinarity and not have simply a digital humanities focus," Spencer said. "I don't think that would be serving our students well."

'Relentless' Growth

The program also gives Bates access to students it might not have been able to market itself to before. The Computing Research Association, a group of more than 200 computer science departments, has described the growth of undergraduates majoring in computer science as "relentless." The Association for Computing Machinery, which conducts annual surveys of enrollments in non-doctoral-granting departments such as those at liberal arts colleges, last September found institutions during the 2014-15 academic year expected a 21.7 percent jump in computer science bachelor's degree production from the year before.

"There's a huge pressure point for everybody on how to serve these students," said Jodi L. Tims, a professor of computer science at Baldwin Wallace University, who cowrote the report.

Tims, chair of the department of mathematics and computer science at Baldwin Wallace, a liberal arts college in Ohio, said she is seeing a growing diversity in the types of programs colleges offer. During her 14 years at Baldwin Wallace, for example, the computer science department has doubled the number of programs it offers from two to four and added an interdisciplinary major, she said.

Program diversity is not an automatic strategy for success, however. Not only do niche programs appeal to a smaller group of prospective students, but they are also expensive to run, Tims said. The main challenge for a computer science department at a liberal arts college, she said, is to use the credit hours it is allotted effectively. While departments at colleges without an expansive core curriculum can design a major using more than half of the typical 120 credit hours needed to graduate, departments at liberal arts colleges often have to do with much less. The major at Baldwin Wallace consists of about 50 credit

hours of course work, which Tims said is still considered a large major for a liberal arts college.

"You have to be very savvy in how you create a curriculum so that students get enough of what they need to be able to sell themselves for that first job," Tims said. "You have to build the idea that students that come from liberal arts institutions are broader thinkers. Tech skills get you in the door. Your ability to communicate, to see the bigger picture and work together with others really help people develop more quickly in the career space."

Beyond the Department

As Bates over the next few years works to strike that balance between tech and liberal arts skills, it may look to Union College, in New York, which Tims highlighted as an institution that has made a big push for interdisciplinary computing.

Union's computer science program dates back to the 1970s, but it has over the last several years introduced changes to expand its appeal. The changes include developing introductory courses around themes such as game development, robotics and media computation, which last academic year attracted students from more than 30 different majors.

Valerie Barr, professor of computer science at and chair of the ACM's Council on Women in Computing, said in an email that a liberal arts background serves as a strength rather than a weakness for students

entering the job market with a computer science degree.

"The majority of computing jobs today are not housed solely within the tech industry," Barr wrote. "More appropriately, every field is now a tech field, and students who can work at the intersection of disciplines will be at an advantage."

Computer science majors at Union are free to major exclusively in the discipline, double major or add a minor, but they can also pursue an interdepartmental major -- a combination of two disciplines with one capstone project that satisfies both. Students have combined computer science with majors such as art, philosophy and psychology, Barr wrote. The department also helps faculty members in other fields use computing in their own courses.

"This is yet another way by which Union students see the role computing can have in other fields," Barr wrote.

Bates last September launched a similar project, called the Digital Course Design/Redesign Initiative, for faculty members interested in adding digital and computational tools or methods to existing courses.

If it becomes popular among faculty members, the initiative could help realize Bates's plans of having interdisciplinary pathways for its digital and computational studies majors. Auer, the Bates dean, acknowledged that building those pathways is "going to require deep consultation with the faculty" -- as well as some new faculty members in other departments.

"When we add new hires in economics, in politics, we are looking precisely to bring digital and computational methods," Auer said. "But if there's no underlying program in computer science, then it means there's just so far a person can go." ∎

Distribution Plus

By Scott Jaschik

The much-maligned general education model remains alive and well, but with new features, survey finds.

When colleges discuss general education reforms or announce curricular revamps, it's common to hear professors talk of the need to replace "cafeteria-style" approaches. Distribution requirements, critics say, may assure that all students take a course or two in such broad fields as the humanities, the social sciences and the physical and biological sciences. But the requirements don't necessarily encourage thoughtful integration of different fields of study -- and many students simply look for the easiest options to check the requirements off. (Think "physics for poets.")

But for all the talk about moving past distribution requirements, it turns out that they are alive and well, but with twists that deal with some of the criticisms.

That is one of the key findings of a survey -- released in February 2016 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities -- of its members on issues such as general education, learning outcomes and teaching approaches. The results were released in early 2016 and are the second from a survey completed by provosts or chief academic officers at 325 AAC&U member colleges and universities.

