

General Education Program Review 2017–2018

Executive Summary

In March of 2004, the Oakland University Senate approved ‘A Proposal for the Renewal of General Education at Oakland University.’ Within the proposal the General Education Committee (GEC) is given responsibility for periodically reviewing the general education program to ensure continuous quality of the general education curriculum, following the guidelines and process of review used for other academic programs. The executive summary and recommendations that follow are the culmination of this review.

During the 2011–12 academic year, the GEC solicited feedback about the general education program from three key constituent groups: academic advisers, students, and faculty. The purpose of this effort was to better understand what these stakeholders believed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the general education program and to identify areas of improvement. Faculty were surveyed again in 2017–18 to understand how their views of the general education program have changed since 2012 and whether they believe the goals of the program align with the University’s values and students’ needs. The complete analysis is available in two full-length complementary reports, *General Education Program Review 2017–2018* and *General Education Assessment Review 2017–2018*.

Program Strengths

- Both faculty and students identify strengths of the general education program as developing foundational knowledge and/or skills, providing a well-rounded educational experience, and broadening students’ perspectives.
- Many students appreciated the explorations components, indicating that exploring various areas of study, particularly for students with undecided majors, was valuable.
- Faculty have widespread agreement that skills-based goals (critical thinking, information literacy, communication, diversity, and a sense of values) are extremely or very important for the general education program.

Program Challenges

- Faculty, students, and academic advisers identify a lack of understanding of the program and its importance as a major weakness of the general education program.
- Students struggle to understand the relevance of the general education program and suggest more emphasis on professional skills. Faculty echo these views and identify communication and writing skills in particular as an area where OU students need more focus.
- Both faculty and students feel that the general education program has too many or complicated requirements, and the connection between the general education program and the major program requirements is unclear.
- Furthermore, students and academic advisers recommended more flexibility in how general education requirements are met (particularly for transfer students).
- An additional challenge for faculty is general dissatisfaction with general education assessment.

Assessment Strengths

- Over half of faculty who participated in the most recent assessment cycle felt like the process yielded useful results. Many indicated that the overall process was useful, informative, or resulted positive changes to instruction or assessment.
- Faculty identified many successful assessment practices including the use of student writing (essay questions, research papers, performance reviews) to demonstrate understanding and mastery of general education learning outcomes and using standardized assessments in courses with multiple sections.
- Departmental-level processes such as faculty discussions of the results, assigning a departmental general education contact, forming a departmental committee, and developing/following an assessment plan were considered valuable assessment practices.

Assessment Challenges

- Competing demands of faculty and compliance with assessment continues to be a challenge. Many faculty express that the process is too time consuming, not useful, or an administrative burden.
- Faculty who serve on the GEC and review assessment reports point to the overall inconsistent quality of reports received for general education courses. Some of the concerns relate to the limited view of student outcomes demonstrated in many of the reports, including an over-reliance on multiple-choice questions and not enough explanation of how departments intend to use the information learned through assessment.
- Implementing and coordinating assessment can be challenging for departments with general education courses – particularly when standardizing an assessment instrument and evaluating the results for multiple course sections given the differences in faculty teaching styles, assignments, and topics of focus in a given general education course.
- Some faculty struggle with assessment measurement and design, including aligning the general education student learning outcomes with the course and developing instruments that measure the learning outcomes.
- The learning outcomes in particular are a point of contention for many faculty because they are perceived as difficult to measure, vague, or too general.
- Student preparedness is identified as an issue impacting assessment, with faculty mentioning that variation (mainly in student writing skills) complicates the extent to which students demonstrate and faculty are able to measure course competencies.

GEC Recommendations

Addressing Campus-Wide Confusion over the General Education Program

Background: Faculty, students, and academic advisers struggle with understanding the relevance and purpose of the general education program. While faculty, students, and academic advisers struggle to understand the importance of the general education program to OU students' education, the importance of the cross-cutting capacities (critical thinking, effective communication, information literacy, and social awareness) is clearer to students, faculty, and employers. Additionally, many majors already include these skills in their discipline's learning outcomes, providing a stronger link between general education and the major for students, who may fail to understand the importance of the general education program to their education.

Each general education course is required to address one of the knowledge areas (foundations, explorations, integrations) and enhance students' abilities in at least one of four cross-cutting capacities but these capacities have not been clearly defined, nor are they systematically assessed. The relative importance of these skills for the general education program is diminished in favor of the area-specific learning outcomes, which are the focus of our current assessment efforts. Most departments have established processes, procedures, and instruments that they use to assess general education student learning outcomes (GESLOs) specific to their knowledge areas and have not emphasized skills- and aptitudes-based assessment.

