

GE Task Force Report Appendix G-6

General Education, the Faculty, and the College Council

St. Olaf's general education curriculum (GE) is the property of the faculty of the college, who authored it, oversee it, and teach the courses that satisfy its requirements. Changes to GE can only be made by the faculty. The College Council is made up of representatives from almost every part of the college, and has heard reports from many offices, each concerned with the overall vitality of the college. Any strategic recommendations regarding GE that originate with the council are informed by the diversity of perspectives represented on the council, and may provide useful guidance to the faculty.

General Education at St. Olaf College

A general education curriculum poses bold claims: these are competencies a student must have, and things a student must know about, to claim a place among educated women and men, to be connected to the histories of our communities, to be equipped for moral reflection, to be competent to join in the controversies and projects of public life, to be ready for a life of worth and service. A decade ago St. Olaf undertook a rare and courageous venture. We developed a plan for GE by discussion among the entire faculty, not by adopting the vision of a dean or committee. The effort to articulate and commit to the vision of general education now crystallized in the "guidelines" for each GE requirement was a remarkable achievement. We characterized the contents of GE itself, rather than merely parcel out requirements among departments. Consequently, our curriculum rises above departmental domains and focuses on subject matter defined by the guidelines. Not only does this approach present a more realistic view of knowledge, it has made general education the province of the entire community. The process of securing GE attributes prompts healthy reflection about the purposes behind course proposals and, further, prompts healthy interdepartmental discussions about subjects among faculty colleagues. The design of GE puts a concern for the quality of student learning in the forefront. The college should celebrate and protect these things.

At the same time, since the implementation of GE the circumstances of the college have changed in important ways (and the work continues to change). Students, faculty, and administrators all on occasion voice frustration about GE based on loosely formed hunches and intuitions (see attachment). Any many express uncertainty about the mechanism through which the college might amend GE if we chose to.

Strategic Planning Proposals

Cherishing the virtues of GE, and mindful of purported problems in the curriculum,

1. The college should adopt means for investigating community concerns about GE in order to substantiate or dismiss them.
2. The college should clarify the lines of responsibility for overseeing GE (e.g., what are the appropriate roles for the Associate Dean, GEC, CEPC, the 5 Faculties?)
3. The college should adopt regular, publicly recognized means for proposing, reviewing, and adopting changes to GE in order to preserve its vitality.

The examples of concerns that prompt calls for changes in GE, together with typical suggestions for revisions.

1. Because the overall size of the faculty (total teaching FTE) and the overall size of the curriculum (total section offered per year) have decreased, GE now occupies a larger proportion of the faculty's time and energy, and a larger proportion of the total curriculum, than it did when first implemented. How large a proportion of the total curriculum is GE? Is it too large? If we decide it is, should we seek to reduce the proportion of GE teaching relative to teaching guided by majors and by other faculty interests? If so, how? Should we research the effects of varying class sizes on the quality of learning and implement much larger and/or much smaller courses where appropriate?
2. Students perceive GE as hard to accomplish, both because they see it as large and because they claim difficulty registering for suitable courses. Is GE in fact hard to accomplish? Should we address student perceptions that it is difficult to find appropriate GE courses, whether by

- improving registration procedures, by offering more courses, by reducing the total size of the curriculum, or by effective advising.
3. Students declare that the contrasting intentions of students in courses that are required for majors, but also fulfill GE, undermine the quality of the classroom experience. Should we seek to minimize the overlap of major courses and GE courses?
 4. Despite the faculty's best intentions to the contrary, the apparatus of identifying courses by GE attributes has focused students' attention on a wooden process of finding courses just to fulfill requirements. Should we invest more heavily in advising to increase the likelihood that students choose courses for intrinsic values, not blind counting of GE attributes?
 5. As the world into which students graduate changes, there are new judgments about what is essential to general education: some elements now deemed crucial may be missing, while some current requirements may be less needful than they were 10 years ago. Without returning to square one, should we assess faculty satisfaction with the completeness of GE: Are there elements missing? Are there superfluous elements? For example, is "media literacy" a "foundational" competence in a media saturated age?
 6. GE requirements for NST that specify courses in traditional departments do not reflect the increasingly interdisciplinary character of modern science, nor do they adequately reflect the importance of grasping the social context of science.