

# The State of Core Education at the University of Oregon

2019-2020 University of Oregon Core Education Council

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This paper is intended to be a foundational document for the Core Education Council (CEC) to use in communicating about the University of Oregon's Core Education program with various stakeholder, clarifying the role of the council and how it articulates with other committees, councils, and offices focused on undergraduate education, and creating a long-term plan for future iterations of the CEC.

In its second year, the CEC had three primary activities: “visioning exercises” with stakeholders to identify gaps and opportunities in the revised model of core education, assessment activities and participating in accreditation activities, and discussions about the effect of remote teaching in core education classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The CEC also has representation on Academic Council and provided input on the campus response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The CEC also weighed in on various questions related to core education classes and monitored re-certification of existing CEC classes. Questions that may be addressed by the CEC in the coming year include:

- How might core education classes incorporate anti-racist pedagogy?
- Which best practices in different course delivery modalities (remote, hybrid, online) align with which methods of inquiry? What policies would encourage and support identified alignments?
- What role should “career readiness” initiatives play in core education classes/methods of inquiry?
- How can we assess student learning in relation to the methods of inquiry?
- What updates of BA/BS requirements are needed to support a full core academic experience for all students?

## Background

In 2016-17 the University Senate investigated the state of General Education at the University of Oregon through the ad hoc Core Education Task Force (CETF). The CETF investigated how our general education requirements supported the mission of the university, the criteria for determining which courses satisfy general education requirements, how our requirements compare to those of comparable institutions.

The CETF made a series of recommendations to the Senate on these issues which had the following effects:

1. Established a new standing committee of the University Senate, the Core Education Council (CEC).
2. Cleaned up the language around the ‘group requirements’ (*e.g.* Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts & Letter), now called Areas of Inquiry, both for approval of courses by the University Committee on Courses and establishing common learning outcomes to be incorporated into Area satisfying courses.

3. Revamped the ‘multicultural requirement’ to create a Cultural Literacy requirement consisting of courses in Global Perspectives and Difference, Inequality & Agency, and determined common learning outcomes and course approval criteria for these courses.
4. Established a set of mission-centric learning outcomes called Methods of Inquiry. These Methods are Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Ethical Reflection and Written Communication. All courses approved for Areas of Inquiry are required to address learning outcomes from two of these four Methods of Inquiry.

Essentially the effort has been focused on identifying and aligning educational outcomes with the promise of the UO mission and creating clear criteria so that courses can be evaluated with detailed guidelines to qualify as a core ed course.

In its inaugural year, the Core Education Council (CEC) also revisited the UO academic policy on ‘General Limitations of Bachelors Degrees’ and proposed a number of simplifications which were adopted by the Senate.

The purpose of this white paper is to describe the evolution from General Education to Core Education at the University of Oregon, including motivations for certain decisions, the practical implications of the changes and possible directions for future proposed changes.

## The Old Model

The old UO General Education system consisted of a number of requirements and a large selection of courses which satisfied these requirements. Our current system builds off of this model, but provides more guidance as to what courses must provide in order to satisfy requirements.

Our previous requirements consisted of *Group Requirements*: students were required to take 15 credits (~4 courses) in each of Arts & Letters, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. The old group requirements are now folded into our Areas of Inquiry. In addition to group requirements we also had a *Multicultural Requirement* and a *Composition Requirement*. The multicultural requirement was satisfied by taking two courses, one each from two of three buckets of courses in American Cultures, International Cultures, and Identity, Pluralism and Tolerance. The old multicultural requirement has been subsumed by the new Cultural Literacy area. The composition requirement consists of two writing courses (out of a selection of three) and remains largely unchanged except for closer integration with Core Education goals.

## Mission Alignment

According to the institutional Mission Statement, “[t]he University of Oregon is a comprehensive public research university committed to exceptional teaching, discovery, and service. We work at a human scale to generate big ideas. As a community of scholars, we help individuals **question critically, think logically, reason effectively, communicate clearly, act creatively, and live ethically.**”

The new Core Education framework articulates closely with the mission by establishing Methods of Inquiry (categories of learning objectives) which must be addressed by certain approved core education courses.

