

Report and Recommendations: General Education at the University of Minnesota

Based on feedback from the University of Minnesota Strategic Plan, in Fall 2015 the Office of the Provost created a Liberal Education Pre-Planning Committee to determine if changes in the current requirements, established in 2008, should be considered. This committee hosted three campus-wide listening sessions and, based on these and additional feedback from the University community, determined that there was strong enough support for considering a redesign of the required curriculum for University of Minnesota undergraduates. The Liberal Education Redesign Committee (LERC), with twenty faculty (Appendix B) representing all undergraduate colleges, was appointed in fall 2017 by Provost Hanson. It began its deliberations by thinking creatively about what basic educational experiences were essential for a college graduate in the decade of the 2020s. Members looked closely at newly revised General Education and required curriculum at similar institutions and then gathered considerable data for U of M students including: patterns of course selection, demographics (e.g. by college, student admit type), and prior credit (e.g. AP, PSEO, and transfer credit). The LERC solicited comments from all undergraduate colleges, and the chair of the committee met in Spring 2019 with the Advising Steering Committee of staff advisors, the Vice Provost's Undergraduate Advisory Board, the Minnesota Student Association, the Faculty Consultative Committee, and others on request.

Members generally approved of the elements in the current LE curriculum and found them similar to those in other universities. At the same time, committee members identified some problematic aspects and agreed it would be useful to review all the requirements, reevaluate and update definitions, and discuss overall frameworks and requirements. The range of opinions was wide, with an advocate for a "genuine" liberal education required of all students and another advocate who recommended allowing individual faculty to determine course eligibility with likely most courses meeting a requirement. The committee spent considerable time discussing in detail the elements deemed essential and appropriate as introductory in each required category. Members discussed naming the required curriculum, and most agreed that General Education, which has become common parlance across the country, was uninspired but definitional.

Committee discussions were set against ongoing commentary about what various observers viewed as problematic within the current system. Quite early, members pointed out that the process of selecting and developing courses to meet requirements too often seems complex, confusing, and burdensome to students and faculty. For undergraduate students, the apparent

“matrix” seems to produce a check-list mentality as they try to match Designated Theme and Diversified Core courses in order to satisfy both categories (double counted courses). That often unnecessary search for efficiency distracts students from thinking more broadly about the possibilities in curriculum and identifying courses and topics that particularly interest them. Some committee members also commented that the current system establishes incentives for departments and faculty to design courses that satisfy both a Designated Theme and Diversified Core in order to recruit a large number of students into a select number of courses. For some faculty, courses satisfying a Core and a Theme feels comfortable but others would like to have a strong, singular focus without an incentive system that pushes toward dual identity. There were additional issues raised: was the current configuration among arts, humanities, and literature the right one; what was the best way to incorporate quantitative thinking and mathematics; how might ethics be integrated more fully throughout the four years and perhaps within the major; and what is needed to rethink the descriptions of required courses and, at the core of making final decisions about the framework, what is the right balance and number of credits if each course were to meet just one requirement? Some committee members also argued for more opportunities to teach collaborative courses across units, especially on issues of justice across geographical scales and engagement with diverse ways of knowing. Through often intense conversations, committee members reiterated their confidence in the strength of our faculty and the discernment of our students. They recommend a system that will allow and even encourage undergraduates to explore and learn about the multiple ways that knowledge is generated, disseminated, and critiqued. At the same time, the committee also sought to identify several key issues that the coming generation of students will need to address and that require informed analysis and critical thinking. The LERC wrestled with how to balance these elements and possibilities, and the resulting report is the product of negotiation and compromise among the dedicated and diverse group of faculty named in Appendix B.

Goals of the Proposed General Education Curriculum

The LERC faculty have been aspirational in hoping that the new curriculum will provide renewed attention to the goals of collegiate education. Renewal seems important in reconsidering a curriculum that has been largely in place for twenty-five years. The committee members observed that many of their concerns about essential elements in a university education are articulated in the Learning Outcomes, including the ability to identify and analyze complex issues, engage in problem solving, enhance communication skills, prepare for civic engagement, understand the ethical dimensions of their actions, and participate in conversations about the factors that frame their identities and those around them. Moreover, many of the descriptions also incorporate pedagogical goals as emphasized by faculty representing those disciplinary clusters.

The core curriculum is intended as an introduction to the work of the disciplines and the classic and current scholarship produced at this university and elsewhere. Such research reaches into history to explore the information and decisions that have shaped the society in which we engage and continues to do so. It also opens up into critical issues that require attention in contemporary society. The Report identifies three categories of requirements:

- 1) Fundamentals: writing, quantitative reasoning and mathematical thinking, and ethical thinking
- 2) Disciplinary Inquiry: an understanding of the importance of disciplinary “ways of knowing” or, expressed another way, “how we know what we know”
- 3) Thematic Inquiry: investigation of themes that address critical issues that have shaped society and will shape the future both locally and globally.