Other key findings relate to a growing majority of colleges having intended learning goals or outcomes for all students, and some skepticism about whether faculty members are using technology in the most effective ways.

Distribution Requirements

Many general education programs have been built around distribution requirements. And the AAC&U survey suggests that relatively few in-

stitutions have abandoned them. In the 2015 survey, 76 percent of colleges reported using distribution requirements, down only modestly from the 79 percent of colleges that reported using distribution requirements in a 2008 survey. But the norm -- even more now than in 2008 -- is a distribution requirement plus other features for general education. In fact, the share of colleges relying only on distribution requirements fell nearly in half between the two surveys.
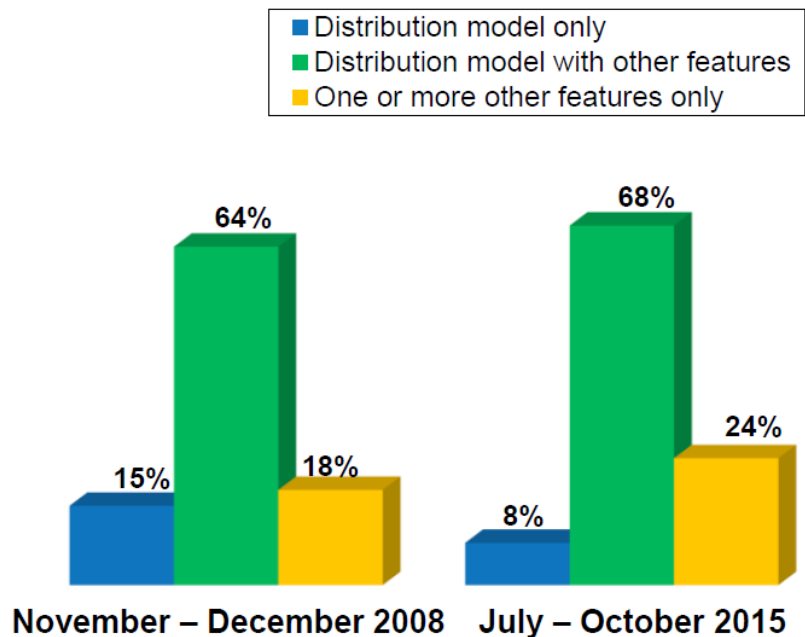
According to the AAC&U report, colleges are building on distribution requirements by also requiring common intellectual experiences of students, thematic courses, learning communities (in which groups of students take a common sequence of courses) and other techniques.

In the survey, academic leaders were asked to indicate the design elements of their general education programs -- and they could list more than one such element.

The University of Nevada at Las Vegas is an example of a university keeping distribution requirements but also adding other approaches to general education. So undergraduates across fields are still required to complete courses in writing, mathematics, fine arts and humanities, social sciences, and life/physical sciences, among other categories. But UNLV has added other required elements, such as a first-year seminar, a second-year seminar and new upper-division requirements in majors, leading to a "culminating experience."

Chris Heavey, vice provost for undergraduate education at UNLV, said the university was trying to more closely link its general education requirements to the major and to institutional learning goals. But he said it was "very challenging for most institutions to go entirely away from distribution models because the structure and resources of the institution [have] probably grown up to support those offerings."

Debra Humphreys, senior vice president for academic planning and public engagement at AAC&U, said that "many people theoretically get that it's not adequate" to just create categories of courses for students, and to require them to take some number of courses in each category. But she agreed with Heavey that "institutions are still organized largely by disciplinary categories that correspond to knowledge areas." As a result, colleges "continue to chip away" at reliance on distribution requirements "but we're still not quite there yet" in terms of moving to an entirely new model.

Humphreys is encouraged by moves like that of UNLV's, which use distribution as a base for general education but don't leave it there. She also said it was important that general education requirements be linked to desired learning outcomes, as the survey suggests colleges are doing.

On learning outcomes, the survey found that 85 percent of colleges report that they have a common set of desired outcomes for all undergraduates, regardless of major. That figure is up from 78 percent in the 2008 survey.

Further, of those institutions that have a common set of learning outcomes for all students, there is consensus about some of the elements that are included. The table below shows, from the 2008 survey and the 2015 survey, the share of colleges reporting that these skills and knowledge areas are part of their

Design Elements of General Education, 2015 Survey	
Element	**Percentage of Colleges**
Distribution model	76%
Capstone or culminating studies (in majors)	60%
Upper-level general ed requirements	46%
Core curriculum	44%
Thematic required courses	42%
Common intellectual experience	41%
Capstone experience (in general ed)	26%
Learning communities	22%

learning outcomes.