*Core Education Method of Inquiry: Critical Thinking*

“Students will develop the skills and habits of mind necessary for the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events in the evaluation and formulation of opinions and conclusions. Critical thinking requires students to question critically, think logically and reason effectively in the context of discipline-specific methodologies.”

*“...communicate clearly...”*

*Core Education Method of Inquiry: Written Communication*

“Through iterative experiences across the curriculum, students will develop the capacity to develop and express ideas in writing, to work in different genres and styles, work with different writing technologies, and mix texts, data, and images to effectively communicate to different audiences.”

*“...act creatively ...”*

*Core Education Method of Inquiry: Creative Thinking*

“Students will develop the capacity to combine or synthesize existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways, and work in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation, divergent thinking, and risk taking.”

*“...and live ethically.”*

*Core Education Method of Inquiry: Ethical Reflection*

“Students will develop the capacity to identify, examine, and critically revise ethical positions, map them onto larger ethical ideas (theoretical traditions, moral frameworks, prevailing social frameworks), and reflect on how decisions and actions (including, sometimes, inaction) shape our relations to others and self. Students will develop the capacity to articulate the ends sought in a range of endeavors in personal, social and professional contexts. Students will also develop concepts, practices, and other tools appropriate to valuing those ends in relation to their means of attainment and their impacts on self and others.”

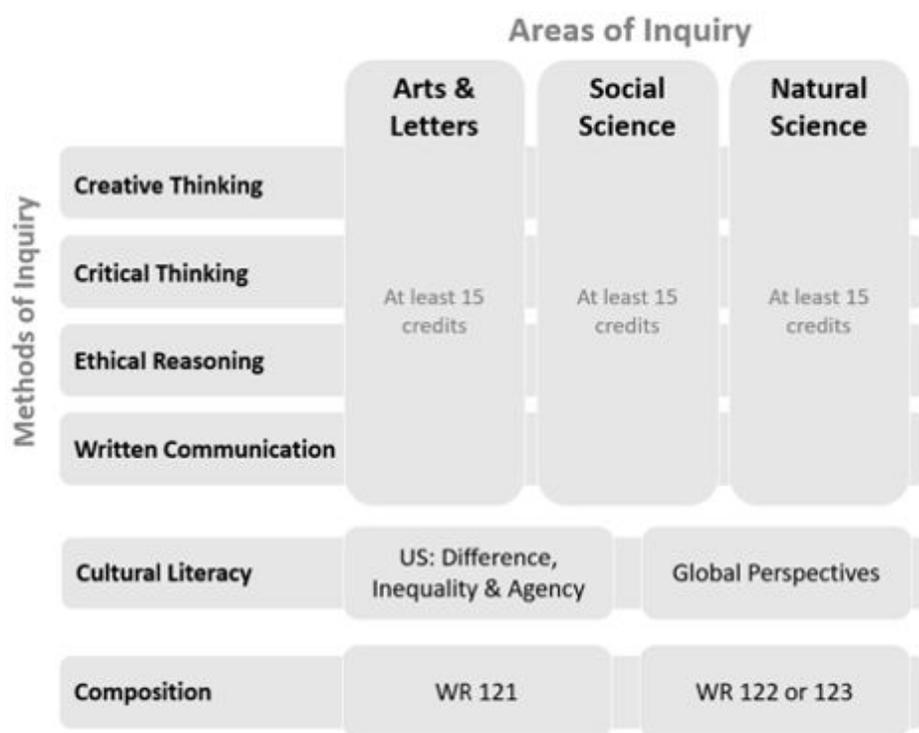
## Recent History

### Methods and Areas of Inquiry

The primary work of the CETF was to establish categories of courses called *Areas of Inquiry* and collections of learning outcomes called *Methods of Inquiry*. The Areas are *Arts & Letters*, *Social Sciences*, and *Natural Sciences*. The Methods are *Creative Thinking*, *Critical Thinking*, *Ethical Reflections* and *Written Communication* and

