To prepare students for life and work, we must continually examine and shape the experiences we want and expect for all our undergraduates.

Undergraduate Education

II. Common Academic Experiences

Introduction

Derek Bok has written that “It is . . . difficult to find any period during the past century and a half when educators were united around a common unifying vision of liberal education” (2006, p. 22). Nevertheless, faculty and academic leaders at colleges and universities throughout the country continue to engage in this pivotal conversation—how to define the skills and qualities we hope to instill in all of our students, and how best to do so. Especially in times of rapid change, we need to regularly reexamine the structure of core, common academic experiences we require of our students, to ensure that that structure is meeting our students’ needs and effectively advancing our view of the goals of liberal education.

Many higher education institutions within the United States have recently assessed and restructured their general education programs, which represent the heart of a liberal education and account for almost a third of the credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree. Perhaps most famously, Harvard University—after a complex self-study—developed a general education program that incorporates eight subject areas that emphasize the importance of internationalization and the communication of science. Other universities have made use of themes that lend coherence and distinction to their programs without creating what they see as an unduly homogenous core—for example, by using diverse disciplines to solve social problems.

The Iowa Promise includes a strategy that calls for a reexamination of our General Education Program (GEP):

Ensure that all students graduate with strong core skills, a broad liberal arts education, and concentrated study in one or more majors by:

1c: Mission pervades organization
1e: Institutional integrity
2d: Mission-aligned planning
3d: Support for learning and teaching
4b: Knowledge, skills, and inquiry
4c: Useful curricula
Promoting their facility for critical thinking, writing and other communication skills, creative endeavor, and the use of information technology;

Providing them with opportunities to develop leadership and teamwork skills and an understanding of business and other organizations;

Reexamining our general education requirements to ensure that course requirements foster an appreciation of the arts and humanities; an understanding of science, technology, and mathematics; an ability to work within and across disciplinary boundaries; and the skills needed to participate in an increasingly global environment;

Augmenting support for the research collections, libraries, museums, and information technologies, broadly defined, that are critical to teaching and learning;

Continuing efforts to internationalize the educational experience.

As plans for the special emphasis self-study developed, we chose to incorporate the GEP review called for in the strategic plan into this larger assessment of the UI undergraduate experience.

**Scope**

The self-study steering committee asked the subcommittee on the Common Academic Experiences to make a thorough assessment of the General Education Program (GEP) in the undergraduate colleges (the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Tippie College of Business, and the Colleges of Education, Engineering, and Nursing).

The subcommittee members were instructed that if their assessment should suggest a need to revise the GEP, their recommendations should address the principles that might guide that revision, as well as an appropriate process for carrying it out. The design of a new GEP did not fall within the scope of the subcommittee’s charge.

**Research Process**

The Common Academic Experiences subcommittee members, in addition to researching the evolution and current status of the UI GEP, relied on data gathered through the GEP student survey, the GEP faculty focus groups, and the GEP employer interviews described in the “Research Processes” section of the introduction to this special emphasis self-study.

This subcommittee also made use of the RISE report.
Summary of Findings

The University has much to be proud of in its General Education Program (GEP), including cooperation among the colleges, a good system of oversight, and a flexible curriculum. Evidence shows that the distributive system in place is working well.

Some students and faculty find the organization of this ambitious GEP confusing, however, and it lacks a sense of coherence. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), working with the other undergraduate colleges, is reviewing the structure and intended outcomes of the GEP and revising the criteria for approval of GEP courses, with an eye to creating a more focused and better integrated program.

The GEP might also be achieving some of its desired learning outcomes better than others. CLAS should examine those that are under-represented, and should consider ways to address the frequently-cited obstacles to teaching communication skills within large GEP courses.

Description and Evaluation of the General Education Program

Evolution of General Education at The University of Iowa

The University of Iowa’s General Education Program (GEP) has evolved slowly since its earliest years, when students could choose either a departmental plan of instruction—with departments determining the requirements—or the “class plan,” which prescribed a fixed four-year curriculum. By 1905, the class plan was replaced with a fixed curriculum for the first two years, followed by two years of course work in the major. Over the following decades, this two-year core curriculum maintained a focus on essential skills and breadth requirements necessary for advanced learning, and inspired the core structure of the University’s GEP.

The GEP morphed incrementally from a core to a more pluralistic distributed model for a variety of reasons including overlap of major requirements with GEP requirements and concerns about diversity and the internationalization of the curriculum. That evolution was mostly complete by 1979; since then, the colleges have revised and refined the program almost every year.

Vestiges of the old core model remain—for example, all UI students must take one or more rhetoric courses that focus on reading, speaking, and writing. Almost all students also complete interpretation of literature—offered either by the Department of English or one of the foreign language departments—which emphasizes reading, analysis, and writing.

The rest of the GEP courses, however, represent a wide range of disciplines and topics, and range from introductory to advanced, as is usually the case in a distributed model.

This hybrid model of general education has allowed faculty and academic administrators to give students a common academic experience in their rhetoric and interpretation of literature courses, but also to keep the program vital by regularly updating the selection of courses available to fulfill the remainder of GEP requirements.

A more detailed history of the UI General Education Program will be available to the HLC consultant-evaluators in the University’s resource room.
Overview of the Current General Education Program

Goals of the General Education Program

The goals of the General Education Program (GEP), as stated by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, can be seen as falling into two categories: the acquisition of essential skills, proficiencies, and familiarities; and the development of enduring qualities and habits of mind.

The GEP intends to facilitate the acquisition of essential proficiencies and skills in and familiarity with:

- Use of language (both English and a second language)
- Manipulation and analysis of symbols (both mathematical and verbal)
- Critical reasoning
- Modes of thinking and basic information across the liberal arts and sciences disciplines
- Discipline-appropriate research and inquiry

The GEP also aims to develop in every student enduring qualities that mark a liberally educated person, including:

- A lifetime pursuit of personal intellectual growth and social responsibility
- Tolerance and open-mindedness, facilitating the ability to question and evaluate one’s own attitudes and beliefs
- Sufficient general knowledge and proficiencies to adapt to new vocations and opportunities
- An ability to understand and to cope with the complexity and diversity of contemporary life

The two categories are, of course, interrelated and essential to one another.

