

Goals for a Future General Education Program

This report summarizes information gathered from faculty and staff focus groups, organized around the general theme of “Goals for a future General Education program” (other reports are organized around the themes of [“Perspectives of the strengths and weaknesses of our current program”](#) and [“Our shared values for General Education”](#)). This report is centered around points of consensus that emerged from the focus groups, supplemented by responses on surveys we administered to the campus. An overview of our process of data collection, focus group data, and survey responses are posted here: <http://wayne.edu/engaging-gened/data/focusgroups/>

In our focus groups, we led discussions organized around three questions intended to elicit responses on goals for a future program:

1. *“What should be the purpose of General Education at WSU?”*,
2. *What kind of knowledge and/or skills do you think are important for a student to gain from General Education courses?*
3. *“What are your hopes and dreams for the future of General Education at WSU?”*

The first two questions elicited responses that tended to be focused on specific goals and outcomes. The third question served as a capstone for our sessions, coming after a good deal of discussion on the other topics we addressed. It was intended to be aspirational in nature, and elicited responses that tended to emphasize the basic principles by which General Education should be structured and delivered. Together, these three questions generated spirited discussion. We feel that the information we received can be best captured under the following goals:

General education at Wayne State should be:

- A program that is streamlined and coherent
- A program that fosters breadth of inquiry
- A program that develops effective communication skills
- A program that fosters analytic thinking
- A program that is integrative

A program that is streamlined and coherent

Common themes in our discussions included that General Education needs to be smaller, the curriculum should be logical and consistent, and its purpose needs to be communicated clearly (issues related to this theme were addressed in two of our previous summaries: [Student Perspectives on General Education](#) and [Perspectives of our Current Program](#)). While these may seem like distinct themes, we feel these points are related because the size of our program was seen to be a factor contributing to the lack of coherence. Reducing the number of credits was something we heard often; there was general agreement in the focus groups that our current program has too many credits and requirements. Reducing the number of credit hours was also the most frequent suggestion of faculty in the open comment section on our survey.

The structure and sequencing of course requirements was also discussed as an important target for reform. The general coherence of the General Education curriculum was viewed as not only an issue for the structure of General Education itself, but also how it integrates with the major. This was especially a concern for professional schools who proposed “a more streamlined program with courses counting toward the major.” Sensible sequencing of courses and enforcement of sequencing were discussed often; for example, students mentioned sequencing as being a barrier to having a user-friendly program, and advisors noted the difficulty of holding students to taking courses at certain times in their academic progression.

Finally, there was expressed a need to solve the identity crisis of the purpose of General Education, especially in the minds of our students. Better communication of the requirements and purpose of General Education was a point of consensus that emerged across a number of our sessions. A means of accomplishing this which was discussed in several focus groups was organizing General Education around learning outcomes rather than courses. Defining outcomes in terms of the specific types of skills students will develop was seen as an essential element to the operationalization of General Education; as one respondent noted “foundational skills should be an outcome, not a course.”

A program that fosters breadth of inquiry

In our discussions on “values” ([summarized here](#)), it was clear that breadth, specifically, exposing students to topics outside of their majors is a highly valued component of General Education. Breadth was seen as a particular strength of our current program, as we summarize here. In our focus groups, a number of content areas were discussed: humanities, the arts, history, and courses that promote informed and engaged citizenship were often mentioned. The importance of breadth to the cultural development of our students was also discussed in a number of groups, which can perhaps be summarized by a respondent who noted that they help you to “become a better human being.” Utilizing the diversity of our campus to help students gain an understanding of other cultures was discussed under a number of our focus group questions (especially those targeting campus values), and it was also cited as an important skill to be developed that will prepare students to interact with people from other countries and cultures. It was also noted that in an increasingly global economy that these skills “should be useful employment-wise.”

A program that develops effective communication skills

Of the foundational skills that were addressed, the importance of communication skills (both oral and written) clearly rose to the top. Across all focus groups, communication skills reached the highest level of consensus for both the “purpose” of General Education, as well as for important “knowledge and skills”. This includes our student focus groups, demonstrating that students understand the fundamental value of these skills. A member of our alumni focus group who employs our students indicated to us that the ability to communicate effectively is the most important skill we need to develop in our graduates. It was noted in a number of groups the importance of developing writing skills early in college to help enable success in later courses, from “learn to write sentences and paragraphs” to learn to “write for different purposes”. A member of one of our groups suggested that “writing should be part of every course.” A similar and consistent perspective was clear from our on-line surveys.