are outlined below. In legislation passed by the University Senate in 2017, the faculty agreed to require that courses taught in an *Area* be required to cover learning outcomes from at least two *Methods*, and provided guidelines for how courses were to be approved for Areas by the University Committee on Courses (UOCC). Subsequent collaboration between the administration and UOCC established a schedule to review existing approved courses for adherence to the new standards. As of summer 2020 the UOCC re-review process is on hiatus due to COVID-19.

While the result of the reorganization of General Education into Core Education looks superficial from the viewpoint of students (the number of courses and how they were divided up remains largely unchanged) the integration of the Methods into the Areas serves to produce central themes, consistent with our public mission, which appear throughout the undergraduate curriculum.



## 1. Critical Thinking

Students will develop the skills and habits of mind necessary for the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events in the evaluation and formulation of opinions and conclusions. Critical thinking requires students to question critically, think logically and reason effectively in the context of discipline-specific methodologies.

- Explanation of issues, assumptions, or hypotheses
- Using relevant and credible evidence, information, or hypotheses to describe, investigate or analyze a situation, or draw a conclusion.

- Facility with methods of reasoning appropriate to the discipline (such as inductive, deductive, scientific, or esthetic reasoning, or statistical inference)
- Modeling: Capturing the essentials of a situation in language or symbolism suitable for deriving conclusions about it.
- Influence of context and assumptions
- Logical conclusions and related outcomes (implications and consequences)

## 2. Creative Thinking

Students will develop the capacity to combine or synthesize existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways, and work in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation, divergent thinking, and risk taking.

- Acquiring Competencies: acquiring strategies and skills within a particular domain.
- Taking Risks: going beyond original parameters of assignment, introducing new materials and forms, tackling controversial topics, advocating unpopular ideas or solutions.
- Solving Problems
- Innovative Thinking: connecting, synthesizing or transforming ideas in discipline-specific ways.

## 3. Written Communication

Through iterative experiences across the curriculum, students will develop the capacity to develop and express ideas in writing, to work in different genres and styles, work with different writing technologies, and mix texts, data, and images to effectively communicate to different audiences.

- Context of and Purpose for Writing: considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s).
- Content Development
- Genre and Disciplinary Conventions: Formal and informal rules inherent in the expectations for writing in particular forms and/or academic fields
- Sources and Evidence
- Control of Syntax and Mechanics

## 4. Ethical Reflection

Students will develop the capacity to identify, examine, and critically revise ethical positions, map them onto larger ethical ideas (theoretical traditions, moral frameworks, prevailing social frameworks), and reflect on how decisions and actions (including, sometimes, inaction) shape our relations to others and self. Students will develop the capacity to articulate the ends sought in a range of endeavors in personal, social and professional contexts. Students will also develop concepts, practices, and other tools appropriate to valuing those ends in relation to their means of attainment and their impacts on self and others.

- Awareness of one's own values and capacities for self-questioning

- Language and tools to examine ethical issues, including discipline-specific frameworks
- Recognition of the presence of ethical issues, especially where typically neglected
- Awareness of impacts of our decisions and actions (both personally and as members of groups)
- Application of ethical inquiry to subject-specific issues

## The Cultural Literacy Requirement

Previous to the establishment of the CETF, a group of faculty had been convened by the then Dean of Undergraduate Studies to propose updates to the multicultural requirement which eventually led to the establishment of a requirement in *US: Difference, Inequality and Agency*. A parallel effort resulted in a requirement in *Global Perspectives*.

### 1. US: Difference, Inequality and Agency

These courses will develop students' analytical and reflective capacities to help them understand and ethically engage with the ongoing (cultural, economic, political, social, etc.) power imbalances that have shaped and continue to shape the United States. This engagement may also include the relation of the United States to other regions of the world. Each course will include scholarship, cultural production, perspectives, and voices from members of communities historically marginalized by these legacies of inequality.