General Education Program Requirements by College

The five UI undergraduate colleges are the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), by far the largest; the Tippie College of Business; and the Colleges of Education, Engineering, and Nursing. As outlined in the “Entry and Transition” section of this self-study, most first-year students enroll in CLAS. CLAS traditionally has designed and managed the GEP while the other, smaller colleges have adapted the CLAS program to fit their missions and accreditation requirements.

The CLAS GEP requires students to complete up to 47 semester hours selected from nine general education areas (the GE areas), including 6 hours from what is called the “distributed” area. The GE areas are foreign language, historical perspectives, humanities, interpretation of literature, natural sciences, quantitative or formal reasoning, rhetoric, and social sciences. The distributed area encompasses seven sub-areas: cultural diversity, fine arts, foreign civilization and culture, health and physical activity, historical perspectives, humanities, and social sciences.

Students enrolled in the College of Education’s teacher education programs must complete the CLAS requirements.

Students in the Tippie College of Business and the Colleges of Nursing and Engineering fulfill nearly the same requirements as CLAS students, but some of that coursework is built into their major programs and therefore does not need to be included in their GEP. The differences between these three Colleges’ programs and the CLAS GEP are:
None of the three colleges requires any additional foreign language beyond the requirement for admission to the University (two years of a single language).

Business and Nursing require students to choose their “distributed” courses from either the sub-area of foreign civilization and culture or the sub-area of cultural diversity (or, in Nursing, students may select from four additional anthropology courses).

Students in the Tippie College:

Do not complete quantitative or formal reasoning course work as part of the GEP since that area is covered in the requirements for all business majors

Must complete one GEP social science course and two GEP courses in economics (a requirement of all business major programs), which adds up to more social sciences semester hours than required of CLAS students

College of Nursing students:

May substitute any GEP humanities course for interpretation of literature

Must complete a total of six semester hours of GEP humanities or fine arts courses, or any philosophy courses

Must take an introductory statistics course or math for the biological sciences in order to meet the three semester hour requirement for mathematics

Must take the CLAS GEP psychology course to fulfill the three semester hour requirement in social sciences

The College of Engineering refers to its GEP as the General Education Component (GEC). Engineering students:

Must complete a total of 15 semester hours selected from a list of Engineering-approved humanities and social sciences courses offered by CLAS (not necessarily courses that CLAS has designated part of its GEP), as described in Table II-8

Must take rhetoric, but may choose whether to take Interpretation of Literature as one of their humanities choices

Do not complete quantitative or formal reasoning or natural sciences course work as part of the GEC since those areas are covered in the requirements for all engineering majors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II-8: College of Engineering General Education Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 s.h. lower level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table II-9 illustrates the similarities and differences in GEP requirements for the five UI undergraduate colleges.

**Table II-9: General Education Areas and Requirements by College**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GE Areas</th>
<th>College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS)</th>
<th>Tippie College of Business</th>
<th>College of Education</th>
<th>College of Nursing</th>
<th>College of Engineering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreign Language</strong></td>
<td>Through 4th semester level **</td>
<td>None beyond UI admit req.***</td>
<td>Through 4th semester level **</td>
<td>None beyond UI admit req.***</td>
<td>None beyond UI admit req.***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Perspectives</strong></td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Possible choice for 6 s.h. of humanities</td>
<td>Possible choice for 6 s.h. of humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanities</strong></td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Possible choice for 6 s.h. of humanities</td>
<td>See Table II-8 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretation of Literature</strong></td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Possible choice for 6 s.h. of humanities</td>
<td>Possible choice for 3 s.h. of humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Natural Sciences</strong></td>
<td>7 s.h. One lab required</td>
<td>3 s.h. No lab required</td>
<td>7 s.h. One lab required</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements in natural sciences</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative or Formal Reasoning</strong></td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetoric</strong></td>
<td>4-8 s.h.*</td>
<td>4-8 s.h.*</td>
<td>4-8 s.h.*</td>
<td>4-8 s.h.*</td>
<td>4-8 s.h.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Sciences</strong></td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>3 s.h.</td>
<td>Fulfilled by program requirements</td>
<td>See Table II-8 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distributed</strong></td>
<td>6 s.h. from 2 areas</td>
<td>3 s.h from one area</td>
<td>6 s.h. from 2 areas</td>
<td>6 s.h. from 2 areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural diversity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fine arts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Possible choice for humanities requirement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign civilization and culture</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health and physical activity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>historical perspectives</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humanities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social sciences</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X = available option for distributed requirement

*Hours and course placement for rhetoric depend on student ACT or SAT score and AP English Composition exam score (i.e., students with an ACT English score of 24 or above or an AP Language and Composition score of 4 or 5 are placed in accelerated rhetoric).

**The foreign language requirement may be satisfied by high school coursework.

***UI requires 2nd level proficiency for admission to the University. Please note that UI accepts exam credit for some GE requirements.
Number, Organization, and Format of Courses

In fall 2007, CLAS departments and programs offered more than 260 courses in the General Education Program. The College of Education offered one additional GEP course, and the Tippie College of Business offered two in the Department of Economics. For a list of approved course titles and the departments that offered GEP courses, see Appendix II-F.

During the 2006-07 academic year, departments added 18 courses to the GEP (and dropped 5), which illustrates how the program can respond quickly to current student interest and to developments in faculty research.

A GEP course takes one of two formats:

A small discussion course is taught by a faculty member, instructor, or teaching assistant (TA) and usually enrolls fewer than 25 students.

A lecture course is taught by a faculty member or instructor, and usually incorporates separate discussion or lab sections, usually led by TAs. These sections may enroll anywhere from 26 to more than 500 students.

Each semester, several sections of small GEP discussion courses, such as accelerated rhetoric, are offered as honors sections. The University of Iowa Honors Program also offers several interdisciplinary GEP Honors Seminars, with enrollment limited to 20 or fewer students. In addition, 15 to 20 lab/discussion sections associated with GEP lecture courses are designated as honors sections. Frequently, these sections are led by the faculty member in charge of the lecture. Students enrolled in an honors designated section attend the same lectures and take the same exams as all other students in the course, but the lab or discussion section is smaller and designed to provide more of an intellectual challenge.

Criteria for Approval of General Education Program Courses

For a course to earn and retain GEP status, it must clearly satisfy the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences’ comprehensive criteria for course quality and consistency, as well as area-specific criteria for its content and intended outcomes.

