

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

GENERAL EDUCATION

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Charge: *What type of general education will best prepare learners for the rapidly changing economy and society in which they will work and live? Is it possible to have one general education experience that best serves all learners, or would learners be more engaged if they were able to “customize” their general education experience? What are the desired outcomes of general education? What role should employers and learners play in the design of a new general education program?*

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GENERAL EDUCATION: Executive Summary

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General education lives at the central intersection of different perspectives and different interests in higher education. Efforts to define its meaning, purpose, and optimal design are sometimes contentious and ineffective. We are happy to report that ours have been civil, productive, and illuminating. Charged broadly with investigating research on what type of general education will best prepare learners and what steps might be involved in any new design, we began at the beginning, with the history and shifting purposes of general education as it has evolved to meet the needs and interests of new generations of stakeholders.

Drawing on the work of some earlier PLCs, our group reviewed the demographic and economic context of higher education and the skills, knowledge, pedagogies, and perspectives deemed necessary for the emerging century. We surveyed the literature of general education revision along with a handful of specific models from open curricula to those with traditional liberal arts cores. Our discussions led to a number of key criteria that should play a role in future, broader discussion of general education revision at SOU, among them: cost and scalability, fit with the institution size, demographics and staffing, alignment with goals of practical liberal education, fit with the practicalities of assessment, transferability and implementation, and the potential impact on reputation, retention and the ability to attract students. Our review highlighted the ways in which employers' perspectives are aligned with the broad goals of liberal education, but also the shortcomings of how that value is understood. And we noted the potential for general education revision to disrupt the equilibrium of a campus community.

Our review finds trends in the direction of smaller general education programs and we noted that most distributional models already incorporate a degree of customization driven by happenstance, which suggests that an opportunity exists for more intentionality and fewer credit hours in general education. We identified **five pillars** or principles in the trends of recent general education:

- A common experience
- Breadth of cross disciplinary knowledge
- Experiential, high impact activities
- Twenty-first century skills
- A clear articulation of value

And we suggested **ten future steps** for Southern Oregon University, bulleted below and discussed more fully at the end of this report:

- Assess the effectiveness of general education
- Collect campus data on the perceptions of general education
- Align changes with demographics in terms of content, pedagogy, and especially SOU's ability to attract and retain students.

- Explore growth potential arising from such initiatives as the Interstate Passport and the General Education Maps and Markers effort.
- Talk with other campuses and consider a team application to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Institute on General Education and Assessment.
- Tolerate healthy skepticism
- Consult broad constituencies throughout the university community
- Be mindful of the time issues, resources and incentives needed for innovation, planning, and implementation
- Develop a broad-based communications effort for general education
- Identify synergies with the work of other professional learning communities

What is General Education?

The earliest colleges in colonial America—Harvard, William & Mary, St. John’s College, Yale and others—offered classical curricula based in the trivium and quadrivium along with some natural science, (classical) languages, and (ancient) history. The goal was often to train clergy or to prepare gentlemen for lives of leadership. There were no majors, nor was there much need for them.

Historians such as Gary E. Miller, Aston Williams, Frederick Rudolph, Cynthia A. Wells and others have traced the evolution of the curriculum and the emergence of a concept of general education distinct from majors and electives. By the early nineteenth century, the liberal arts and liberal education were emerging as an alternative to the religious orientation of the curriculum.¹ In 1825, the University of Virginia offered students eight programs to choose from, and the influential Yale Report of 1828 argued that each of the liberal arts “exercised a different facet of the mind, such as reason, judgment, memory, and taste” (Wells 2016, 18). The following year, a Bowdoin College professor writing in the *North American Review* described the goal of a college education as a “general education, classical, literary, and scientific, as comprehensive as an education can well be, which is professedly preparatory alike for all the professions.” It was the first mention of the term general education.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Morrill Act was establishing curricular partnerships between land-grant institutions and practitioners in agriculture and industry and bringing new voices into the curriculum. Following the model of European universities, specialization developed quickly and toward the end of the nineteenth century, the term *major* was being used for a course of study requiring two years (first in the 1877–1878 catalog of Johns Hopkins University).