Each course will undertake one or more of the following:

- Teach respectful listening and tools for ethical dialogue in order to expand students' abilities to practice civil conversation and engage with deeply felt or controversial issues.
- Facilitate student reflection on their own multiple social identifications and on how those identifications are formed and located in relation to power.

Each course will address each of the following:

- Intersecting aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, indigeneity, national origin, religion, or ability.
- The uses of power to classify, rank, and marginalize on the basis of these aspects of identity, as well as considerations of agency on the part of marginalized groups.
- Historical structures, contemporary structures, forms of knowledge, cultural practices, or ideologies that perpetuate or change the distribution of power in society.

### 2. Global Perspectives (GP)

These courses will foster student encounter with and critical reflection upon cultures, identities, and ways of being in global contexts. Each course will include substantial scholarship, cultural production, perspectives, and voices from members of communities under study, as sources permit.

Each course will undertake one or more of the following:

- Teach respectful listening and civil conversation as critical tools for collective student engagement with topics that are controversial today;
- Provide critical vocabulary and concepts allowing students to engage and discuss topics with which students may be unfamiliar.

Each course will engage with one of more of the following:

- Texts, literature, art, testimonies, practices, or other cultural products that reflect systems of meaning or beliefs beyond the US context;
- Power relations involving different nations, peoples and identity groups, or world regions;
- Consideration of hierarchy, marginality or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or ability (or some combination).

Note: Approved study abroad programs also fulfill the Global Perspectives requirement.

## Forming the Core Education Council

In 2015, the university's accreditors recommended that the university establish a standing committee charged with developing and maintaining a core education curriculum. The University Senate established a Core Education Task Force during Spring Term 2017 with faculty, administrator, and student representation. The task force was asked to recommend a structure for this ongoing standing committee and to develop a set of principles to guide its construction of a core education curriculum. The task force met regularly and in 2017 sent members to an Association of American Colleges and Universities conference on assessing university-level learning outcomes and supporting success of historically underrepresented student groups. The Core Education Council was created by US17/18-08 "Creation of Core Education Council" by the following legislation:

"The Core Education Council shall oversee that part of the University curriculum which is required of all undergraduate students. Currently that includes but is not limited to: group satisfying requirement; multicultural requirement; writing requirement; requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree; and requirements for the Bachelor of Science degree.

Charge and Responsibilities: The Core Education Council shall:

- A. Convene an ongoing campus dialog on the purpose, value, assessment, evaluation and improvement of the core education at the university.
- B. Establish, review and revise the goals, objectives and assessable learning outcomes of the core education.
- C. Establish, review and revise policies and processes to ensure an effective, regular and comprehensive system of assessment of student learning outcomes in core education.
- D. Review and recommend to the Senate proposals and policies concerning core education requirements;
- E. Establish guidelines and criteria for courses which satisfy core education requirements.  
(However, UOCC retains authority to operationalize criteria and guidelines and to approve courses.);

- F. Serve as a resource on core education for campus stakeholders including, but not limited to, the Provost, the Dean of Undergraduate Education, the University Committee on Courses, the Undergraduate Council, the Academic Requirements Committee and the Scholastic Review Committee, curriculum committees in schools and colleges.
- G. Interpret existing core education policy. Provide guidance on the interpretation of the goals and objectives of core education.
- H. Collaborate with the UO Teaching Academy on quality teaching and learning initiatives that are relevant to core education; identify topics for faculty scrutiny and insight through the Teaching Academy itself or its subgroups.
- I. Invite guests as appropriate for expertise.

## General Limitations of Bachelors Degrees

In 2019, CEC took on the overdue task of reviewing UO Bachelor's Degree General Limitations. The updated limitations are below (copied from UO 2020-2021 Catalog:

<http://uocatalog.uoregon.edu/admissiontograduation/bachelorrequirements/> ).