Comprehensive Criteria for General Education Courses

The comprehensive criteria for General Education courses—provided in full in Appendix II-G—address issues related to teaching, course content, and consistency. The criteria:

1d: Effective governance and administration
3a: Articulated learning goals
3b: Effective teaching
3c: Effective learning environments
4b: Knowledge, skills, and inquiry
4c: Useful curricula

Establish the expectation that the College’s most effective and experienced teachers will be involved with the GEP.

Lay out guidelines for the use of TAs.

Require evidence of how the course will help develop each student’s critical thinking, analysis, and communication skills.

Require that GEP courses provide a “breadth of experience in content and/or in methods,” because a GEP course may represent a student’s only exposure to a given subject area.

Dictate that when a course’s content or structure changes significantly, its GEP status will be reviewed.
Require departments to ensure that various versions of GEP courses—such as Saturday & Evening or Guided Independent Study courses—are comparable to “regular” versions of those courses, that multi-section courses offer “consistency of instruction and focus,” and that grading across sections is consistent.

State that because GEP-approved courses must be readily available to students, they should normally be offered at least every two years.

**Intended Outcomes by General Education Area**

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) has established criteria to define appropriate content and intended outcomes for courses in each GE area.

From 2003 through 2006, the CLAS Educational Policy Committee (described below) reviewed the content and intended outcomes criteria for each GE area, and worked with the CLAS faculty (through the College’s central faculty governance body, the Faculty Assembly) to implement changes.

Regular review by the faculty has helped to maintain the GEP’s relevance, allowing its content and policies to adjust when needed without destabilizing its structure. At the same time, the nature and number of the intended outcomes, detailed below, reveal a GEP that is ambitious but diffused, perhaps attempting to satisfy too many differing audiences.

The following intended outcomes are taken from the CLAS GEP page: [http://www.clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/gep/areas.shtml](http://www.clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/gep/areas.shtml).

**Foreign Language**

Courses in this area provide students with speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in a second language. These courses also provide knowledge of the culture(s) in which the language is spoken.

Intended outcomes:

Students will be able to read, speak, and understand the language as described in the course descriptions, and will develop enhanced understanding of the culture(s) in which the language is (was) used.

**Historical Perspectives**

Courses in this area help students understand a period of the past in its own terms, comprehend the historical processes of change and continuity, sharpen their analytical skills in the evaluation of evidence, and develop their ability to generalize, explain, and interpret historical change.

Intended outcomes:

Students will understand one or more periods of the past in its/their own terms.

Students will comprehend change and continuity in history.

Students will improve their ability to evaluate evidence using the tools of historical investigation.

Students will gain experience and improve their skills in generalizing, explaining, and interpreting historical change.

(Revised March 2004)
Humanities

Courses in this area focus on the ways individuals and cultures have interpreted and understood themselves, others, and the world. Courses exploring the nature and meaning of artistic forms (across the spectrum of the fine arts and literature of the past and present), human values and value systems (including current and historical ideas in philosophy and religion), and other expressions of human aspiration, belief, and creation may be approved in this area. Interdisciplinary courses that explore these topics may also be approved. Courses approved in this area teach verbal, analytic, perceptual, and imaginative skills needed to interpret and examine culture, community, identity formation, and the human experience.

Intended outcomes:

Students will learn about one or more specific cultural topics, problems, artistic forms, value systems, philosophical concepts, or religious ideas in relation to the larger human context in which they become meaningful.

Students will become familiar with one or more methods of humanistic research, critical inquiry, and analysis and have an opportunity to practice these methods.

(Revised March 2004)

Interpretation of Literature

Building on previously acquired skills of reading and writing, courses approved for the interpretation of literature area seek to reinforce in every student a lifetime habit of frequent, intelligent, and satisfying reading. These courses, taught in English in small sections, focus primarily on “ways of reading,” asking students to become aware of themselves as readers, to learn how to deal with different kinds of texts, and to understand how texts exist within larger historical, social, political, and/or cultural contexts. These “ways of reading,” while growing out of various critical approaches to literature, are also transferable to other fields of study.

Intended outcomes:

Students use and refine their skills of reading, speaking, and writing to respond critically and sensitively to literary texts.

Students learn to see themselves as readers, recognizing the influence of individual differences (such as gender, ethnicity, and geography) and past experiences on interpretation.

Students consider the connections between individual texts and broader cultural contexts.

(Revised March 2005 and April 2006)

Natural Sciences

Courses in this area explore the scope and major concepts of a scientific discipline. In these courses students learn the attitudes and practices of scientific investigators: logic, precision, experimentation, tentativeness, and objectivity. In courses with a laboratory component, students gain experience in methods of scientific inquiry.
Intended outcomes:

Students will come to understand a significant segment of natural science and will become familiar with its major concepts and ways of framing questions. In laboratory courses, students will use laboratory investigations and appropriate procedures to generate accurate and meaningful data and derive reasonable conclusions from them.

Students will understand and appreciate (if not adopt) the attitudes of science: logic, precision, experimentation, tentativeness, and objectivity.

Students will develop and practice those communication skills that apply to the relevant discipline.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric helps student to develop skills in speaking, writing, listening, and critical reading. It also builds competence in research and inquiry as well as in analysis and persuasion, especially in the area of understanding public controversies in their social contexts.

Intended outcomes:

Students will learn to read with understanding and enjoyment.

Students will write and speak about reading with personal authority and analytical skill.

Students will be able to write and speak to discover, explain, question, and defend ideas.

Students will be able to take into account fundamental rhetorical concepts when writing or speaking.

(Under review for 2007-08).

Quantitative or Formal Reasoning

Courses in this area help develop analytical skills through the practice of quantitative or formal symbolic reasoning. Courses focus on the presentation and evaluation of evidence and argument, the understanding of the use and misuse of data, and the organization of information in quantitative or other formal symbolic systems including those used in the disciplines of computer sciences, linguistics, mathematics, philosophy, and statistics.

Intended outcomes

Students will learn and practice a method or methods of analytical or formal symbolic reasoning, for example a specific set of mathematical, statistical, computer programming, or logic skills.

Students will learn to evaluate arguments made in the symbolic system embodied in the course and will become familiar with its major concepts and ways of formulating questions.

(Revised May 2003)
Social Sciences

Courses in this area focus on human behavior and the institutions and social systems that shape and are shaped by that behavior. Courses provide an overview of one or more social science disciplines, their theories, and methods.