Humphreys said she was pleased by one of the topics that saw the biggest increase from 2008 to now: research skills and projects. She said this was consistent with the idea of working in teams and working to solve problems -- skills that employers seek and that promote cohesive learning that goes beyond one course or discipline.

Some of the scores on the list may be hard to explain. For example, the results suggest more colleges include study of a language other than English as a learning outcome. But a report from the Modern Language Association a year ago found foreign language enrollments declining, and many foreign language departments in the last few years have found themselves the target of cuts.

The high percentage (85 percent) of colleges reporting that knowledge of the arts is a learning outcome is also at odds with the relatively few colleges that require arts study for all students. Humphreys said she suspected that the high figure was due to provosts looking at requirements for arts and humanities courses and counting them as arts requirements.

Common Elements of Colleges' Learning Outcomes		
Skills/ Knowledge	2008	2015
Writing Skills	99%	99%
Critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills	95%	98%
Quantitative reasoning skills	91%	94%
Knowledge of science	91%	92%
Knowledge of mathematics	87%	92%
Knowledge of humanities	92%	92%
Knowledge of global world cultures	87%	89%
Knowledge of social sciences	90%	89%
Knowledge of the arts	n/a	85%
Oral communication skills	88%	82%
Intercultural skills and abilities	79%	79%
Information literacy skills	76%	76%
Research skills and projects	65%	75%
Ethical reasoning	75%	75%
Knowledge of diversity in the United States	73%	73%
Integration of learning across disciplines	63%	68%
Application of learning beyond the classroom	66%	65%
Civic engagement and competence	68%	63%
Knowledge of technology	61%	49%
Knowledge of languages other than English	42%	48%
Knowledge of American history	49%	47%
Knowledge of sustainability	24%	27%

Are Students Aware?

The provosts were also asked whether they believed students were aware of the desired learning outcomes at their institutions. Only 9 percent said that they believed all students understood the desired learning outcomes, and only 36 percent said that a majority of students understood them.

Humphreys said that academics should be "very worried" about these findings. She said she worried that faculty members may spend lots of time developing a general education program consistent with their institutions' missions, launch the system with fanfare and then not do enough to promote understanding of it. That may mean that, a few years after a program launch, students may not know much about it.

The findings also point to a need for more of a focus on academic advising and for advisers to talk to students about the broad goals of general education, and not just requirements to be finished.

The completion agenda, she said,

may make this more difficult. Many advisers are "under pressure to get students through as soon as possible," she said.

That is admirable, but means that students aren't necessarily being asked about how course plans "relate to learning broadly," but rather are encouraged to find "an efficient way to get this done."

Technology and Digital Tools

The survey also asked chief academic officers about their impressions on the use of digital tools by faculty members.

Thirty-six percent of survey respondents said they believed that most faculty members were using the tools effectively, while 61 percent said that some faculty members were doing so, and 3 percent said that very few faculty members were doing so.

Even if some of the academic leaders think that most of their faculty members are using digital learning tools effectively, most of the provosts want more.

Asked to respond to the statement that "all or most of our teaching faculty should be using more digital learning strategies in undergraduate courses or programs," 89 percent said that they totally agreed.

There is less of a consensus, however, on offering more online courses for undergraduates, with 26 percent of chief academic officers saying that was a high priority, 36 percent saying it was a medium priority and 38 percent saying it was a minor priority or a nonpriority. ∎

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/19/survey-colleges-finds-distribution-requirements-remain-popular-new-features

Measuring Competency

BY PAUL FAIN

Southern New Hampshire U's College for America releases a promising early snapshot of the general-education learning and skills of students who are enrolled in a new form of competency-based education.

A preliminary snapshot of the academic skills of students who are enrolled in a new, aggressive form of competency-based education is out, and the results look good.

Southern New Hampshire University used an outside testing firm to assess the learning and skills in areas typically stressed in general education that were achieved by a small group of students who are halfway through an associate degree program at the university's College for America, which offers online, self-paced, competency-based degrees that do not feature formal instruction and are completely untethered from the credit-hour standard.

The university was the first to get approval from the U.S. Department of Education and a regional accreditor for its direct-assessment degrees. A handful of other institutions have since followed suit. College for America currently enrolls about 3,000 students, most of whom are working adults. It offers associate degrees -- mostly in general studies with a concentration in business -- bachelor's degrees and undergraduate certificates.