The updates proposed by CEC and approved by the UO Senate in 2019 were mainly minor, clarifying updates and worked to:

- simplify, clarify wording in first limitation
- delete limitation (prior second limitation) about “correspondence study”
- add wording to limitation 3 to clarify relevant courses and include appropriate exception for dance majors
- simply, clarify wording in fourth limitation
- remove outdated wording (prior limitation 7) about University Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) courses
- add Cambridge Examination Program and clarify P\* grade for credit awarded by examination (limitation 7)
- clarify that limitations on credits for repeated courses are covered in the *UO Policy on Repeatable and Non-repeatable Undergraduate Courses* and are no longer repeated here (limitation 8)
- clarify language prohibiting awarding credit for courses that are regressive or otherwise beneath student's assessed competency level (limitations 9-11)
- clarify that majors and minors (as well as certificates) must be completed when the degree is awarded (limitation 12)

For reference purposes, the full general limitations are included below:

1. A total maximum of 124 credits may be transferred from domestic, regionally accredited junior or community colleges and from international junior or technical colleges. Of the total maximum of 124 credits, only 90 credits may be transferred from an international junior or technical college.
2. A maximum of 48 credits in law, medicine, pharmacy, chiropractic medicine, dentistry, technology, or any combination may be used toward fulfilling total credit hours for the BA or BS degree.

3. A maximum of 24 credits may be used toward fulfilling total credits in the following areas with not more than 12 credits in any one area:
  1. Lower-division professional-technical courses;
  2. Physical education activity, military science activity (e.g., MIL 131 and 331), and dance activity (DANC) courses, except for dance activity courses for majors in dance;
  3. Music lessons (in subject MUP), except for majors in music;
  4. Applied and/or experiential courses, academic support skills courses, nonacademic field experience courses, or career and professional development courses.
4. For music majors, a maximum of 24 credits in music lessons (in subject code MUP), may count toward requirements for the BA or BS degree.
5. For dance majors, a maximum of 36 credits of DANC may count toward requirements for the BA or BS degree.
6. University of Oregon academic records are sealed thirty days after the official conferral date of a degree. After this date, changes to majors and minors, addition of departmental honors, removal of incompletes, grade changes, or other changes to an academic record cannot be made.
7. When the University awards credits for Advanced Placement Program (AP), International Baccalaureate Program (IB), Cambridge Examination Program, the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), and credit by examination (course challenge), these credits are counted toward the satisfaction of bachelor's degree requirements--except residency and the 45 UO credits graded A,B,C,D. When the university grants credit for AP, IB, Cambridge, and CLEP examinations, pass (P\*) credit is granted.
8. For limitations related to repeated courses please refer to *UO Policy on Repeatable and Non-repeatable Undergraduate Courses*.
9. Students may not receive credit for any course assessed as having substantially similar content as a course for which they have already received credit.
10. Students may not receive credit for courses beneath their assessed competency level. Competency level can be assessed by various means such as placement scores, faculty/departmental assessment, etc.
11. Student may not receive credit for courses that are designated by the department as regressive prerequisites for courses in which they are currently enrolled or have already received credit.
12. Students must have degree-seeking status in order to earn an undergraduate major, minor or certificate; undergraduate majors, minors and certificates must be completed at the time the degree is awarded.

The CEC also recommended streamlining Core Ed requirements. These policies [can we say policies/requirements rather than limitations/restrictions ??] are here:

### "Double-Dipping" Restriction

Students may not use courses that fulfill the second-language requirement for the bachelor of arts degree to fulfill the arts and letters area requirement. Courses used to demonstrate proficiency in mathematics or in computer and information science or in a combination of the two for the bachelor of science degree may not also be used to fulfill the science area requirement.