Intended outcomes:

Students will examine the strengths and weaknesses of at least one method of inquiry distinctive of the social sciences, and become familiar with its major assumptions, concepts, and ways of formulating questions. Students will learn to evaluate data, generalizations, and hypotheses in the discipline. Students will have the opportunity to practice the methods of the discipline.

Students will be given practice in developing positions and supporting their ideas with evidence and reason.

Distributed Area

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Courses in this area foster greater understanding of the diversity of cultures in the United States and provide knowledge and critical understanding of these cultures, focusing on one or more non-dominant cultures or peoples of the United States. Some courses include comparative study with cultures outside the United States, but the primary focus is on United States experience.

Intended outcomes:

Students should develop a critical understanding of the culture of a group or groups in the United States.

Students will become familiar with one or more methods of research and critical inquiry into culture.

In courses that examine the artistic production of a group, students should develop an understanding of the relationship between the artistic production and the culture of the group.

Some courses will provide a comparative perspective on specific groups.

In some courses students will develop a greater understanding of the dominant culture, in the context of the dominant culture’s interactions with the focus culture(s) that form the primary content of the course.

FINE ARTS

Courses in this area provide students with knowledge of the history, theory, and appreciation of various disciplines in the creative arts. Courses in this area may also provide students with studio, performance, and production experiences.

Intended outcomes:

Students should develop the ability to recognize the constituent parts of an artwork and of the processes of producing that art.

Students should have ample opportunity to observe the performance of an art, or
when feasible, be actively engaged in the making of that art.

Students should be able to recognize how aesthetic and critical meanings are attached to artworks and be introduced to some of the ways in which quality can be recognized and assessed.

Students should be able to recognize aspects of the context (e.g., historical, social, ethnic, economic, geographic) in which artworks are made, particularly how an artwork is linked to the identity of both the artist and the artist’s culture.

FOREIGN CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

Courses in this area seek to provide students with knowledge about one or more foreign civilizations, cultures, or societies; stimulate their desire for further study of foreign civilizations, cultures, and societies; and foster international and intercultural understanding.

Intended outcomes:

Students will develop an understanding of an aspect of a culture or civilization not their own.

Students will be introduced to concepts and artifacts important to or created in the culture or cultures being studied.

Students will become familiar with one or more methods of research and critical inquiry into civilization and culture.

Students will be given practice in articulating their understanding and interpretations of another culture.

(Revised March 2004)

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Courses in this area help students acquire knowledge and skills that are conducive to good health and well-being.

Intended outcomes:

Students will understand the theoretical groundings of good health practices, become cognizant of major health risks, and learn strategies for overcoming those risks.

Students will develop critical skills for assessing various structural factors that constrain good health practices and for making informed choices about health behaviors.

Students will learn and practice the physical and mental skills associated with a specific activity or activities.

(Revised spring 2004)

Note: historical perspectives, humanities, and social sciences courses within the distributed area have the same intended outcomes as described above.
Oversight of the General Education Program

As the largest undergraduate college and the administrative home for all but a very few courses within the GEP, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) has had oversight of the program. CLAS carries out that responsibility through two committees, the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) and the General Education Curriculum Committee, which are described in detail in the College’s Manual of Procedure, Articles VI and IX.

The Tippie College of Business and the Colleges of Education and Nursing generally accept and share the CLAS-approved GEP course offerings. The College of Engineering, however, does not limit its GEC offerings to courses approved for the CLAS GEP.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY COMMITTEE

The Educational Policy Committee (EPC), chaired by the associate dean for academic programs and services, has primary oversight of the GEP. The EPC comprises nine faculty members elected from and by the faculty, including three members from the humanities and fine arts, three from the natural and mathematical sciences, and three from the social sciences. A student representative, selected by an appropriate student group designated by the dean, sits on the EPC as a voting member.

The EPC meets weekly while the University is in session to examine and develop collegiate policy and procedures, including those related to the GEP.

The EPC appoints members to the General Education Curriculum Committee (described below), which recommends courses for GEP status and monitors GEP policy and procedural issues. The EPC gives final approval on all recommendations from that committee. Where changes are indicated, the EPC works with the CLAS faculty, through the Faculty Assembly, to implement them.

In the last two decades, the EPC has been active in its stewardship of the GEP, recommending several significant changes:

- In 1989, the University began permitting students to use courses to satisfy both major requirements and the requirements of the GEP.

- In 1994, a two-year review of the GEP by the EPC resulted in the creation of the comprehensive General Education Curriculum Committee, to replace multiple committees that had previously had oversight of individual areas of the program.

- The 1994 review also led to ongoing revision of the GEP’s comprehensive criteria and area-specific content and outcomes criteria.

- In 1996, the “distributed” area was added to the program, offering courses in cultural diversity and foreign civilization and culture.

- In 2005, foreign language units began offering courses that fulfill the Interpretation of Literature requirement if they are taught in English, are introductory, and meet the content and outcomes criteria for Interpretation of Literature.

GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM COMMITTEE

The General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC) makes recommendations to the Educational Policy Committee regarding GEP course offerings and GEP-related policies and procedures. The committee consists of two faculty members from each of
the three CLAS voting divisions (humanities and fine arts, natural and mathematical sciences, and social sciences), as well as a student with voting privileges. A liaison from the Educational Policy Committee serves as a nonvoting member, as does a representative from the Academic Advising Center.

A department or program wanting a course approved for GEP status submits a request to the GECC, including:

- An explanation of the intended audience for the course, and of the department’s vision for how the course complements other GEP offerings or helps the department fulfill its mission
- An explanation of how the course meets the **comprehensive criteria for General Education courses**
- An explanation of how the course meets the **content and outcomes criteria** for each relevant GE area
- An explanation of how consistency will be maintained if the course is offered in different modes or by different instructors
- An explanation of plans for TA training and supervision, if TAs will be involved with teaching the course
- A syllabus for each format in which the course will be taught
- Sample assignments, including two representative and/or important assignments
- A sample quiz
- A sample mid-term or other major test
- A sample final exam or final assessment project or paper

For a course to take on GEP status, the Educational Policy Committee must approve the GECC’s recommendation.