To try to kick the tires in a public way, College for America used the Proficiency Profile from the Educational Testing Service. The relatively new test assesses students in core skill areas of critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics. It also gives "context-based" subscores on student achievement in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The results could be notable because skeptics of competency-based education fear the model might not result in adequate learning in these areas.

"We wanted to be able to have a way of examining where the students are," said Jerome L. Rekart, the program's director of research and analytics. He added that they went with ETS for "external validation."

Colleges can benchmark their results on the Proficiency Profile against those from other institutions. ETS features comparative data based on results from 7,815 students at 27 associate degree-issuing institutions, representing a wide range of colleges, programs and students.

Matthew Soldner, a senior re-searcher in the higher education practice at the American Institutes for Research, said the benchmark guide from ETS looked reasonable. (Soldner and AIR are working with a small group of institutions to gather early evidence about competency-based education's effectiveness.)

The overall results from College for America placed its group of students at the 67th percentile (see chart, below). The students scored at the top -- the 100th percentile -- in reading and the natural sciences. College for America also looked good on the measure of critical thinking. It only lagged behind average in mathematics, and not by much.

"The students did quite well," Rekart said. "It suggests we're pointed in the right direction."

Seeking Proof

College for America cautioned against reading too much into the results, which are based on a small sample from a program that was created less than three years ago.

"This really just scratches the surface of what our students are asked to do," said Rekart, noting that the college's academic programs are

project based and that many of its students have not taken traditional examinations for years or even decades.

Even so, both critics and boosters of competency-based education are watching closely to see results from College for America and other direct-assessment programs. And Southern New Hampshire is eager to provide evidence about student achievement at its subsidiary. As Rekart said, the ETS comparison "speaks about transferability of the competencies."

Amy Slaton, a professor in the department of history and politics at Drexel University, has written skeptically about the rise of competency-based education. She said the heavy workforce focus of some competency-based programs -- College for America relies on partnerships with employers as funnels for its enrollment -- makes it hard to glean much from benchmarking with traditional degree programs.

"This is not comparable," she said. "We're seeing a false equivalency."

For example, Slaton said, the lack of traditional grading in direct as-sessment changes the calculus for students' risk of failure. In a self-paced, self-directed environment, she said, students don't fail, they just keep muddling along.

"You see definitions of learning that have really been gutted," Slaton said. "That's not higher education."

Supporters of competency-based education, however, say their degree programs have the potential

COLLEGE FOR AMERICA STUDENTS OUTPERFORM TRADITIONAL AA STUDENTS

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CFA 60+ COMPS = SOPHOMORE YEAR OR APPROX. 30 CREDITS
SCORES FROM ETS PROFICIENCY PROFILE, CFA TOTAL SCORE = 439.5, AA-SOPHOMORE AVERAGE = 435.6

to be more rigorous. For example, a "gentleman's C" isn't possible in a competency-based program that requires mastery of a topic. If a student doesn't demonstrate that competency, he or she doesn't move forward.

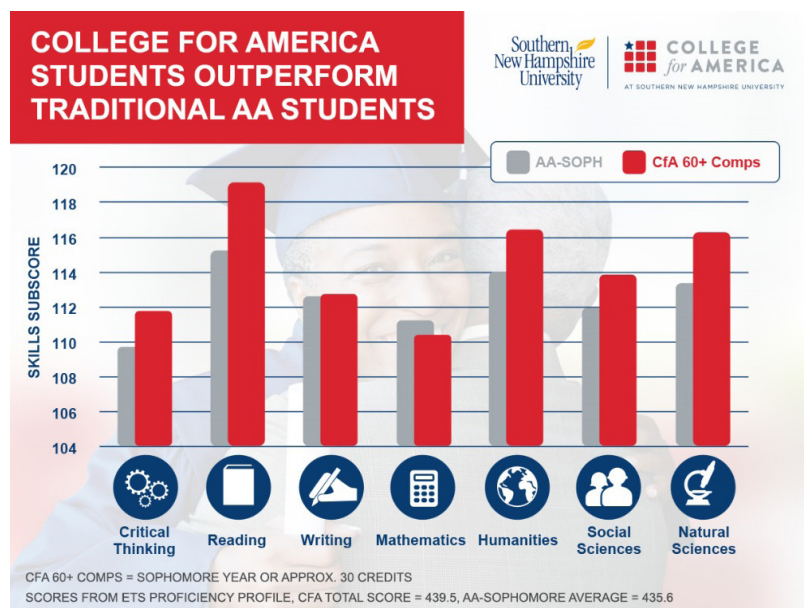Either way, competency-based education programs face plenty of pressure to show evidence of student learning.