### Areas of Inquiry Requirements for Specific Degrees

1. **Bachelor of Arts or Science.** Students must complete a minimum of 45 credits—15 of those credits in approved area-satisfying courses in each of three general-education areas: arts and letters, social science, and science. Each area must include coursework in two different subject codes. No more than three courses with the same subject code may be used to fulfill the 45-credit requirement.
2. **Bachelor of Architecture, Education, Fine Arts, Interior Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Music, or Music in Music Education.** Students must complete a minimum of 36 credits—12 of those credits in approved area-satisfying courses in each of three general-education area: arts and letters, social science, and science. Each area must include coursework in two different subject codes. No more than three courses with the same subject code may be used to fulfill the total 36-credit requirement.

Core education requirements balance two competing core education goals: students will be exposed to courses across a variety of disciplines, and students will be able to go deeper in areas of interest to them. They should also be straightforward so they can be clearly understood and implemented.

The updated policies meet these goals. The requirement that each group (area of inquiry) must include two courses with the same subject code has been removed, which means that students can satisfy an area of inquiry with courses from four different subject codes (breadth). The previous “one course restriction” has also been removed, which simplifies prior issues with first and second majors, when students declare their major, and so on. The policy that up to three courses with the same subject code may be used to satisfy all areas of inquiry still ensures breadth of subject code while allowing exploration depth (regardless of major).

## Planning for Assessment

The Director of Assessment provided regular updates to the CEC related to the new learning outcomes, including the outcomes chosen by faculty re-certifying their courses as Core Education satisfying. The goal is to move to data-driven decision-making. In the coming year, the CEC will continue to clarify the relationship between itself and the work of assessment. The CEC is well-positioned to provide input and feedback on core education assessment activities.

## Emerging Issues

Academic year 2019-20 was the second full year of the Core Ed Council. The members of the council have explored various aspects of our bachelors degrees and the common requirements to achieve them. These conversations have ranged from the philosophical to the mundane. We have been consulted on issues by both the administration and faculty committees, and have presented the iterations of Core Ed to various groups on campus. These conversations have pointed to emerging issues which must be tackled if we are going to achieve a coherent, modern, valued, common curriculum. Council representatives met with representatives of the Science Literacy Program and the Language Council to discuss the changes to core education and to invite additional input on where the CEC might next focus. See appendix for notes taken at discussions.

## Communications and Branding

Part of the motivation for this white paper is to communicate the state of our core education to faculty and administrators. Both the Core Ed Council and academic administrators need to sustain this conversation so that units and faculty members are

1. aware of changes to requirements;
2. understand new terminology *e.g.* Areas and Methods of Inquiry;
3. understand expectations around new course development and curriculum, and
4. have the ability to weigh in on future updates/iterations of UO core education.

Academic administrators (in particular those in the Provost's Office) should weave core education terminology into relevant communications and conversations, so that faculty, students, and other academic professionals become accustomed to the new language of core ed.

We also need consistent student-facing communication which clearly enunciates what students can expect from their core education. This is succinctly expressed in the phrase from the UO Mission: "As a community of scholars, we help individuals question critically, think logically, reason effectively, communicate clearly, act creatively, and live ethically." This message should be translated into something that slaps (or whatever the kids are saying these days). This student-facing messaging needs to be interwoven into advising and recruiting communications, so that current and potential students and parents can readily understand the unique value imparted by a UO bachelor's degree.

Many universities have established an on-campus core education *brand* which advertises their core education values to their students. The University of Oregon should follow suit. Students should be reminded of UO's core education mission in every academic and residential building via consistent branding on posters, flags, banners and other marketing ephemera. Consistent branding will acculturate students into expectations around their core education. This should translate into better understanding of the requirements by students, which in turn should (from an actuarial perspective at least) translate into a lowering of the average time to graduation.

It is particularly important that academic advisors are aware of any upcoming changes to requirements, messaging or branding around core education.

# Appendix: Council & Task Force Membership<sup>1</sup>

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## 2018-19 Core Education Council

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## Appendix: Stakeholder Conversations

The following images provide the prompt used for stakeholder discussions about the future of UO Core Education as well as notes from meetings with stakeholders, including CEC members, the Language Council, and Science Literacy Faculty.