The GECC also reviews previously approved GEP courses on a five-year cycle, examining the offerings of five to eight departments each year. This rigorous review process requires departments to submit:

- A statement from the department about the rationale for the courses
- An explanation of how courses and assignments fulfill the program’s comprehensive and content criteria and intended outcomes
- Evidence of consistency of content and evaluation standards across offerings
- Evidence that courses are regularly taught by well-qualified faculty, instructors, or TAs
- Evidence of TA training and oversight
- A syllabus for each format in which courses are taught
- Sample assignments
- A sample quiz
- A sample mid-term or other major test
A sample final exam or final project

Courses that do not fulfill the GEP criteria are removed, either by the request of the offering department, by the GECC, or by the associate dean of academic programs and services.

The committee also develops and periodically reviews suggested modifications in the comprehensive criteria and area-specific content and outcomes criteria.

This review process is thorough and substantive, and evaluates courses by measuring assignments, syllabi, and learning activities against the stated intended outcomes of the GEP. It does, however, generally evaluate teaching rather assessing learning outcomes.

QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION WITHIN THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

When departments submit materials for the five-year review of their GEP offerings, they must include evidence of the quality of teaching within the General Education (GE) courses. The General Education Curriculum Committee examines the submitted materials for evidence that the department is satisfying the requirements of the comprehensive criteria as they relate to teaching:

The Educational Policy Committee expects the College’s best and most experienced teachers to participate in General Education as instructors and as conscientious guides and supervisors to teaching assistants (see below). Participation by each department’s best and most experienced faculty members helps ensure the quality and consistency of the courses offered for General Education.

They also help to ensure that GE-approved courses provide a consistent educational experience, across semesters and when multiple sections of a course are offered within a semester. Consistency within a department can be developed by common expectations for courses and by sharing materials and syllabi.

Departments may, on occasion, find it advisable or necessary to assign a visitor or adjunct to teach a GE-approved course. Whenever possible, these instructors should be provided with materials and advice from the tenured faculty who have taught the course. Departments should not routinely assign GE-approved courses to visitors or adjuncts.

The criteria also provide guidelines for the use of teaching assistants in GE courses:

When teaching assistants are used in General Education courses, faculty supervisors must ensure that they are adequately trained and supervised. In reviewing courses in which teaching assistants are used, a description of the methods used to select, train, and supervise the teaching assistants must be included with the review materials. It is especially important that teaching assistants who are given responsibility for individual sections (as in language instruction, Interpretation of Literature, and rhetoric courses) have comprehensive preparation and ongoing oversight. The General Education Curriculum Committee and the Educational Policy Committee will expect additional information on the training and supervision of teaching assistants in these courses.

Departments must describe in their review materials how they train and oversee TAs who teach GEP courses. The General Education Curriculum Committee pays particular attention to the course syllabi, assignments given, and the description of the TA training or professional development program, looking for evidence of consistent supervision by the department.
The Department of Rhetoric’s summary of its professional development program provides a good example of TA oversight within the GEP:

The Professional Development Program (PDP) begins with a three-day workshop in August, the week before classes begin. Groups of about a dozen new teachers are led by a faculty member and one or two experienced TAs. During this workshop, teachers begin developing general plans for the semester and detailed plans for the opening weeks, all in the context of discussions of larger issues, from rhetorical principles to pedagogical approaches.

These discussions begin a conversation about teaching that continues in the required PDP colloquium, 3:30-5:20 Thursdays through the fall semester. Attendance and satisfactory performance in the August workshop and Thursday colloquium are conditions of employment—part of every new TA and faculty member’s contract.

Every rhetoric TA has a teaching advisor. For PDP participants, it is the PDP faculty leader; for others, it is a faculty member assigned by the chair of the department. Before the start of the semester, the advisor reviews and responds to a draft of the course policy statement. By the end of the first week of classes, each TA provides the advisor with a written course description or tentative plan, which should include a schedule of major assignments and indicate the role of other planned activities. At some point, the advisor calls for, reviews, and responds to a sample of student folders. The advisor confirms that teachers are on pace to meet the requirements for major assignments; that students are engaging in a variety of other relevant activities; and that the folder of teaching materials (including assignment sheets) is complete. For PDP participants, this review occurs at midterm and includes grade distributions. Before the beginning of the spring semester, PDP participants give advisors a self-evaluation and response to student evaluations. Advisors are available for conferences and classroom visits, and instructors should make themselves available if the faculty member requests a meeting, a class visit, or materials beyond the minimum outlined above.

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Because rhetoric courses help students develop reading, writing, and speaking skills necessary for the completion of assignments in other courses, students must fulfill the rhetoric requirement in their first year. Most also take interpretation of literature in the first year. For most new first-year students, in fact, GEP courses compose more than half of their schedules.

The University and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) work together to ensure enough open seats in GEP courses to accommodate the needs of first-year students. Every year in March, for example, representatives from the Office of the Provost, CLAS, the Office of Admissions, Orientation Services, the Office of the Registrar, and the Academic Advising Center meet to go over enrollment projections, enrollment data from previous years, declared majors, and other information to plan how many seats to reserve for new students. If it looks as though a course may run short of space entirely, the collegiate dean or associate provost allocates funds to the department to hire additional instructors. Likewise if a course is scheduled for a room that is a bit too small for the projected enrollment, a new room can be sought. The timing of the meeting allows the Registrar to hold seats in advance of early registration in April.

As orientation progresses through the summer, these same offices track enrollment to
identify areas that need adjustment, sections that need additional funding, or sections that can be released to general enrollment.

The group works especially hard to ensure the availability of rhetoric courses, which students must take in the first year, and of GEP courses that function as prerequisites for the next level of courses required for a major or for entry into a professional college. The Four Year Graduation Plan (described in greater detail in the “Environments and Resources for Learning” section of this self-study) expresses the University’s commitment to course availability. In the 12 years that the Four Year Graduation Plan has existed, no participant in the plan has failed to graduate in four years because of lack of course availability.

**Relationship of the General Education Program to the Major**

Until 1989, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) disallowed the use of GEP courses as part of the major program. Since then, however, the GEP has become integrated into most majors.

A GEP course may serve as an introduction to the major in a broad historical or social context; as a foundational prerequisite for major level-coursework; or as a required cognate. This is especially true in the natural and social science majors.