"Everybody wants it. Everybody needs it," said Alison Kadlec, senior vice president and director of higher education and workforce programs at Public Agenda.

And, as Soldner said, competency-based programs may have to clear a higher bar to gain acceptance. So the good news for College for America is that its preliminary student outcomes appear similar to (and even a little better than) those of more traditional associate degree tracks.

"Traditional programs have had years, decades and centuries to refine their pedagogies. Competency-based education programs are building from the ground up. Given how new so many competency-based education programs are, how reasonable is it to expect they'll dramatically outperform traditional programs?" Soldner said in an email. "The curious thing isn't that competency-based education programs are being challenged to show student learning outcomes; it is that an overwhelming number of traditional programs still aren't." ∎

Views

A selection of essays and op-eds

Let's Focus More on the First Year

By Roger Martin

Students enter college hoping it will be a major step up from what they were doing before, writes Roger Martin, but they are often disappointed.

Do we have our priorities backward?

It has long been a truism in American higher education that junior and senior year are seen as at the top of the curricular pecking order. That is when the major is taken and, frankly, that is where most of our senior faculty really prefer to teach.

First year, on the other hand, is seen by many of us as less important. And because of this, guess who is often assigned general education and introductory courses? Adjuncts, graduate assistants and our most junior faculty.

It's almost as though introductory and general education courses that define the first two years of college are what students get through as quickly as possible so that they can get to the good stuff in their third and fourth years -- that is, upper-level courses and the major.

But this view is out of sync with what many prospective college students and their parents are thinking. In a book I recently wrote about the transition from high school to college, virtually all of the high school seniors I interviewed, along with their parents, hoped that the first year of college would be a major step up from what they were doing in high school. But they are often disappointed.

At many colleges and universities, first-year students take large introductory courses in classes of 100 or more. Teaching is usually done by an instructor lecturing in front of the classroom while students dutifully take notes later to be regurgitated on a quiz. There is very little class participation involving discussion and debate. Writing anything over a few pages is unusual.

Arizona State University has gone even further. They are offering a Global Freshman Academy that allows first-year students to take their courses by the use of MOOCs (massive open online courses). Students won't even have to leave the comfort of home to complete their first year! First year is seen as a means to an end, with the end being upper-level courses and the major.

But I would argue that the first year of college is far more important than this -- perhaps, in some ways, just as important as the final years of college.

> " At far too many colleges, advising is relegated to new faculty who have limited knowledge of the curriculum or to adjuncts who have equally lim- ited office hours. But many colleges, realizing that solid advising reduces attrition, are assigning experienced faculty who are skilled at advising. "

Why do I believe this?

• First year is when college students get a sound, cross-disciplinary grounding in the liberal arts and sciences, especially those who go on to vocational majors like engineering or nursing. The liberal arts are where they learn how to think critically and how to communicate effectively, skills that are crucial for a generation that will have many different careers in their lifetime.

• First year to sophomore year is when attrition is at its highest. When I was a college president, 20 percent of first-year students at my institution didn't return for their sophomore year. Some transferred, but many dropped out of college altogether. Why does this happen? In far too many exit interviews I have seen, dropouts say that they found their first-year classes meaningless.

I will never forget the admissions tour I took at a well-known university with my youngest daughter. We were in the university's amazing library, and the tour guide, a sophomore, was bragging about the fact that most of his teachers were graduate assistants. "They're really cool," he said, "and understand our generation," whereupon a mother standing next to me uttered sotto voce (but loud enough for everyone

to hear), "Why am I paying a small fortune to have my child taught by someone who is only a couple years older than she is?"

That parent was articulating what many parents I interviewed for my book were saying: for $50,000 or more per year, the expectation is that their children will be taught by experienced faculty with the requisite credentials, not by part-time employees or graduate students.

Of course, many of the instructors assigned to introductory or general education courses including adjuncts and graduate students are quite capable teachers. But I believe that first-year students could really benefit from also being taught by senior faculty

members who excel in the classroom. In many ways -- and I know this is heretical -- assistant professors who just completed their Ph.D. dissertations are probably the most capable of teaching the major that requires up-to-date knowledge of their discipline. Senior faculty, on the other hand, who through wisdom and experience have a wider view of the world are, in my opinion, the most qualified to teach general education courses designed to give first-year students a broader perspective on human knowledge and, in the process, excite them about what will come later.

