

Core Education Council (CEC) Recommendation to the UO Senate

History

Prior to 2018, the University of Oregon had not revised its general education requirements in over 20 years and had a simple distribution model with no identifiable learning outcomes. In part due to an accreditation recommendation in 2017, the University Senate in partnership with the Office of the Provost began exploring ways to update the general education portion of the curriculum. The first change was to rename a critical part of the undergraduate curriculum from “General Education” to “Core Education.” A Core Education task force was formed to explore other changes.

After much research and consultation across campus, the task force concluded that changing the menu of requirements made little difference in student outcomes. Many other institutions had gone through years of “general education reform” with little actual change to show for it and the literature was clear that what mattered in terms of positive student outcomes was not the requirements but rather the experience students had in those courses. Several studies demonstrated that the most critical factors in terms of positive outcomes for students were:

- Good teaching and high-quality interactions with faculty
- Academic challenge and high expectations
- Interactional diversity

As a result of this work, the task force recommended two changes:

- Creation of the Core Education Council (approved Feb. 2018) – prior to this body, there was no faculty committee charged with overseeing the policies and requirements affecting all students
- Creation of learning outcomes, named “Methods of Inquiry” that aligned with the university mission.

These are:

- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Written Communication
- Ethical Reasoning

Rather than go through a long and complicated process of debating what courses students should take, the task force retained the current requirements, renamed from “group requirements” to “Areas of Inquiry”, and added the requirement that each Area of Inquiry course had to address at least two of the Methods of Inquiry as well. The hope here was to ensure that students encounter all the Methods of Inquiry at some point in their academic career.

At the same time, another group was working on revising the “multicultural requirement” which had consisted of 3 categories (American Cultures, International Cultures, and Identity, Pluralism and Tolerance) requiring students to take one course from at least two categories. That requirement was changed to “Cultural Literacy” and modified to two categories: U.S. Difference, Inequality and Agency, and Global Perspectives. Students are required to take one course in each category. That was passed by the University Senate in May 2018.

A 3-year process was then put in place for each course to be reapproved with evidence of how those courses would address each Method of Inquiry and/or new Cultural Literacy requirements. That process was to conclude in the summer of 2021, but COVID caused a 2-year delay in the process. The last summer review of courses was conducted in summer of 2023. Approximately 90 courses have yet to submit reapproval documentation.

Along with these changes, the Office of the Provost and the Teaching Engagement Program have offered ongoing support and workshops on course reapproval along with continual expansion of teaching support in many areas to improve the classroom experience for students.

Our accreditors and outside evaluators lauded our attempts to focus on the student experience rather than the menu of requirements.

Where We Are Now

Now that the initial work of establishing learning outcomes, reapproving courses, and making other modifications to the core education curriculum to streamline the path for students is mostly completed, the Core Education Council finds itself asking, “what now?”

The Core Education Council is a senate committee with only faculty as voting members although representation of *ex-officio* supports an expansive look at core education. As such, it is best suited in an advisory and policy-making role rather than an operational role of executing ideas to improve the core education experience for students.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the council focused its discussions on this question, primarily considering the goals of core education and the practices at other institutions. The council believes the basic core education requirements and outcomes are sufficient to achieve the promise of core education for students. What is lacking is the operational capacity to execute on that promise.

Promise and goals

The goals and promise of core education are founded in the accreditation standards and the institution's mission.

The relevant accreditation standards state:

*“1.C.6 Consistent with its mission, **the institution establishes and assesses, across all associate and bachelor level programs or within a General Education curriculum, institutional learning outcomes and/or core competencies.** Examples of such learning outcomes and competencies include, but are not limited to, effective communication skills, global awareness, cultural sensitivity, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and logical thinking, problem solving, and/or information literacy.*

*1.C.7 **The institution uses the results of its assessment efforts to inform academic and learning-support planning and practices to continuously improve student learning outcomes.**”*

The Core Education Council does not have the capacity, nor should it in its advisory and policy-making role, to meet these standards.

In terms of the promise of core education, the council has concluded that because of its central place in the curriculum (roughly 1/3 of required credits for a bachelor’s degree), much more institutional attention needs to be placed on the student experience in these courses. If the institution places so much value on these requirements that it asks students to devote 1/3 of their credits there, the institution is obligated to devote more resources to providing a compelling student experience.