If a given GEP course is not a requirement for the major, it may nonetheless be on the menu of electives a student might choose to fulfill a category requirement within the major. Some students may use several GEP courses to also satisfy category requirements, and others may not use any. This variation is pronounced in the fine arts, humanities, and some social sciences (such as history), where students choose from a particularly large menu of courses, only some of which are GEP-approved.

Almost all major programs allow—or even require—students to count at least one course toward both GEP requirements and major requirements. Most major programs allow up to two such “double countings.” The one exception is the Department of English, which does not allow students to double count any courses. Neither the GEP nor CLAS has a policy limiting or requiring the application of GEP courses toward major requirements.

Selective and limited admission majors at UI include those offered by the Tippie College of Business and the Colleges of Education and Nursing, all of which generally admit students after they have fulfilled certain requirements and established a satisfactory academic record at the University, including earning at or above a minimum GPA (see the “Education within the Major” section of this self-study for more about selective and limited admission programs). CLAS also offers some selective majors, including actuarial science, athletic training, communication studies, health promotion, integrative physiology, journalism and mass communication, social work, and sport studies. Since most first and second year students take a lot of GEP courses, and since the selective admissions majors tend to require GEP courses to fulfill prerequisites or cognate requirements, the GEP has the unintended function of screening applicants for these majors.

**Perceptions of the General Education Program**

In considering what data would be needed to make a thorough assessment of the General Education Program (GEP), the subcommittee on Common Academic Experiences identified three groups likely to have different and valuable perspectives on the GEP and how effectively it accomplishes its goals: students, faculty, and employers.
Student Perspectives

Development of the General Education Program Student Survey

In recent publications, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has offered some helpful direction for colleges and universities working on assessing their general education programs. Prominent in the AAC&U’s advice is the suggestion that strategies and measurement protocols be designed in ways that reflect the distinctiveness of a given university’s particular program of general education. The subcommittee on Common Academic Experiences tried to follow that advice in developing a survey instrument to measure student perceptions of the GEP.

One ready framework for examining the University’s GEP is embodied in the stated goals for the program, as described above. As written, however, the goals are too diffuse and abstract to be used as measurement statements in a closed-response questionnaire. The subcommittee members therefore chose to use as the basis of measurement in the questionnaire a set of eight objectives derived from those stated goals, but informed by their reading of the comprehensive criteria and the content and outcomes criteria, by their conversations with GEP course instructors, and by their own discussions about “goals in use”—that is, how the abstract goals for the program translate into more specific, measurable objectives.

Thus they identified the following as eight major desired learning outcomes of the UI GEP:

- **Critical thinking** includes skills in evaluating bodies of information and analyzing and judging values expressed by oneself and others.
- **Communication skills** include the ability to organize thoughts clearly and to communicate them effectively in words, writing, and visual displays.
- **Understanding of world complexity** includes understanding distinctive characteristics of different countries and the varied ways countries interact with each other.
- **Appreciation of diversity** includes understanding one’s own uniqueness and also the uniqueness of persons different from oneself.
- **Understanding of scientific inquiry** includes the ability to collect and use dependable sources of data and follow standards of scientific method while evaluating results.
- **Social responsibility** includes understanding the importance of bringing one’s educational skills to contribute to my local community and society as a whole.
- **Appreciation of the arts** includes understanding how visual, written, and performing arts help us think and enhance our emotional lives.
- **Life of the mind** includes developing interests and habits for life-long learning and enjoyment of creations of others and ourselves.

A description of the methodology used in developing and administering the GEP student survey can be found in Appendix II-C.

Key Findings of the General Education Program Student Survey

Confirming the Logic of the Distributive System

The GEP survey asked students to report to what extent each of the GEP areas had contributed to their growth in the eight learning outcome categories listed above (the
distributed sub-areas were included as a group under “other General Education courses . . . such as Cultural Diversity, Fine Arts, Foreign Civilization and Culture, or Health and Physical Activity”). The data show that each learning outcome category “pulls its own weight,” so to speak.

Table II-10 shows the two highest scored learning outcomes in each GE area (bold, in red). Six of the eight learning outcomes achieve “top two” status in at least one GE area; only two do not, social responsibility and life of the mind.

The non-bold scores in Table II-10 illustrate all cases where a learning outcome scored a three or better on the Likert scale. Here, all eight learning outcomes are represented; critical thinking, understanding world complexity, and appreciation of diversity appear several times.

Yet another way to test the rationale of the distribution matrix is to note which learning outcome scored its highest rating against each GE area. The arrows in Table II-10 mark those highest ratings, showing that respondents to the survey believe that each GE area achieves one of the learning outcomes better than any of the other areas. This seems to confirm the logic behind the distributive matrix.

### Table II-10:
**Top Scoring Outcomes by GE Area**

Note:
- Bolded scores in red are the top two scoring outcomes in each GE area.
- Where an outcome received a score of three or greater on the Likert scale, that score is also shown in this table.
- These arrows ↑ mark the GE area in which each desired learning outcome received its highest rating.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GE Areas</th>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Foreign Language</th>
<th>Interpretation of Literature</th>
<th>Historical Perspectives</th>
<th>Humanities</th>
<th>Natural Sciences</th>
<th>Quantitative &amp; Formal Reasoning</th>
<th>Social Sciences</th>
<th>Other (Distributed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4 ↑</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>3.0 ↑</td>
<td>3.4 (↑)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding World Complexity</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2 ↑</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Diversity</td>
<td>3.4 ↑</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Scientific Inquiry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5 ↑</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of the Arts</td>
<td>3.0 ↑</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life of the Mind</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.0 ↑</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(↑) Foreign language actually scored highest in this category, but one can assume that the score was related to the teaching of communication skills in a foreign language, thereby making rhetoric the key distributive GE area for the teaching of communication skills in English.
Under-Represented Goals

If the objective of the GEP is to advance each of the eight desired learning outcomes equally, we should have some concern that students did not rank social responsibility or life of the mind within the top two areas of growth in any of the GE areas. We may take the view, however, that some learning outcomes (such as critical thinking) apply to multiple areas more obviously than others, and some imbalance in representation among the learning outcomes is not a cause for concern.

We should address this question, and if necessary determine how to strengthen these two learning outcomes within the GEP.

General Education and the Goals of Thinking and Communicating

According to student survey responses, communication skills do not have the pervasive presence in the GE experience that thinking skills have.