Overview of the Proposed Curriculum

An important goal is to provide a more clear, flexible, and straight-forward set of requirements that invites exploration across the curriculum and focused attention to the central elements in each course. The recommended General Education curriculum both identifies the importance of breadth in university studies and highlights issues that often transcend disciplinary investigation. Thematic Inquiry courses, with a singular issue focus, will be encouraged to use interdisciplinary materials and contacts. In thinking about fundamentals, the committee believed that the new category of overlay subjects -- writing, quantitative reasoning and mathematics, and ethics – benefits from being taught contextually.

As noted previously, the committee struggled with how to balance Disciplinary Inquiry with Thematic Inquiry and concluded that broader faculty input was necessary. For this reason, the committee is providing [three proposed plans for consideration](#). All three plans require students to complete 4 credits of first-year writing and a total of 8 courses between Disciplinary Inquiry and Thematic Inquiry. The table below summarizes the differences between the three proposals. In Plans A and B the faculty will determine whether a student must take a course in six Disciplinary Inquiry categories (Plan A) or whether it is more important for students to engage in an additional Thematic Inquiry course and choose to drop one Disciplinary Inquiry category (Plan B). Plan C presents students with the choice to drop one requirement from **either** the Disciplinary Inquiry category or Thematic Inquiry category.

Proposal	Emphasis	Disciplinary Inquiry	Thematic Inquiry
Plan A	Disciplinary Inquiry	6 courses (20 credits)	2 courses (6 credits)
Plan B	Thematic Inquiry	5 courses (16-17 credits)	3 courses (9 credits)
Plan C	Student Choice	5-6 courses (16-20 credits)	2-3 courses (6-9 credits)

Fundamentals

The committee's recommendations reinforce the current requirement with first year writing and four writing intensive courses. This overlay of writing led the committee to think further about the importance of quantitative thinking and recommends that it too become a requirement that may overlay other subjects (parallel to writing intensive courses) in a category of quantitative reasoning and mathematics. The third fundamental, which students seemed very interested in pursuing early and as they worked toward graduation and future careers, was ethics. The committee recommends that ethics be suffused throughout the curriculum and particularly emphasized in thematic courses. The goal is for students to encounter ethics as an overlay in advanced courses, especially in their major so that they can anticipate issues that may arise as they take internships and move into the post-graduate careers. Fundamentals courses may overlay with any undergraduate course.

Disciplinary Inquiry

The committee, initially coordinating through subcommittees, systematically worked to revise and update the descriptions for Disciplinary Inquiry courses. The intention is to eliminate what seemed to become a detailed check list of requirements and to move toward evaluations that are attuned to the course content and methods in ways that capture the intended spirit of the disciplinary category without being overly prescriptive. These courses generally highlight "ways of knowing" or, perhaps, "how we know what we know." Having a comprehensive description that foregrounds the methods as well as content is intended to encourage more faculty to identify their courses as part of the General Education curriculum.

The committee proposes six required Disciplinary Inquiry courses to offer breadth following a familiar emphasis on three areas of inquiry that have in recent history structured higher education: humanities, sciences, and social sciences. These groupings help to clarify the new choice among arts, humanities, and literature as distinctive areas.

- 1) Arts, Humanities, and Literature (2 courses, representing 2 from 3 categories)
- 2) Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences (2 courses, one in each category)
- 3) Social Sciences and History (2 courses, one in each category)

These categories are identified but with a recognition that there is now considerable overlap and interdisciplinarity within and among the disciplinary divisions. While departments are often identified with particular required categories, the intention of the descriptions is to allow courses in contiguous areas that meet the criteria to be eligible. Faculty teaching these courses will be asked to provide statements that explicitly indicate how their course content and assignments meet the intentions of those descriptions.

The intention is to avoid having a bullet-point list of categories and instead to have groups of faculty with some related expertise evaluate whether each course proposed meets the intention of the specific breadth category. It is essential that the courses are clearly intended for General Education and that they capture the spirit of the description provided.

Thematic Inquiry

Thematic Inquiry courses address contemporary issues deemed critical for students to understand as global citizens in the twenty-first century. These courses complement Disciplinary Inquiry courses by encouraging students to identify and investigate critical concerns in contemporary society. Very often these issues require engaging multiple perspectives and, whether taught by more than one faculty member or not, will likely be interdisciplinary. Because these topics are deeply embedded in social concerns, they will address the ethical issues raised by behaviors and policies. All of the Thematic Inquiry categories are important and students are encouraged to consider courses that will challenge them as well as those addressing concerns in which they already have some interest. Four themes are identified and students will select from among them.