Communication skills were rated both as “most essential” when compared to a host of other types of skills, as well as rated highest to the extent it should be part of General Education.

A program that fosters analytic thinking

Analytical thinking skills followed communication skills as an area of consensus in our focus groups. The analytical skills most often discussed were: critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and information literacy. In general, “the ability to reason” was used broadly in our groups, and included topics ranging from historical reasoning to scientific inquiry. The ability to ask questions, understanding how knowledge is created, and the ability to think critically were all discussed as important elements. Our surveys also demonstrated that critical thinking is of high value; for example, almost all faculty respondents on our survey indicated that critical thinking was either “essential” or “important” for college educated people in the future. A good deal of discussion on this topic dealt less with the importance of this foundational skill and more with the context in which it should be taught, for example whether it should be taught as a course or integrated and applied across different domains.

The importance of “quantitative literacy” was discussed in a number of our groups. This included mathematics. There was also clear opinion that quantitative skills should be developed in a way that extends beyond what is currently covered in a mathematics course. A central idea was that students should develop the ability to analyze and communicate quantitative information across a variety of disciplines in terms of “numbers, visual depiction of data, graphs, charts”.

Information literacy was frequently mentioned as an essential analytic skill, and one that is central for college success. This would include the ability to locate information, evaluate it, and apply it in a meaningful way. The integration of information literacy into a variety of courses was described as an essential strategy for developing these skills. The number of platforms on which these skills needed to be developed, from traditional print to digital media was also highlighted. In addition to the comments in focus groups and survey responses, our committee also received two papers specifically addressing information literacy; one on the [importance of information literacy as a learning outcome](#) and one on how [information literacy is integrated into the engineering curriculum](#).

A program that is integrative

A strong recurring theme across our focus groups was the importance of creating integrative educational experiences in our General Education program. This was also reflected in the open comments on our faculty survey, where making General Education multidisciplinary or integrative was the second-most cited opinion.

The usage of the term “integrative” was very broad, and included topics such as integrated courses that cross disciplines, integrating active research into courses, and integrating classroom experiences with some form of community engagement. A central tenet that emerged was the importance of making explicit connections across disciplines. Representative statements that captured this idea included “courses that are idea-driven and not tied to a specific discipline or department” and “thematically integrated courses with faculty working together”. Integrative courses were seen as a way to target the development of key foundational skills such as critical thinking, oral and written communication, and quantitative skills, with these skills being seen as an outcome of a General Education experience and not linked to a specific course. Our student focus groups discussed the idea of integrated courses with great enthusiasm, to the point of suggesting models that employ shorter, more focused courses that could be linked to their major. Students were also enthusiastic about the idea of

creating "...an interdisciplinary course, bringing together lots of people, working together to solve the problems of Detroit." Similar ideas were discussed in a number of our focus groups. On a cautionary side, creating integrative educational experiences was recognized as a "difficult logistical problem" when it comes to implementation. As an example, respondents cited the insular or compartmentalized nature of our current General Education requirements as a barrier to such integration (see the document [*Perspectives of our Current Program*](#) for more detail).

A program with a focus on student success

General education was viewed as an essential element in providing both the structures and experiences that can lead to student success at Wayne State. This theme included a number of elements that can be tied to other themes, such as communicating a clear purpose that "must have lasting value to the students"; delineating clear academic pathways that can be tailored for different majors; "courses that relate to real life"; and better affordability.

One of the most common topics under student success was providing an effective first year experience. There were a number of ideas about what a first year experience should entail. These include courses that incorporate experiential learning (e.g. service learning, community learning, co-ops and internships); a meaningful "Introduction to the University"; courses that focus on key academic skills (e.g. information literacy and critical thinking); and courses that are tied in some way to the city of Detroit. Creating these experiences around cohorts and/or learning communities was cited as a positive, with one of our focus group participants describing research that demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of organizational structure in supporting student success.