Find a copy of the worksheet used to prompt discussion here:

[https://uoregon-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/dmarti14\\_uoregon\\_edu/Ee8a1pNbhZlAjqQLsB2j2DcBUwHODbdyzqW8R3RWlHYHw?e=BcRH5y](https://uoregon-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/dmarti14_uoregon_edu/Ee8a1pNbhZlAjqQLsB2j2DcBUwHODbdyzqW8R3RWlHYHw?e=BcRH5y)

Notes from the CEC discussion:

Learning how to be a learner L

Citizenship & personal growth & well-being V  
& job focus.

Application of knowledge - addressing real world problems E

Connected breadth & depth beyond the major E

- connections between disciplines/silos E
- making sense of the complete ed. experience for students E
- co-curricular programs/support/connections L, E

- Student colloquia L

- Making goals/explicit for students' expectations L

- environment/sustainability V

- Deliberate synthesis of common ed. experience E

$$\sum_{i \in S_N} s_{ij}(i) \prod_{n=1}^N \langle n | A | n \rangle = \det A.$$

VALUES Learning

Teamwork

Application

Oral Communication

Data Literacy

Visual Literacy

(self-awareness) superior ability to listen to diff. ideas/purpose and judge + be able to listen

VALUES

Positive Experience

Career Ready

Socially Responsible

Well-educated

Connectivity / Interrelatedness

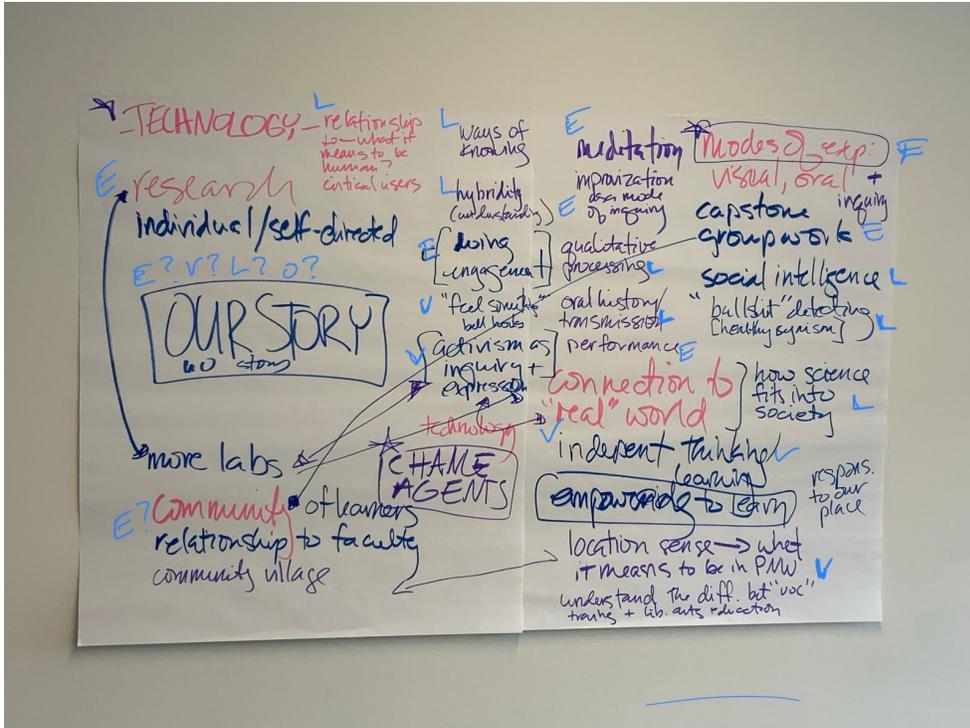
Experiences

International

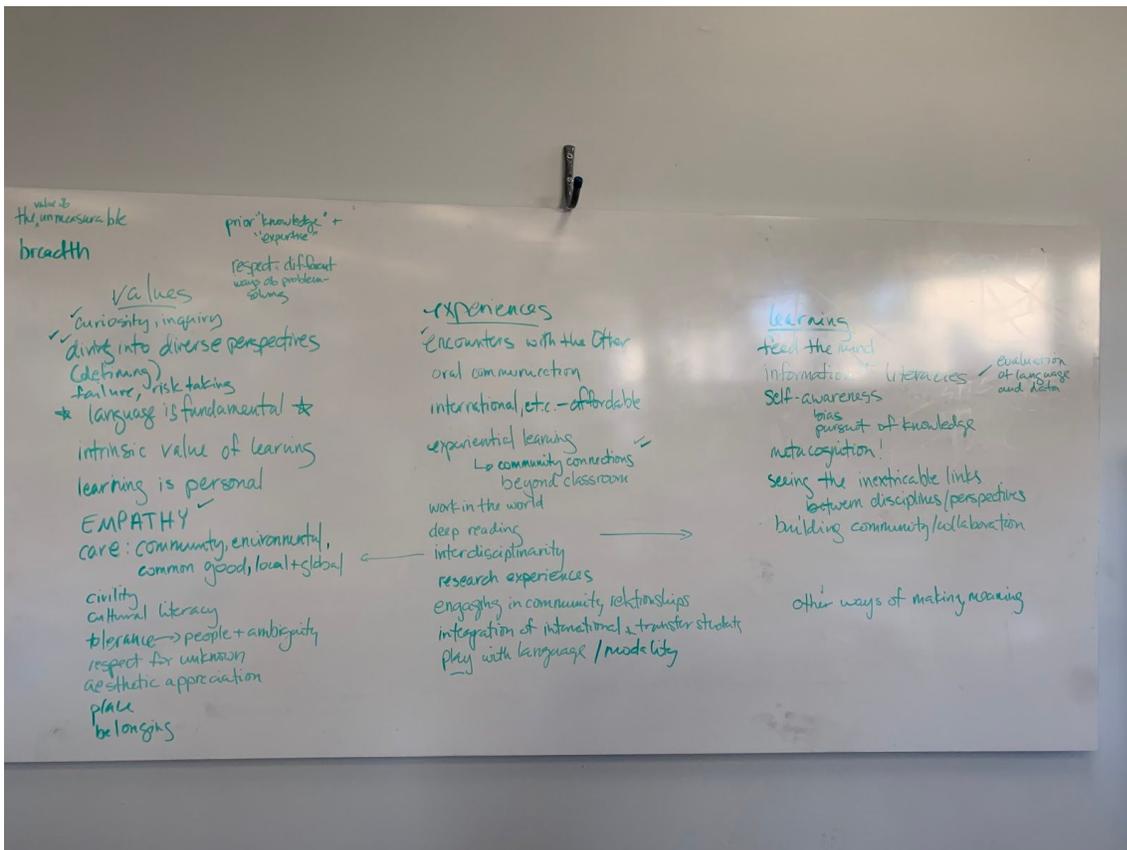
Career bridge experience

Presenting to others/feedback

Debate



Notes from the Language Council discussion:



Notes from the Science Literacy Discussion:

### **Values**

Connectivity

Socially Responsible, Sustainable (environmental justice, social justice)

Positive Experience, Well-being

Prepares For Careers

Personal Growth, Independent Thinking

Making the world a better place

Exploring multiple perspectives

Learning at UO/PNW is unique [honoring the place of learning]

### **Experiences**

Career Bridge Experience, addressing real world problems

Presenting to others

Receiving Feedback

Debate

Interdisciplinary experiences (like Runways?), synthesis of experiences (capstone?)

Co-curricular programs

### **Learning**

Self-Awareness: Ability to suspend judgment and disbelief

Learning how to learn, learning different ways of knowing

Citizenship

Social/emotional intelligence

Teamwork

Oral Communication

Data Literacy

Visual Literacy

Digital Literacy

Qualitative Literacy

Goal Setting