Harvard’s long-serving president Charles Eliot argued for an education that provides a “general acquaintance with many branches of knowledge” in order to ensure an “intelligent public opinion” (1909, 4). According to Bell (1966), Eliot regarded “general education as a part of a liberal education, the whole of which each student would complete with those studies which he freely elected.” Critics argued that the elective system left the undergraduate degree lacking a common learning experience and that prescribed content was necessary if higher education were to serve its goals. A later Harvard president, Lawrence Lowell, who served from 1909 to 1933, established a set of distribution requirements that forced students to select courses from particular categories, though critics still noted that the distribution model lacked a unified core curriculum. The distribution model is the most popular form of general education today, accounting for about 90% of programs (White, 1994).

With the Baby Boom and the G.I. Bill, higher education continued to grow to accommodate new populations. By the 1980s, a period of sustained disinvestment in higher education was underway, which continues to this day, and proponents of multiculturalism and of the Western

¹ For definitions of liberal arts and liberal education, see Appendix 1.

canon were debating content (see Levine 1997, Nussbaum 1998, Bloom 1987, Hirsch, et al. 1988).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century -- with the rise of the assessment movement in the wake of the Spelling Commission Report of 2006 -- models like the AAC&U's Liberal Arts and America's Promise campaign (LEAP) have emerged, which frame the university experience in terms of knowledge, competencies, and demonstrations of application. LEAP stressed the importance of learning outcomes, principles of excellence (challenging standards with flexible guidance), high-impact practices (intensive writing and research, internships and connection to learning outcomes), assessment of student work samples demonstrating outcomes, and cross-disciplinary work. Oregon was one of the charter states to join the LEAP challenge (see <https://www.aacu.org/leap/states>).

The history of general education, in short, has been one of changing demographics, models, and goals, constrained by finances, size, competition and inertia, and informed by the perspectives of various stakeholders.

Today's Learners: Who are they going to be and what are they going to do?

General education has historically evolved to fit the student body as well as institutional, national and economic issues. Brint et al. (2016), citing data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2007, Table 178), note that from 1960 to 2000 the number of students enrolled in postsecondary education rose from 3.6 million to 14.8 million. But according to Nathan Grawe (2018) in his *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, those days are long gone.

The impact of the 2008 recession on birth rates (Grawe calls it the "birth dearth") suggests a 7% increase in four year higher education enrollments through 2025 followed by a **loss of about 15% of the potential student population as early as 2026-2029**.

In addition, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has also issued a series of reports that suggest a drop in the number of American high school graduates, as well as changes in the makeup of that population. Other reports indicate modest growth in the Latinx population as well as new potential enrollments of first-generation students, rural populations, international students, and adult students seeking career advancement or career change.²

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2016, 57% of college students were white compared with 71% in 2000. The percentage of Hispanic students increased from 10% to 18% between 2000 and 2016.

Some of the research on career aspirations is summarized in Arce, Cedar Face and Adams (2018), which cites work by Selingo noting that 39% of college bound individuals are "career switchers" or "career accelerators." They also note that "The traditional 18-year-old academically centered individual is no longer the norm." The NCES reports that student enrollment for individuals over 25 years increased between 2000 and 2016 by 27%, for females the growth was 29% and males 24%. Career outlooks are shifting as well, and some writers even

² SOU demographic data can be found at <https://inside.sou.edu/ir/factbooks.html>. We noted too that the pool of high school students already connected to SOU who are actively accumulating and paying for SOU credit includes approximately 1,800 high school students in Oregon and California.

forecast transformative change in the workforce and an increased bifurcation between high-skilled and low-skilled work as automation squeezes out the middle. In light of such “job polarization,” Fountain and Brooks (2017) cite a future need for “breadth of skills in universal disciplines like communication or management, as well as mastery of specific skills, processes, or a body of knowledge (Adams, 2016).” Their report notes that skills and attitudes such as problem solving and critical thinking, creativity and curiosity, data analysis and collaboration, written and oral communication, and emotional intelligence are currently in demand, and with skills like critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, decision making, and cognitive flexibility likely to be increasingly important in the future. Job change is also a constant, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics now reports that workers will hold an average of 10.8 different jobs between the ages of 18 and 42 alone.

As with previous demographic and workforce shifts, general education may be spurred into new forms. What type of general education will best prepare learners for such changes?