Table II-11 shows that mean scores for communication skills in the history, natural science, and quantitative or formal reasoning categories were about a standard deviation removed from the highest mean score achieved by any one learning outcome. This was not the case for critical thinking skills (see Table II-12).

This suggests that if we consider communication skills a priority learning outcome for the GEP, such skills may require more attention in a number of key areas. History, for example, is an area where written communication skills would seem to be particularly important—but the student perception data indicate that our GEP history courses may have considerable room for improvement in teaching writing skills. (It is important to note that the survey did not ask about writing in particular—it asked about “communication skills,” which students might have interpreted in ways that do not reflect what actually happens with regard to all the communication skills in GEP courses.)

If we choose to implement any changes to give communication skills a stronger representation in the GEP, we must pay attention to how those changes could interfere with things the GE area does especially well.

Table II-11: Mean Scores for Communication Skills and Rank Within General Education Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Comm. Skills Rank Among Outcomes Within GE Area</th>
<th>Highest mean for any one GE desired learning outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of Literature</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Perspectives</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative or Formal Reasoning</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Distributed)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table II-12:
Mean Scores for Critical Thinking Skills and Rank Within General Education Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GE Area</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Crit. Thinking Rank Among Outcomes Within GE Area</th>
<th>Highest mean for any one GE desired learning outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of Literature</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Perspectives</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative or Formal Reasoning</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Distributed)</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Faculty Focus Groups

In February 2007, the subcommittee on Common Academic Experiences invited faculty to participate in focus groups to share their perceptions about the University’s General Education Program (GEP). A total of 47 faculty from 25 departments participated in five focus group sessions. Details about these sessions can be found in Appendix II-C.

The groups discussed two questions: What are the goals of the GEP, and are we achieving those goals?

Faculty Perceptions of Intended Outcomes

The focus group interviews suggest that faculty perceptions of the GEP’s intended outcomes align closely with the GEP’s stated criteria and goals.

The faculty focus group participants reported, for example, the belief that the GEP aims to produce “educated persons” who have acquired both skills and knowledge. They also expressed that the GEP fosters the development of “life skills,” which contribute to learning outside of the classroom. Faculty expectations for the GEP thus correlate with the two categories of the GEP goals—acquisition of essential skills and knowledge, and the development of enduring qualities that mark a liberally educated person.

Faculty demonstrated substantial consensus around some specific goals under the umbrella of “producing educated persons,” including (1) providing breadth of study before specialization, (2) broadening students’ horizons, (3) providing a common core of knowledge, and (4) facilitating understanding of different modes of inquiry.
Obstacles to Achieving Outcomes

The focus groups spent considerable time discussing obstacles to achieving the perceived desired outcomes of the GEP. Four obstacles came up repeatedly: (1) the challenges of teaching communication skills, especially writing, within the GEP; (2) problems related to large classes; (3) the University’s system of recognition and reward for teaching; and (4) the organization of the GEP curriculum. In general, faculty saw all of these as related to one another.

Challenges in Teaching Communication Skills

In discussing the challenges associated with teaching communication skills in GEP courses, faculty focused primarily on writing skills. Many focus group participants addressed these issues. This faculty member’s comments are typical:

In a class of 240 students, . . . if we have only one writing assignment . . . essentially all we are doing is evaluating students based on the skills they come in with. We are not actually doing anything to teach the students how to write, nor are we establishing any type of baseline for students in terms of what they came in with and how you make progress from where you started.

There was consensus among the faculty that students lack adequate writing skills and need extensive work to build them, but the time-consuming nature of teaching writing and the difficulty of doing so in large courses makes this a difficult obstacle to overcome within the GEP.

Large Classes

Faculty expressed considerable concern about the difficulty of achieving desired outcomes related to communication skills (especially writing) and critical analysis in classes of more than 50 students. They do not expect, however, that the answer lies in creating more small GEP courses. Faculty understand that small courses require extensive resources, including faculty to teach them.

Recognition and Reward for Teaching in the GEP

Each group discussed “disincentives” for teaching GEP courses at UI, mostly focused on the University’s recognition and reward system for tenure track faculty.

One faculty member asserted that “there’s a disincentive in that [GEP courses] tend to be big. If the idea of [GE] is communication, then that is a difficult task. And the [University’s] administrators don’t recognize how much work it is to teach one of these courses.” Another echoed those comments: “There is a disincentive. Teaching [GEP courses] is a different kind of work than the ‘research and publications’ enterprise that we are in . . . . The University needs to recognize the struggle between the research and publication mission and the teaching mission.” In response to that comment, another faculty member said, “We’ve lost people because of this disconnect.”

Faculty, in other words, see a tension between the University’s focus on research and its teaching mission, with rewards and recognition going more readily to outstanding research faculty than to excellent teachers within the GEP.

Organization of the Curriculum

Faculty pinpointed the organization of the GEP curriculum as another obstacle to
achieving its desired outcomes. One faculty member commented:

I think the list of categories seems a little bizarre. It feels too specific to me . . .
Historical perspectives feels like a subcategory to one of these broader categories.
So does rhetoric. interpretation of literature feels like it should be an option under humanities . . . So the list feels like it combines specifics and categories.

Another noted, “I think [the GEP curriculum] is very difficult to understand. I think if there were a way to simplify it that makes logical sense . . . it would make far more sense to students and to me. We all find it enormously cumbersome.”

Strategies for Achieving Intended Outcomes

The focus group interview questions also elicited descriptions of effective GEP practices. Some instructors have found ways to overcome the problems presented by large course sections with creative teaching strategies such as “one-minute” in-class papers, or with the use of technology, such as online assignments and class participation and communication using “clickers” (audience response devices, addressed further in the “Environments and Resources for Learning” section of this self-study).

Employer Perspectives

Employer Interviews

Subcommittee members interviewed 13 employers who typically recruit students from UI and other Midwestern colleges and universities, without specifying any particular liberal arts and sciences major. The subcommittee chose interviewees who:

Had some prior association with the Pomerantz Career Center or with subcommittee members

Had general knowledge of the UI philosophy of general education requirements

Were associated with the local office of an organizational entity that has national or international expanse, or were professionally integrated into national professional networks

Came from firms requiring a bachelor’s degree as a minimum educational requirement

Appendix II-C provides additional detail about the subcommittee’s approach to these interviews.

