

Our shared values for general education: a summary of survey and focus group responses

This report summarizes information gathered from faculty and staff focus groups and surveys, organized around the general theme of “Values” (other reports are organized around the themes of “perspectives of current program” and “goals for future program”). This report is centered around points of consensus that emerged from the focus groups, supplemented by responses on the surveys. An overview of our process of data collection, focus group data, and survey responses are posted here:

<http://wayne.edu/engaging-gened/data/focusgroups/>.

To begin, what do we mean here by “values”? Simply put, this is what is important to us as a campus community. Our values reflect both our *purpose* and *identity* as an institution. They comprise our shared goals for our students as we help them to achieve success both at the university as well as throughout their careers. While the focus of our conversations were the values under which General Education should be organized, it was clear that often we were also discussing the very essence of a university experience.

From the data we obtained, it became clear that there were two notable points of consensus regarding our shared values for general education: it should develop foundational skills that will lead to student success in their major and beyond; and it should be a transformative experience. Further, a common theme of discussion was our distinctiveness as an institution and how this could be a strength in providing a unique and meaningful educational experience. Each of these major themes is addressed below. Interestingly, whereas faculty and staff tend to have a different involvement in General Education at Wayne State University, their views in these areas were similar.

The purpose of General Education: Foundational skills

A major theme in our data is that GenEd should be ***foundational***, which we interpret here to mean the basic skills and competencies that form the groundwork upon which subsequent skills are built (e.g. in the major). These would most closely correspond to the set of competency requirements in our [current General Education program](#). When we asked focus group participants about their views on the purpose of general education, common responses included “lay a foundation for further study”, help to acquire “fundamental tools for life” and help toward becoming “a whole person”. The participants also emphasized the importance of students acquiring skills in their competency courses that are integrated across domains, which “should be useful to students and transferrable”, and provide a “whole educational experience” beyond collegiate skill building and toward lifelong learning. These comments reflect the

importance of making the connections between the foundational domains and coursework in the major more explicit to students.

Communication skills (oral and written) and critical thinking were cited most often by focus group participants as foundational features of a general education program. These responses were consistent with the data we obtained in our surveys. We asked about a variety of skills and competencies, both in terms of how important they are for a modern college student, as well as the extent that they should be a “signature” of what it means to be a Wayne State student. Among the competencies that would be considered as foundational, skills related to reading, oral and written communication, and critical thinking were consistently rated highest as essential. Interestingly, basic skills related to mathematics or quantitative reasoning were rated lower than these in both faculty and staff survey responses. For example, 71% of tenured/tenure track faculty indicated that they considered English Composition as essential as compared to 50% for Mathematics. Similarly, 81% viewed written communication as essential as compared to 49% for quantitative reasoning. While these data should not be interpreted as meaning that quantitative skills are not valued, they do indicate that the campus community places a higher priority on communication skills.

The purpose of General Education: Broad and transformative

A second major theme to emerge in our analysis is that General Education should be broad and transformative. Breadth reflects exposing students to a variety of topics, whereas transformative infers that the courses can change the ways that students think about themselves and their interactions in a broader world. In part, this reflects on the group requirements that exist in our current program, which are intended to expose students to coursework in the sciences, humanities, and social institutions that they might not otherwise take within their major program. When asked of the purpose of General Education, responses such as “exposure to the unfamiliar”, “connecting students to the broader world”, “making well-rounded students”, and cultural/political/historical competency were common. Across the disciplines that are components of our current General Education group requirements, there did not seem to be a clear separation in the number of times any one particular group requirement was mentioned; they seemed to carry equal weight. In our surveys, physical and life sciences tended to be more consistently rated as essential than other disciplines, though the differences were relatively small. This differs from what we observed from the larger separation between communication skills and other competencies when considering foundational skills.

It became clear to us in our discussions that the notion of “transformative” went beyond a student’s coursework into the types of civic and cultural experiences a student might engage in while attending the university. In fact, outside of the foundational skills, we observed the greatest level of consensus among focus group participants around the

values of civic engagement and community involvement. When asked about the purpose of General Education, common responses we heard included the importance of cultural “competency” and awareness, citizenship, and “creating communities with shared experiences”. In one of our faculty focus groups, we explored the benefits that enhanced cultural awareness might provide, and received responses such as “challenging stereotypes”, “acceptance of diversity”, and “preparation to interact with people from a global world”.

Our survey data generally supported what we heard in the focus groups. For example, ethical reasoning and intercultural knowledge were rated as essential skills for college educated people by half of our respondents. Global learning and civic engagement tended to be rated lower, though a clear majority of respondents still indicated that these areas are important to essential for college students. However, comparatively speaking, survey ratings for these types of transformative experiences were noticeably lower than what we obtained for foundational skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, reading, writing, and problem solving.

The uniqueness of our institution is a strength

There was great deal of enthusiasm across all of our focus groups about the opportunities students could have at Wayne State due to the distinctive features of the university. First, the university’s location in the city of Detroit was viewed as providing an excellent opportunity to think about the city as a sort of teaching “lab”, providing the possibility for students to actively engage in the remaking of the city, with the added benefit of creating stronger links between the university and the community. Focus group participants overall thought that Wayne State’s distinctiveness of having both an urban mission and a strong research focus was a particular strength, with the promise of providing students from diverse backgrounds learning experiences they are not likely to obtain at other universities.

Beyond the characteristics of the university, a common discussion in our focus groups centered on our diverse student population, including racial/ethnic and socio-economic diversity as well as non-traditional and commuter students. These characteristics were seen both as challenges and opportunities for the university; challenges in the different points of entry and levels of academic preparation, and opportunities for leveraging the diversity of our student population in creating unique educational experiences.