Increasingly, colleges are coming to see the crucial importance of the first year. At one college I feature in my book, the freshman writing seminar is largely taught by the college's most distinguished and experienced senior faculty, who are handpicked because they are also master teachers. First-year advising is also being given a new emphasis. At far too many colleges, advising is relegated to new faculty who have

limited knowledge of the curriculum or to adjuncts who have equally limited office hours. But many colleges, realizing that solid advising reduces attrition, are assigning experienced faculty who are skilled at advising or professional advisers to first-year students.

For these colleges and universities, the first year has been given a new priority.

I'd like to end by saying that there is money to be raised by rethinking the first year, which should make presidents who are reading this article happy. I believe that philanthropic individuals and foundations, concerned about the cost of higher education and the human waste when students prematurely drop out and don't graduate, will resonate to programs that support first-year students and keep them in college. I'm talking about:

- Innovative first-year general education programs that challenge and excite first-year students through active learning (including discussion, debate and writing) so that they don't want to leave college.
- Endowed writing centers and other support systems that can save kids who come to college with academic deficiencies.
- Endowed first-year opportunity programs that keep underserved and first-generation students in college.

Attrition is enormously expensive. A college of 2,000 students like my own that loses 20 percent of the first-year class potentially forgoes $5 million or more in tuition, room and board, which for many colleges is more than the development office raises each year in the annual fund.

In summary, by putting more energy and resources into the first year I believe we keep more of our students in college and thereby cut down on the enormous human waste when otherwise good students prematurely leave college with outsize debts they can't pay back because they are unemployable.

At the same time we improve our bottom line by not losing so much in tuition dollars. Most important, we graduate students for whom education from the very beginning is a pleasure, not a hardship to be endured. ∎

Bio

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From Crisis to Composition

By Jessica Yood

Jessica Yood went back to school to take a class on first-year writing and came away with a new take on the reform of general-composition courses.

Extravagant cars, illicit affairs, eliminating gluten -- I've heard these are good ways to cope with a midlife crisis. But I'm an academic. So I chose to go back to school.

After a decade teaching college composition, I decided to take the course myself. I attended and did all the work for English 111, the first of a two-semester writing requirement at the college where I teach. I completed assignments just like the other students, participated in class activities, took the final and got a grade. I recorded my experience, interviewed classmates and collected writing.

Becoming a student was not how I thought I'd spend a long-awaited sabbatical. I intended to do what every academic plans to do on leave: complete a book.

"We must understand the link between rhetoric and complexity." That's how I opened the book when I started it, back in 2008. I followed up with close readings of little-known scientific documents and a link between complexity science and my theory of a networked, posthuman rhetoric. The second half promised to describe a "new humanities for the 21st century." A book contract

came quickly. One press reviewer called the project a "bold challenge to the status quo."

Three years went by, and the book lay dormant. The sabbatical was my last chance to see this through.

Things didn't go as planned. Faculty members at my institution are eligible for sabbatical every seven years. Mine came after 12. By that point, I was a parent of three small children, juggling a heavy teaching load and directing a fledging writing program. And there was another less obvious derailment of the work-life balance: a daily failure to move on after a devastating death in my family.

Scholarship had always anchored me. But loss and regret left me detached. I couldn't finish something begun in another time, by another self. I needed to start over.

I was not alone. My university, the City University of New York, was also on the verge of something new. Since 2008, the fate of higher education had become a national crisis. It seemed like everyone was seeing an apocalypse: the rising costs of college, the low rates of graduation and the failure of academe to keep up with the needs of what Presi-

dent Obama called the "new knowledge society." There was a feeling at CUNY that something had to change.

That something was general education. In just "nine months in 2011 and 2012" colleges began to innovate like never before, reports Kevin Carey in The End of College. That academic year, American colleges and universities teamed up with technology companies to radically update curricula and learning platforms for a global, digital age. As Carey puts it, higher education's "race to revolution" had begun.

CUNY's version of the revolution was a 2011 curricular overhaul called Pathways. The promotional brochure promised "Reform and Rigor in CUNY's Common Core." Pathways would radically revamp undergraduate requirements through common course outcomes, easier transfers between CUNY schools and a consequent faster time to degree. Most important, it would prepare students for what the chancellor called "knowledge in a new century."

Once, each of CUNY's campuses had distribution or general-education requirements. Now the curricu-

lum would be divided into two neat categories: courses in the major, representing knowledge of a new century, and gateway courses, or those leading to knowledge of a new century. There would be nothing in between.