- 1) Diversity, Power and Justice
- 2) Global Perspectives
- 2) Technology and Social Transformations
- 4) Environment and Sustainability

[NOTE: Still under discussion is the issue of oversight and evaluation. However, there has been considerable discussion and some possibilities are emerging: All faculty teaching thematic inquiry courses will participate in a discussion forum with others planning to teach a similar theme. The purpose is to share syllabi, discuss sources and approaches to the material, and perhaps find colleagues with whom to interact during the semester in or beyond the individual courses. The Office of the Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education will establish potential times for the initial meetings. This option is also open to those teaching disciplinary course as well. To be a course of record for General Education in any category, the teaching faculty must present a paragraph explaining how the course meets the description and provide a proposed syllabus.]

Significant Changes from the Current Curriculum

- Distinguishing Fundamental topics that can overlay other courses (Quantitative Reasoning & Mathematics; Ethics; Writing Intensive)
- Singly identifying Arts, Humanities, & Literature; students to choose two of the three
- Redefining four Thematic Inquiry courses

- Ending the practice of dual identity courses (practice of double-counting courses)
- Requiring a total of 8 courses between Disciplinary and Thematic Inquiry
- Emphasizing that each required course has a clear identity
- Adopting category descriptions that capture the spirit of their intent without being overly prescriptive.

Ongoing Discussions:

How to manage the total number of credits (and courses).

How to a balance the distribution/breath category with thematic inquiry.

APPENDIX A: REQUIREMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Fundamentals

Writing

The University of Minnesota's writing requirement has two components: First-Year Writing and Writing Intensive courses.

- **First-Year Writing:** All students continue to be expected to complete the first-year writing requirement (WRIT 1301, 1401, or equivalent) within their first two semesters of enrollment. First-year writing gives incoming students the fundamental writing skills demanded in university study. The Department of Writing Studies' purpose is to help emerging adults undertake university-level study of writing and develop the habits of mind and skills that will make them independent learners. Carefully designed experiences in reading and writing allow students to reflect seriously on the ways advanced literacy skills lead to success in college and in the many professions that accomplish much of their work through writing.
- **Writing Intensive:** In addition to the first-year writing requirement, students continue to be expected to complete four Writing Intensive (WI) courses. These courses help students understand what it means to write in various disciplines and the teaching faculty present evidence of the ways in which writing is incorporated into individual areas of investigation. Two of the four courses must be completed at the upper-division (3xxx or higher) level, and one of the two upper-division (3xxx or higher) courses must be within a student's major field of study.

Quantitative Reasoning and Mathematics

This requirement involves students in systematic formal reasoning through coursework including mathematics, statistics, computing, argumentation and related fields. These courses possess three key elements. First, they involve facility with a formal, symbolic language designed for logical discourse. Students use symbolic languages (beyond mere arithmetic computation) to propose verifiable arguments and explanations. Second, courses in quantitative literacy demonstrate the applicability of formal and mathematical reasoning in particular academic contexts. Many problems that arise in the everyday world can be modeled using formal symbolic reasoning. These elegant solutions to applied problems are necessary for a deeper understanding of the forces that continuously transform our world. Third, quantitative literacy courses engage students in communicating their formal reasoning processes. Communicating quantitative reasoning helps students form their ideas, and once they have developed confidence and consensus around their ideas, communication allows students to

take action through quantitative reasoning. Courses in quantitative literacy may attend to these three principles in varying proportions, but all courses should expose students to quantitative literacy as a creative endeavor and should develop students' confidence in using formal reasoning as a life skill.

Ethics

Understanding the fundamental importance of ethics is essential as students continually shape their personal and professional identities and character in relationship to their communities. Civic life and public engagement are not simply political activities; they inevitably encompass the everyday actions that individuals take in their personal, professional, and public lives. Ethics involves acquisition of insight into experiences that help us to make decisions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust—and to recognize the ambiguity inherent in many public problems. There are fundamental philosophical underpinnings to ethics as well as the practical ways in which ethics are part of decisions that affect the general population in their daily lives. Integrating ethics into academic majors (and anticipating future professions) will make the necessarily abstract discussions of ethics directly related to public responsibility and engagement in managing contemporary challenges and opportunities. Where appropriate, students may use a fully focused ethics course in philosophy or another department that has developed a course relating to that subject and encompassing the considerations above.

