

**Principles of a
Revised General Education Curriculum for the
University of Kentucky
(derived from USP Reform Steering Committee proposal)**

1. *The foundational essence of general education will shift more toward learning experiences that produce understanding of the process of inquiry and help students develop critical thinking skills than acquiring specific knowledge content.*

We should intentionally set knowing how to learn and think as an essential goal of a general education program. At its best, general education establishes a foundation for critical and thoughtful approaches to solving problems and strengthening intellectual development. Beyond the texture of disciplinary problems and issues, the general intended outcome is the development of evidence-based thinkers; students capable of understanding what critical argument demands and what it offers as a way of understanding ourselves, others, and the world around us.

While content knowledge is both desirable and necessary, ensuring that students acquire a deep understanding of discipline-specific knowledge cannot be the primary goal of general education, and is best left to elective course work and the major requirements. Further, the revolutionary changes in the access to information since the adoption of the current USP require that students become adept at organizing, processing, and being discriminating consumers of information.

2. *The general education curriculum will consist of no more than the equivalent of thirty credit hours of course work.*

The current University Studies Program imposes a minimum of forty credit hours of course work, or one-third of the total credits in typical undergraduate degree programs. This said, it is also true that a significant portion of the required course work in USP, notably the pre-major courses that satisfy the disciplinary-based requirements, can also be applied to course work in the major. This is the practice of having courses “double-dip” as credits in the major and USP. However, pre-major courses are often designed, as they should be, to emphasize the content knowledge of a specific discipline, sometimes at the expense of developing the broader learning objectives of general education. There are inherent tensions, which are often difficult to reconcile, between the goals of a course in the service of the major field on the one hand, and general education, on the other hand.

Courses approved for inclusion in a revised general education program will need to meet, as an essential goal, the approved learning outcomes of the appropriate constituent element of a revised general education curriculum. If, on the whole, a revised curriculum no longer allows students to use pre-major or major courses to satisfy general education requirements, it would be unnecessarily burdensome for students to be expected to satisfy more than thirty hours of general education course work. Besides, some general education goals should be incorporated into all four years of study.

3. *A revised curriculum will intentionally identify and strengthen the connections between coursework in general education and the student’s major field of study.*

In the current USP many goals of the general education requirements are set up to be met in independent courses detached from those that satisfy disciplinary requirements. There is less intentional connection between general skills courses and those taught within the major. The recent change in the writing program, which encourages development of writing-intensive courses within majors, underscores the value of linking the experience of the major with general education. More possibilities for interconnections exist, and we should strive to achieve them.

4. *A revised general education curriculum will be designed to smooth the transition from high school to a research university, and include a first-year curriculum with significant involvement of full-time faculty.*

The broad goal of the first-year curriculum should be to provide students a set of integrated learning experiences that facilitate the successful transition to UK by highlighting the academic strengths of a research university and acculturating undergraduates through common study in the discourse and practice of rigorous intellectual inquiry. The first-year curriculum will be anchored by courses that (1) ask students to explore the epistemologies that

inform and shape the nature of intellectual inquiry within the three broad knowledge areas - the arts and humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural and physical sciences; (2) are taught as far as possible by full-time faculty members; and (3) provide a common experience for all first-year students, one that is premised on intellectual engagement and addresses forthrightly issues attendant to the transition from high school to college.

5. *A revised general education curriculum will have an explicit focus on written communication and quantitative reasoning skills.*

Our students need a grounding in logic, understand the rudiments of probability, be able to recognize statistical patterns, model formulas, and deal with statistically-based hypotheses throughout their lives. Similarly, they need a skill set that enables them to comprehend basic quantitative data, equips them to understand fundamental issues in fiscal and monetary policy, and provides them with the analytical tools for managing their personal finances. To that end, the revised curriculum should emphasize the components of quantitative literacy over mathematical computation and algorithms.

In a similar vein, it is clear that high school graduates who attend the University of Kentucky still need additional help with expository and persuasive writing. The recent change in USP, which incorporates writing-intensive courses in the majors as a second-tier writing requirement, should be regularized, rigorously assessed and improved.

6. *The general education curriculum will lay the foundation for effective citizenship in a pluralistic society and an increasingly interconnected world.*

We must help our students understand the contours of the society in which they will live and work as productive citizens. That understanding requires reflection and analysis of what it means to be a member of our changing society; it also demands a nuanced appreciation for how that meaning differs depending on who we are. Appropriate courses will adopt multidisciplinary perspectives and include both historical and contemporary analysis of institutions and social organizations, of nation-states and transnational affairs. The demands of productive citizenship require students to understand the meaning of cultural competency and the value of human diversity. As a tool for social success, it is important that our graduates appreciate the role that culture plays in influencing individual behavior, attitudes, and beliefs.

Furthermore each graduate must be introduced to the life of the mind as it informs moral decision-making, ethical conduct and personal responsibility. Our task should be to help prepare them to deal effectively with situations of great complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability. Life does not always present itself as a problem to be *solved*; it often appears as a dilemma that must be *resolved*. In these situations, knowledge alone is inadequate. A graduate who has had little experience in thinking about moral dilemmas as a student is not prepared for the world she or he will inhabit.

7. *The curriculum will specify learning outcomes and the processes for the systematic assessment of those learning outcomes, and ongoing curricular improvement.*

The articulation of a comprehensive set of student learning outcomes is the necessary first step in the development of a new curriculum. This first imperative of curriculum development is no less true for general education than a program of study in an academic major. Only after we have decided what our students should master across the cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal dimensions of learning can we begin to fashion an effective assessment strategy. Indeed, the dialectical relationship between student learning outcomes and assessment is fully revealed when one poses an elemental assessment question, "Does our curriculum accomplish what it sets out to do?" Any viable general education proposal will assert what the curriculum sets out to do. The implementation of a comprehensive, systematic and ongoing set of assessment activities, designed to help us determine the efficacy of our general education curriculum, must then be an integral component of the implementation process that follows.