English 111 had always been a course in between: a transition from high school to college, from job to academe, from a past to what might come next. Unlike nearly every other course, its goal was not to prepare but to practice, not to enter a disciplinary community, but to write effectively for general readers.

In early 2012, my college assigned me to the Pathways Composition Committee. We had until fall 2013 -- about a year -- to create a common syllabus that remade composition into a gateway course for professions and specialization.

For two months, we debated compensation and credits, protested assessments, and fought over favorite reading assignments. What we didn't do was defend what had been composition's foundation for 40 years: its focus on writing for and to a general public. In fact, we wrote the word "general" out of the description of first-year composition and every other writing class almost right away.

That was a good, progressive decision, I thought. Indeed, I had built a writing program and half a book manuscript on the belief that culture is a complex web of constructions and that rhetoric needed to be liberated from the false god of generality.

Then I took English 111. And I learned what we would be missing once general composition became extinct.

Going Back to School

Nothing was general about my section of English 111. Four of the 25 students came to college straight out of high school; the rest of us were in our late twenties, and some were many years older. Everyone worked full or part time, half spoke a language besides English, and a third had immigrated to America to escape poverty, violence or war. Eight were parents, and six were primary caregivers for older family members. Five students had earned part or all of a degree from another institution.

We were adults in between worlds, ideas, hopes and crushing realities. What could we learn from an introductory course in general writing?

That question haunted us through six writing assignments, multiple blog posts and weekly class conversations. It also prompted us to do what committees and crisis chroniclers claim is impossible: reform education and revitalize culture from the inside. Because we couldn't be defined by one category, because the only thing most of us had in common was a world of particulars, we had to make up a general public. So we did. Over 14 weeks we cultivated a diverse, complex, educated public of the new knowledge century.

There are serious problems with a general-composition course. Writing programs that define generality as belonging to one culture, values system or genre defy the realities of a multilingual, global, digital society. And composition courses staffed by untrained and exploited teachers shortchange students and derail efforts to strengthen undergraduate education.

Yet those drawbacks should not blind reformers to the contributions of such classes. A general-composition course challenges students to use writing to find out what they know and to try to connect that to what others think. Something new always happens in the process. We should reform composition, yes, but also reclaim it as a scarce but vital resource of our culture: as a general resource.

Despite our best efforts, it's not the curriculum that makes this happen. For example, my instructor crafted our course around a concern she believed had general, common appeal. Yet our course's subject, "The Role of College Today," did not automatically resonate. Most students told me that that the theme was too broad and general to make a difference to their writing. I agreed. We wanted to write about issues related to our jobs, majors or long-term professional prospects.

By the end of the course we felt differently. The topic grew on many. Working to make that topic matter was what really turned us from a group of students to an interested, dynamic, general readership. We were beginners engaging and disrupting a specialized, knowledge society. That essential paradox proved

an enabling constraint and a productive, innovative muse.

The first assignment began this rigorous process of interaction and revision. We had to write a descriptive essay about an influential person in our educational lives for the class website and submission to a local newspaper. We broke into writing groups. All four women in my group acknowledged an influential educator in our lives, but none of us, as one classmate put it, "felt ready to write about it."

"Not ready" describes my first five attempts. I wanted to write about my graduate mentor, someone who had professional and personal influence on my life. But draft after draft had me writing about the dissertation and not about my adviser or me. My writing group was bored. I had to move from what I remembered to what I could make relevant in the here and now.

Many of my classmates had to move from their first drafts, too -- sometimes from mundane generalities, sometimes from unexplained connections. One student's witty anecdotes about a heroic teacher in his one-room elementary school just didn't work when put into prose. Another student argued passionately for training teachers in a local after-school education program.

But she offered no supporting narrative to help us see her point. We asked for more.

Writers today like to claim r e l e v a n c e by tracking retweets or the number of likes on Facebook. But, in English 111, that wouldn't cut it. Our writing had to be relevant immediately, locally and publicly.

Two days before the assignment was due, I still hadn't figured out an angle. That's when a classmate offered an idea. "Call your old teacher," she said. "Find out what's up. Then tell us about that."

That's what I did. My mentor had one version of our history. I had another. And then there was a third perspective: the one from the students in English 111. For the final draft, I put these worlds together, finding a link between what I learned from my former teacher and what my classmate told me was needed in her after-school program. I reached back to my past and connected it to my present in a visceral, vulnerable way.

This is the heady, humanizing work that happens when you write for general readers. It's complexity enacted through connections. These connections are endangered by educational reforms that designate this course and its students as unprepared and anachronistic.