Disciplinary Inquiry

Arts

The arts foster original, imaginative ways of perceiving, reconceiving, and sensing the world around us. Arts courses bring together practical training, the creative production of new work, and critical insight into artistic production (for example, in considering issues of representation, memory, power, embodiment, and cultural aesthetics). Artistic pursuits raise rather than answer questions, discover rather than solve problems, and explore paradox, contradiction, and the unspeakable. Artistic works are implicitly directed toward an audience, evoking beauty, perplexity, outrage, wonder, empathy, and other aesthetic experiences. These courses work with the rich ambiguities of motion, sound, poetic connotation, space, and color rather than fixed systems of denotation, syntax, and definition. Among the specific capacities fostered in such courses are flexibility, intuitive experimentation, thoughtful critique, ingenuity in problem solving, and working in the midst of complexity and conceptual paradox. All this aims to initiate a lasting connection to the arts for students as critically attuned creators, viewers, and participants.

Humanities

Humanities reflect on the common and familiar human condition – human limitations and failures together with distinctive human capacities and achievements. Courses in the humanities analyze and contemplate on works that invite or compel critical thought. They focus on ways to explore and articulate human experiences with particular emphasis on modes of communication, aesthetic qualities, and the complexity of private lives and engaged human interactions. Studies of language, meaning, context, and influence of written and media expressions enrich our lives and enable us to be more thoughtful and perceptive members of our communities. Humanities courses explore and articulate human experiences with particular emphasis on modes of communication, aesthetic qualities, and/or the complexity of private lives and engaged human interactions.

Literature

Literature enlarges understanding of the human experience, transforms thinking and lives, and helps to articulate through language new imagined possibilities for individuals, societies and the world. Focusing on analysis of written works of literature, these courses will address the form and meaning of writings that may include fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry or essays. Students will explore the choices authors make when constructing a work, including genre, style, character, word choice, meter or the use of symbolism and other devices -- all of which combine to create literature's ability to powerfully evoke a reader's response. Students will also engage in analysis of written works of literature and examine the social and historical contexts of the literary work. Courses in literature are found in a variety of departments and units throughout the university

Biological Sciences

Biological Sciences courses study the processes of living organisms, individually and as they constantly interact with other organisms and the environment. The courses guide students through the process of acquiring knowledge using the tools of the discipline, present the limitations of current research, convey the message that questions of the future will continuously require new ways of gathering information, and emphasize that new knowledge often requires substantial revision of our current thinking. Course will provide evidence of how we know what know about the living world. The aim is not to capture simply a snapshot of what we currently know in a given field but to develop skills that allow for a critical analysis of information pertaining to biological sciences. Courses will include the opportunity for collection and analysis of scientific data in a laboratory or field setting.

Historical Perspectives

Historical Perspectives courses encourage students to think critically and in an informed manner about their own and others' assumptions and assertions about the human past. They investigate how historical knowledge is produced from material, oral, visual and written primary sources. By discerning between "the past" as that which happened and "historical knowledge" as what we know about the past, these courses self-consciously examine the methods and sources used to produce historical knowledge. A central question in any Historical Perspectives course concerns both the value and the limitations of certain sources. The incomplete and partial nature of the sources, and the distinctive perspective any given individual brings to them, leads inevitably to multiple and conflicting interpretations of the past. And yet not all historical analyses and arguments are equally persuasive. These courses equip students to evaluate the reliability of sources and historical arguments and thus develop their own historical perspectives.

Physical Sciences

Physical Sciences courses explore the natural world, as elucidated via the scientific method. They provide basic knowledge of modern scientific thought about nonliving systems and demonstrate how predictive models are developed and refined in the face of ever-present uncertainties. Students learn to appreciate the role of creativity and empirical observation in driving scientific breakthroughs and that the scientific endeavor is an evolving process. Through laboratory or field work, they experience how scientific knowledge is acquired and assimilated into a broader framework for understanding the world around them.

Social Sciences

Social Sciences courses study human behavior through systematic investigation at the level of the individual, group, or society. Relevant areas of inquiry include the study of society and societies, of government and commerce, of the spatial interactions between humans and their environment, of how they communicate, and of the determinants of individual behavior. Courses that fulfill this requirement engage students in identifying the evidence and methods used by social scientists to reach conclusions significant in understanding human dynamics.