General Comments

The employers commented, in general, that applicants with baccalaureate degrees who have general education experience are notably different from applicants trained in community colleges, or those with an educational background based on an array of technical courses. More specifically, the employers volunteered their observations about the high quality of UI graduates they interview and hire, in terms of the eight GEP desired learning outcomes.

Every interviewee said in some unequivocal manner that all of the eight desired learning outcomes matter in hiring and promotion. A retail manager from an international corporation, for example, says “I could map your eight [learning outcomes] with the list of priorities we have for training our corporate leaders [management positions].”

A public safety director said, “We prefer college graduates; the level of maturity,
perspective, intellectual capacity from these applicants is night and day compared with those trained only in technical skills.”

**Communication and Critical Thinking Skills**

All interviewees ranked communication skills and critical thinking skills as their first and second priorities, though the order differed among them.

A retail employer said about communication skills, “I am responsible for answering impromptu and often highly consequential requests from the media about a product or service. I cannot duck the question and I have to respond with information that is accurate, timely, and confronts the problem or complaint.” An example of such a scenario might be fielding a question about a stocked product that enters the news as defective or dangerous.

Writing and public speaking were repeatedly mentioned as essential for law enforcement personnel: “Officers must be able to write clear, concise, complete, and compelling accident and crime reports in order to meet prosecutor (or plaintiff) and magistrate requirements.”

Employers made many comments about critical thinking as well. Managers in a corporation have to be able to “get to the bottom of problems” quickly, for example. Police officers (or public employees) have to be able to “connect the dots.”

**Comments in Workplace Context**

It is interesting to note statements employers made about each of the learning outcomes in the context of their respective workplaces:

*Critical thinking:* “I see that as problem solving, getting to the root cause. If you have that skill, you communicate better, you understand processes, you can improve conflict resolution, you know how to develop labor pools” (corporation, manufacturing).

*Communication skills:* “The majority of our business depends on communication. This is communication over the phone or e-mail, and our employees have to know how to communicate effectively without visual cues” (corporation).

*Understanding of world complexity:* All but one of the corporate firms whose representatives we interviewed are currently developing international offices; hence, international skills (foreign language, cultural awareness, knowledge of different political economies) are salient. “You wouldn’t think it was so, but our officers frequently encounter situations where they must be aware of laws and customs of foreign countries pertaining to driving, use of mandated auto safety devices, and family interaction norms [speaking specifically of issues associated with migrants from Latin America, Southeast and East Asia, and Eastern Europe]” (recruitment and training of public safety officers).

*Appreciation of diversity:* “Our people have to be able to live and be effective outside their comfort zone” (corporation; philanthropic organization). “Much of our work is done in teams; teams must bring together and thrive on diversity” (corporation). Two representatives of large corporations described major diversity initiatives in recruitment and training (both to enlarge and refine labor pools and to develop adequately sensitivity to changing audiences and markets).
Understanding of scientific inquiry: “All our employees must be able to read and evaluate all kinds of media that purport to be true. They have to sort out the wheat from the chaff” (corporation).

Social responsibility: “We raise money in a wide variety of ways. But a big emphasis now is to alert students to philanthropy as a basic life responsibility; giving back to the community” (philanthropic organization). “All our employees must be committed to and in kind give back to the community, e.g., Big Brothers, Big Sisters, etc.” (corporation).

Appreciation of the arts: “My dream is for every one of your students to have the opportunity to attend live artistic events” (philanthropic organization). “The arts are big for us. We give a lot of money each year to support artistic endeavors, and we have to know what we are doing” (corporation).

Life of the mind: “The life of the mind is terribly important, in ways that may not be obvious to you. This is very, very important to us. We look for intellectual curiosity; people eager to learn. We want people who are constantly asking, ‘why?’” (corporation).

Conclusions—Perceptions of the General Education Program

The results of the General Education Program (GEP) student survey indicate that students perceive each General Education (GE) area as doing especially well in achieving at least one of the desired learning outcomes, which suggests that the distributive model is efficacious. Respondents perceive that the GE areas contribute more to their growth in critical thinking skills than to their growth in communication skills, however—a finding that deserves further study.

Faculty support the intended outcomes of the GEP but identify several obstacles to achieving them, including challenges related to teaching communication skills, especially in large classes; perceptions that teaching GEP courses is not valued sufficiently by the University; and a lack of logic in the naming and organization of the GE areas.

The responses of the employers interviewed, with their consistent emphasis on the value of general education learning outcomes, seem to mediate the presumption that the academy and the market are very separate cultures. Compelling writing, critical thinking, and appreciation of differences are at the core of the liberal education tradition. Successful products and services require critical thinking; institutional survival depends on the successful communication of ideas; and the necessity of group work in these settings requires individuals to practice mutual respect. One high-ranking labor strategist in an international corporation expressed what drives that organization’s hiring in a way that seems to encompass regard for all eight general education learning outcomes: “We hire the whole person.”

Summary and Conclusions—Common Academic Experiences

Signs of Success

The University does many things well in its General Education Program.

The undergraduate colleges do a good job of cooperating with one another to share GEP courses and requirements. Students not accepted into one of the professional colleges will, in many cases, find themselves well prepared to enter a major in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) instead.
CLAS provides strong oversight for the GEP, and has implemented a structure to ensure its quality by requiring documented adherence to the GEP’s goals, consistency of course offerings, and quality teaching. The College and the University also manage GEP enrollment issues to ensure that enough seats are available in first-year GEP courses.

Course offerings in the GEP change frequently, allowing a flexible curriculum. Although not every GEP course is offered every semester, they are offered consistently, allowing students many choices in almost every field of undergraduate study. At the same time, the rhetoric and interpretation of literature requirements provide a stable counterpoint to curriculum flexibility, creating a common academic experience for nearly all first-year students.

The results of the GEP student survey suggest that the distributive model is working well. Employers speak well of the education students receive at The University of Iowa, in part because of the GEP’s strengths.

**Moving Forward**

The UI GEP is ambitious, and its many detailed criteria and intended outcomes can be difficult for students and faculty to understand or to see as achievable. Faculty find the names of the GE areas unclear and inconsistent, and the organization confusing. Our study suggests that students agree.

The University should identify and implement improvements to the General Education Program, with the goal of creating a more focused and integrated program that consistently achieves all of its desired learning outcomes consistently. This effort has begun, and will continue as described in the “Initiatives for Progress” section at the end of this special emphasis self-study.