Core education is the part of the UO curriculum that affects all students. As such, it should at a minimum:

- Provide a compelling, cohesive experience to all students
- Clearly communicate the purpose and value to students
- Effectively articulate to students the key skills and outcomes (Methods of Inquiry) they should gain in those courses

But beyond the minimum, the promise of core education lies in the institution's opportunities to positively affect students in those courses. The potential directions and opportunities are many but for instance, core education:

- Can be a central facilitator of student success by uniformly focusing on key academic and student success skills and habits

- Can be a place to focus on career readiness attributes. The Methods of Inquiry are the foundation for that as they already map onto top employer-identified career readiness skills
- Can be a place to ensure that students have opportunities to engage in high-impact practices (e.g. common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, writing-intensive courses to name a few)

Other Institutions

The Core Education council looked at the administrative structure of other comparable institutions to get a sense of how they organized their resources to administrate their general education program. A summary of the findings follows.

Institution	Administrative Structure	General Education Requirements Summary
University of Wisconsin-Madison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coordinated by associate dean in the College of Letters and Science, which is the home for general education ▪ Supported by the University General Education Committee – a faculty committee. ▪ Assessment coordinated by the Academic Outcomes and Assessment Subcommittee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very similar to UO. ▪ 13-15 “breadth” credits distributed in 3 areas (Natural Science, Humanities/Literature/Arts, Social Studies). ▪ In addition, they have communication, ethnic studies, and quantitative reasoning requirements.
Oregon State University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staffed under Academic Affairs with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Core Director ○ Writing intensive director ○ Assessment Coordinator ○ 3 assistant directors of different areas ○ Designees in each college ▪ Supported by faculty committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Just revised and renamed to “Core Education” ▪ Includes two parts – Foundational Core and Signature Core ▪ Foundational Core <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Writing Foundations ○ Arts and Humanities ○ Quantitative Literacy and Analysis ○ Communication, Media and Society ○ Social Science ○ Scientific Inquiry and Analysis ○ Difference, Power, and Oppression ▪ Signature Core <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Transitions – personal development ○ Beyond OSU – Career Integration ○ Difference, Power, and Oppression advanced ○ Seeking Solutions ○ Writing Elevation ○ Writing Intensive in the major
Michigan State University	Administered in the Office of Undergraduate Education led by a Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education and several associate/assistant deans for general education and assessment	5 Learning Goal Areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analytical Thinking ▪ Cultural Understanding ▪ Effective Citizenship ▪ Effective Communication ▪ Integrated Reasoning

		<p>These don't seem to map directly onto their general education requirements which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Writing – 4 credits ▪ Integrative Studies Sci – 8 credits ▪ Integrative Studies Soc Sci – 8 credits ▪ Integrative Studies Arts and Hum – 8 credits ▪ Math – 3-5 credits
UNC Chapel Hill	<p>CAS Office of Undergraduate Curricula within Office of Undergraduate Ed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Associate Dean for Undergraduate Curricula ▪ Associate Dean for First-year Curricula ▪ 4 additional staff 	<p>Complicated set of requirements including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First-year foundations ▪ 9 focus areas ▪ Disciplinary distribution in 3 main areas ▪ Reflection and Integration courses
University of Washington	<p>Student Affairs with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vice Dean of Undergraduate Student Affairs ▪ Executive support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Areas of Inquiry in SS, NS, A&H ▪ Eng composition ▪ Writing ▪ Diversity ▪ Foreign Language

Recommendation

In order to meet minimum expectations and realize the promise of Core Education we must invest in its success. We have what we have always had – a menu of courses which students must choose from and get through. We should collectively have higher aspirations and that begins with an institutional commitment to core education. The “bones” of Core Education are in good shape – we offer a variety of courses across disciplines that, with vision, attention and care could easily develop to meet the promise of core education. Specifically, we recommend what every other institution we looked at has – devoted FTE to a professional staff that can devote the time and effort needed to develop, with the faculty, a vision and execute on that vision.

To meet the goals and the promise of Core Education for our students, the University of Oregon needs to better administer and assess core education. To this end, we recommend that administrative FTE be assigned to the coordination and assessment of Core Education. This FTE should focus on working with academic units, Core Education faculty and the Core Education Council to:

- Create a more consistent and cohesive Core Education experience, focusing on evidence-based best practices
- Improve the overall pedagogy and instruction in Core Education with a focus on student success
- Ensure Core Education courses are explicitly focused on addressing the Methods of Inquiry in each course
- Ensure students understand the how the Methods of Inquiry already map onto career readiness skills
- Equip students with metacognitive and college success strategies
- Revise and implement a plan to continually assess each Method of Inquiry, and to use those results to improve the Core Education experience
- Engage in ongoing analysis of Core Education requirements and policies to improve timely graduation, including but not limited to investigating a revision to the BA/BS structure.
- Ensure that there is sufficient capacity in core education courses to meet student demand