Thematic Inquiry

Diversity, Power, and Justice in the US

The United States is a diverse nation that embraces its internal diversity as a defining feature as much as it struggles to live up to the ideals embedded in that claim. Courses that fulfill this requirement wrestle explicitly with the complex relationship between diversity, power and

justice in the United States. Students will explore one or more forms of diversity through a multi-layered analysis of power, privilege, and justice. Such courses promote historical and contemporary understanding of how race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability have shaped social, economic, political, and cross-cultural relationships within the United States. The differential treatment of particular groups and the unequal distribution of power have generated inequality and new ideas about the meaning of justice. Thus, students examine how the contested nature of diversity, power, and justice impacts social dynamics, democratic practices, and institutional stratification. In order to get at these issues, these courses engage with current scholarship and critical theoretical approaches that respond to epistemological gaps in information and perspective.

Environment and Sustainability

Human interaction with the environment is complex. Responding to environmental issues raised by that interaction requires students do the following: understand the origin and nature of the issue; vigorously debate solutions with attention to costs, benefits and tradeoffs; navigate an information culture that can pose significant challenges to concepts of scientific consensus and uncertainty; and learn to become involved, informed, and constructive citizens. Issues such as sustainability and the ethics of intergenerational equity must be weighed against meeting current demands and shifting community needs. Courses that fulfill this theme provide students opportunities to take on the complex issues of the environment in an academic setting involving a broad array of disciplines, from physical, biological, and social sciences, to the arts and humanities. Science based approaches and engagement with ethics and societal values should be integral to proposed solutions.

Global Perspectives

In a complex, rapidly changing world that is increasingly interdependent yet fraught with conflicts and disparities, courses with this theme engage students with some significant discussion about the world beyond U.S. borders, and the opportunity to consider the implications of this knowledge for the international community and their own lives. Global perspectives courses might include contemporary popular culture; nationalism; globalization; human rights; comparative politics, economics, or cultures; historical studies; different modes of material and political life; regional, ethnic, or religious conflict; artistic and literary responses to colonialism or the colonial legacy, and the role of governments, corporations, or international organizations. These courses may engage in a concentrated study of a particular country, culture, or region, be part of an in-depth focus on a particular global issue with reference to two or more parts of the world, or cultivate a broader global awareness by a comparative method as students learn the importance of the particularities of place, time, and culture to understanding our world.

Technology and Social Transformations

Technology and Social Transformations theme courses consider the impact of technology on society and the impact of society on technology. Students will investigate how advances in science and engineering can produce profound impact on society, shaping not only the way people live but how they interact and construct possibilities. Courses will provide examples of how new technologies are developed, the ways in which they are adopted and implemented, and the conditions and assumptions governing their use. The course will help students develop a foundation for evaluating the range of costs -- economic and well as broader human costs -- and the personal and social benefits of existing technologies as well as those likely to emerge in the future. When appropriate, students should explore underlying science, design, or engineering to understand the technology's social implications.

APPENDIX B: MEMBERS OF THE LIBERAL EDUCATION REDESIGN COMMITTEE

Name	College	Role	Term
Sally Gregory Kohlstedt	CSE	Chair	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Daniel Bond	CBS	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Gayla Lindt	CDes	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Rashne Jehangir	CEHD	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Sue Staats	CEHD	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Jay Bell	CFANS	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Jonathan Gewirtz	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Gayle Golden	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Malinda Lindquist	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Peter Mercer-Taylor	CLA	Member	Fall 2018 - Spring 2019
Richa Nagar	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Chris Phelan	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Matthew Rahaim	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Fall 2018
JB Shank	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
John Watkins	CLA	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2018
Randal Barnes	CSE	Member	Fall 2017 - Fall 2018
William Durfee	CSE	Member	Spring 2019
Ken Leopold	CSE	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Justin Revenaugh	CSE	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Liliya Williams	CSE	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Mary Benner	CSOM	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Vlad Griskevicius	CSOM	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Ruby Nguyen	SPH	Member	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Julie Tonneson	Budget Office	Ex officio	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Robert McMaster	OUE	Ex officio	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019
Jennifer Reckner	OUE	Ex officio	Spring 2019
Kathrine Russell	OUE	Staff	Fall 2017 - Spring 2019

APPENDIX C: RELATED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT POSSIBLE FUTURE EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

Over nearly two years of deliberation, the LERC considered a range of ideas relating to the content of the required curriculum as well as the ways in which it might be designed to take additional advantage of faculty initiatives and skills. Among the ideas that emerged from consideration of recently revised curriculum at other universities was that of having a small, self-selective “liberal education college” designed by a group of faculty that creatively restructured the overall set of requirements. One model was that of the New College at the University of Virginia which built a distinctive framework of common experiences for a relatively small set of self-selected students that collectively meet the goals of liberal education. As a complement to the currently proposed General Education, the LERC recommends that such a possibility be made available and that the administration seriously consider any proposal from a core group of faculty interested in designing such a curriculum.