Recommendation: the GEC should develop a series of informational and discussion-based workshops to introduce and promote the general education learning outcomes. These workshops should target department chairs and program directors, faculty, advisers, and students.

Recommendation: the cross-cutting capacities should be renamed as "University Learning Outcomes" (ULOs) and reframed as central to the general education program (see below). To help achieve this, departments could be encouraged to assess the ULOs in their general education courses, rather than the GESLOs associated with each of the discipline-specific areas.

Recommendation: To ease the transition from emphasizing GESLOs to university learning outcomes, the GEC should pilot a process in which departments with general education courses have the option of assessing either the GESLOs (knowledge-based) or ULOs (skills-based). Recruitment for the pilot assessment program could be facilitated by asking programs proposing new general education courses and those programs rewriting existing courses (intro to biology, intro to psychology, and calculus I) if they wish to participate. A call for other participants will go out in fall 2018.

Recommendation: Offer a training/workshop for faculty participating in the pilot (pre-implementation) and a debriefing (post-implementation) to understand what worked well and adjust where needed.

Incorporating Flexibility into the General Education Program

Background: The Knowledge Applications (KA) requirement was originally designed to encourage students to explore the ways in which knowledge can be applied in areas outside their own field of study and to provide them with opportunities to compare the research methods and practices used in their major with those in another field. Many students and faculty do not understand this requirement, and many students consider it to be punitive. Additionally, students have requested more flexibility with how general education requirements are met including more options for courses that can be taken.

The challenges to assessing Knowledge Applications courses (described in the next section), may be limiting the number of courses proposed by departments to meet the Knowledge Applications requirement.

Recommendation: Build more flexibility into the Knowledge Applications requirement, and allow any course outside the student's major with a general education pre-prerequisite to count for the KA requirement.

Maintaining General Education Course List

Background: In developing degree plans, students may anticipate taking a particular course to meet one of their requirements. If the course that they plan to take is included on the approved list of general education courses but is not offered regularly, student progress towards meeting degree requirements for graduation may be affected.

Recommendation: Communicate with chairs in departments with general education courses that have not been offered regularly and request information about the status of the course. If it is not anticipated that the course will be revived, GEC will request removal of the general education designation from the course.

Addressing Issues with Assessment

Background: Faculty who serve on the GEC and review assessment reports point to the overall inconsistent quality of reports received for general education courses. Many of the assessment reports submitted for general education courses offer a limited view of student outcomes (percentage of students answering multiple-choice questions correctly) and not enough explanation of how departments intend to use the information learned through assessment. These issues with the assessment reports speak to the difficulty some departments have with finding the time, resources, and faculty to assess their general education offerings. The many competing demands on faculty time and compliance with assessment continues to be a challenge, and many faculty express that the process is too time consuming, not useful enough, or an administrative burden.

In particular, Knowledge Applications (KA) and U.S. Diversity (USD) courses are challenging to assess at the course level, creating a significant burden on the units. KA courses may include a mix of students taking the course to meet general education requirements and others who are not. Faculty who are tasked with assessing the learning outcomes may not know which students need to be evaluated or they may not be aware of the pre-requisite coursework that their course is meant to build upon. For a course to meet general education requirements for USD, only a portion of the course curriculum needs to be devoted to such topics. Therefore, conducting a course-level assessment for USD courses presents an administrative burden on faculty. These challenges resulted in particularly low assessment compliance for KA and USD courses during the first assessment cycle, with only 16% of KA courses and only 36% of USD courses assessed.

Recommendation: course-based assessment of knowledge applications and diversity should be replaced with indirect measures, for example, using data already collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Diverse Learning Environments (DLE). NSSE includes relevant items that would allow for comparisons over time and between students in their first year and senior year to estimate the impact of general education courses on measures of integrative learning for KA courses and for understanding people of other backgrounds (economic, racial/ethnic, political, religious, nationality, etc.) for USD courses.

Recommendation: Reducing the assessment requirements for KA may make it possible for departments to offer additional KAs, thus increasing flexibility for students.

Recommendation: one way to move departments towards a more robust assessment approach is to offer feedback and guidance to faculty who rely on multiple-choice, knowledge-focused assessment, helping these colleagues to explore alternative or supplemental assessment approaches that emphasize the application of knowledge or critical thinking skills. Additional resources may need to be available to support departments with large general education programs, to aid them in developing more robust assessments.