A week after the semester ended, I let go of my half-written manuscript for good.

I'm working on something else now -- transcribing classroom interactions and coding hundreds of pages of student writing. I'm learning a lot about teaching, learning and literacy.

But mostly I'm discovering why we need this writing, why we need general composition. It proves that the next new thing is still in reach for those of us who seek a path not just to a future but also to a more fulfilling present. ∎

Bio
Jessica Yood is an associate professor of English at the City University of New York.

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/03/11/importance-general-composition-courses-essay

When Students Say They're "Bored."

By John Warner

John Warner explains why he talks to students about their boredom.

I like to talk to my students about boredom.

I hear from them that lots of things are boring – a course, an assignment, school in general – and when they say this I want to know why because boredom is a significant impediment to learning, the peak (or nadir) of non-engagement.

If we want students to learn, I think we need to take boredom seriously and treat it as the complicated emotion we know it to be.

I've compiled an incomplete list of what students mean when they tell me something is "boring," and added what I think they really mean, based on deeper conversations with them.

1. "School is boring." I'm not sure if college is the right choice for me.

Our cultural narrative where a college degree is a virtual necessity for success and happiness isn't doing us any favors on this front. I talk to students who are otherwise lively and engaged people for whom a four-year traditional degree is simply not something they want at this time, and perhaps ever.

1a. "School is boring." I'm in the wrong major.

Maybe even more common than #1.

2. "This class is boring." I don't know how this course is relevant to my interests/major/etc.

I hear this most often in the context of general education courses where students believe they're being made to jump through non-contextualized hoops. To them, these courses often look like high school, just a little bit more difficult, and therefore even more boring.

3. "Writing is boring." I've had bad experiences in previous writing courses.

I have many students who, on entering my first-year writing course, will tell me that writing is even worse than boring, more like actively horrible. When I ask why, I hear stories

about the kinds of writing they've been asked to do previously (often tied to standardized assessments), and I begin to understand why they think writing is boring. Writing has been decoupled from any larger context or meaning. It is simply a task we do, as ordered by a teacher.

Sounds pretty boring.

4. "Calculus is boring." I am afraid that I might not succeed at this course, no matter how hard I try.

Sometimes the "boring" declaration is a mask for self-doubt and/or confusion. They are opting out before they ever opt in.

5. "Professor So-and-So's class is boring." Professor So-and-So's class is boring.

Sometimes stuff really is boring.

There are likely other variants, but I think the common thread is that students experience boredom most often when what they are being asked to do is not tied to something that carries genuine meaning to themselves.

I think this makes students no different than anyone else. One of the perks of adulthood is that I get to organize my life primar-

ily (though not exclusively) around my areas of interest. In college, you very well might have heard me say, "This book is boring," and resent the fact that I needed to keep slogging forward, but now when I say "This book is boring," I put the book down and pick up another.

I also have the perspective to view the "boring" work that I have to do (grading, for instance) in a larger context, which makes it significantly easier to manage. Imagine having to grade without knowing it was tied to the rest of your work in the course. That's straight-up torture.

It's a mistake to tell students to "fight through" or "deal with" boredom without giving them the tools necessary to do such a thing.

As the professionals overseeing the work of education, I believe we should listen for what's underneath when students claim "boredom." When students are experiencing boredom because they either shouldn't be in college or are pursuing a degree that's a bad fit, they should be nudged towards the counsel that will help them shift their path.

And in the other cases, I think it's a trap to try to combat student "boredom" with "entertainment." We will never be as entertaining as things designed for that purpose.

But we can be something better: engaging. I have yet to meet the student that isn't curious about something. This is why in my writing courses I try to give as much latitude as possible (inside of the assignment objectives) to write about their own interests.

Sometimes, combating student boredom has been as simple as explaining why we're doing something, and I haven't had to change a thing, other than how I present the work. Peer response to student drafts used to get heavy groans of protest, but once I started explaining the context, that they're not meant to "grade" each other's work, but to use someone else's writing as a vehicle to reflect on their own, attitudes improved and boredom dropped. (Though it obviously didn't disappear.)

Ultimately, it's up to the students to decide how deeply they want to engage. It is their educations, after all. But by taking boredom seriously, I can knock down as many barriers as possible.

∎

Bio
John Warner is an instructor and the author of the story collection Tough Day for the Army, *and a novel,* The Funny Man, *on teaching, writing and never knowing when you're going to be asked to leave.*

https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/when-students-say-theyre-bored