Recommendation: The GEC is responsible for approving new course proposals, reviewing petitions of exception (POEs) and transfer courses, and reviewing assessment reports. Given this work, and the need to pilot new assessment measures and assist programs with their assessment processes, an *ad hoc* General Education Assessment Committee should be created for 2018–20 to direct the pilot studies, review assessment reports, and develop a strategic plan for future implementation. This committee, which would include representatives from the GEC and University Assessment Committee (UAC), could focus on helping new courses develop more robust, but achievable, assessment methods in their proposed courses and on aiding existing courses on improving their assessments. Members of this committee might provide workshops on general education course assessment and models of effective, robust assessment methods.

Reframing the Cross-Cutting Capacities as University Learning Outcomes (ULO)

Because the cross-cutting capacities (CCC) are skills- and aptitude-based, faculty, advisers, students, and employers may have an easier time understanding the central role these capacities play in OU students' education. Renaming the CCCs as University Learning Outcomes (ULO) demonstrates the importance of these capacities at OU. Thus, the GEC proposes that the CCCs be reframed and redefined as ULOs.

ULO: Critical Thinking

Oakland University students will develop into critical thinkers capable of comprehensively exploring issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion. Critical thinking may be demonstrated through an OU student's ability to:

- gather and assess relevant information using abstractions for effective interpretation,
- arrive at well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, and test them against relevant criteria, and
- recognize and assess the assumptions, implications, and consequences of alternative systems of thought.

Critical thinkers are also capable of

- raising vital questions and problems, and formulating those questions clearly, and
- collaborating with others to achieve solutions to complex problems.

The critical thinking requirement can be demonstrated through a student's ability to handle formal reasoning and through more complex assignments that require OU students to analyze or critique information.

ULO: Effective Communication

OU students will become effective communicators who analyze rhetorical situations--including audience, purpose, and context--adapt their discourse to diverse genres and media, treat their sources and source material ethically, and meet the expectations of a variety of discourse communities in the academy and beyond.

ULO: Information Literacy

As information literate learners, OU students will develop an integrated set of abilities that allow them to reflectively discover information, understand how that information is produced and valued, and use information ethically to create new knowledge and participate as lifelong learners in society.

ULO: Social Awareness/Responsibility

OU students recognize themselves as members of multiple communities, constituted by their participation in the classroom, civic institutions, societal conversations, physical environments, and within increasingly-global contexts. OU students who are socially aware may become generous citizens who demonstrate their intercultural competence and consider the ethical implications of their words, actions, and engagement with or indifference to these communities.

Additional Points for Future Consideration

Faculty and students may be unaware of the relationship between the various general education program components.

Recommendation: develop a visual to depict the relationship between ULOs (formerly cross-cutting capacities) and knowledge areas to convey interdependence (umbrella example).

There may be reluctance to adopt an assessment model emphasizing the more skills-based over the more discipline-specific general education student learning outcomes (GESLOs) because of long established processes, procedures, instruments, etc.

Recommendation: the GEC should support departments with courses in each knowledge explorations area that are interested in rewriting the GESLOs for their knowledge area to, instead, integrate the skills-based ULOs.

The committee raised issues with the quality of assessment reports from general education courses.

Recommendations: one of the recommendations from the faculty survey was to transfer responsibility for assessment reviews to the UAC, which adheres to a rigorous review process and provides recommendations to programs on ways to improve assessment.

Recommendation: the GEC should consider incentives as a way to improve the quality of general education assessment, similar to the UAC assessment award offered for program assessment.

Recommendation: other ways to address quality of general education assessment involve considering GEC's role in revoking general education credentials from courses that do not comply with assessment, that submit poor quality reports, or that do not provide evidence of curriculum or instructional revisions in subsequent assessment reports.

Recommendation: one way to ease the assessment burden on departments is to create a survey with a standard format/questions administered to students at the end of each general education course to assess the cross-cutting capacities. The results of this instrument could be aggregated to the course-level and shared with various stakeholders [department, college/school, GEC, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA)] for further analysis. This indirect student assessment should be paired with faculty feedback about course objectives and assignments and how the course facilitates student attainment of the learning outcomes. This approach could be implemented by

- Modeling the assessment process used by the School of Engineering and Computer Science
- Pairing Likert-scale type questions with open-ended questions where students could reflect on their experiences in the class
- Encouraging student participation (e.g. assignment points, attendance points, earlier grade availability)