General Education Models and Trends

Today, general education comprises about 30% of a hypothetical undergraduate student’s four-year course of study. An analysis of models over the period 1975-2000 (Brint, et al., 2009) characterized them as falling into four types: “core distribution areas,” “traditional liberal arts,” “cultures and ethics,” and “civic/utilitarian” models. Brint, et al. offered a statistical analysis of changes in general education keyed to these models and cross-referenced to the size and type of institutions. They also take into account such factors such as efficiency, accountability, diversification, and the historical expansion of higher education to new audiences. They report that change in general education was slow and that “During the period of our study, more institutions continued to require general education in natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities than in any other courses,” and that “the humanities were somewhat less frequently required than natural and social sciences . . . , suggesting cracks in the long-standing convention of defining humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences as the principal divisions of basic knowledge.”

From General Education Models: Continuity and Change in the U.S. Undergraduate Curriculum, 1975–2000. (Brint, et al. 2009, internal citations omitted)

The core distribution model treats “the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences . . . as core distribution areas, . . . , with mathematics and the arts joining this group at some institutions.”

The traditional liberal arts model “emphasizes subjects such as literature, history, philosophy, and foreign languages, and it does not include distribution requirements in natural or social sciences. Like other forms of ‘status education,’ it focused on subjects distant from the practical skills valued by

employers. By the 1960s denominational colleges had become the primary home of the traditional liberal arts model of general education.

Cultures and ethics models originated “in the dissatisfaction of faculty members at a number of elite secular institutions, ... with the Western civilization emphasis of general education courses in the 1960s, and the desire of these faculty members to expand the civilization concept to include non-Western cultures.”

The civic/utilitarian model “focuses on preparing students for civic and business life by exposing them to U.S. government, business, and technology courses. ... The model developed, in part, out of state mandates during the period for required U.S. and state government courses.”

Not all general education programs may fit neatly into the models described by Brint et. al. (2009), but rather creatively combine models or connect them with other instructional goals or strategies.

The Traditional Liberal Arts Model

The traditional liberal arts model is represented by such universities as **St. John’s College** in Maryland, which tours “an interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum focused on the most important books and ideas of Western civilization... all classes are conducted seminar-style,” and “a truly comprehensive education that is perhaps the most rigorous in America.” With a total undergraduate enrollment of less than 500 students and a single degree in “Liberal Arts,” St. John’s encapsulates competing aspects of the traditional liberal arts model: rigorous classicism and limited enrollments.

No General Education Model

Other universities, like **Evergreen State College**, go in the opposite direction: “We don’t have majors or general education requirements for undergraduate degrees, so there are no required courses you have to take.” Evergreen enrolls about 3,000 undergraduate students who graduate with a Bachelors of Arts or Bachelors of Science or (with additional credits) as Bachelors of Arts & Science. The general education debate at Evergreen was, at one point in the not-so-distant past, thoughtful and heated, and a number of creative models were offered before the faculty decided to dismiss requirements that some identified as constraints to curricular and academic freedom (McCann, 2002).³ **Amherst College** likewise has “no distribution requirements and no core curriculum”, explaining on their website that their “open curriculum ensures that each classroom is filled with inquisitive, fully engaged students committed to the topic at hand.”

³ This was accompanied by a two-year refinement of the expectations of an Evergreen graduate. Models included a “Spring Festival” model, wherein 40% of the faculty would move their programmatic offerings to Fall and Winter to enable students to take general education requirements in Spring during a “Festival of Learning”.

A time-tested example is given by **Brown University**, which has not had general education requirements for 40 years, after a faculty-student committee found that the courses led to fragmentation, were unrelated to one another, and “inhibited ‘the development of the capacity to think’” (Guterl, 2014). Brown states that “A modern liberal arts education is still defined in terms of a core curriculum comprised of several areas of knowledge. At Brown, rather than specifying these areas, we challenge you to develop your own core” (The Brown Curriculum, 2019). Specifically, in Brown’s open curriculum, the only requirements are that students demonstrate “excellent skill in written English” before graduation, complete 30 courses in 8 semesters, and complete at least one concentration program (what we call a major) in that time (*What is the Open Curriculum*, 2019).

Such programs as the ones at Evergreen, Amherst, or Brown are the exception rather than the rule in the US. Having no general education is more common outside the US. For example, SOU’s sister institutions, the University of Guanajuato and the University of Winchester, do not have a general education programs, reflective of the Mexican and British university systems generally.

Stand-Alone General Education

Flaherty (2018) reports on several revamped general education models aimed at making the experience more cohesive.⁴ Goucher College and Ripon College reimagined a curricula front-loaded with “interesting stuff.” The idea was a breakaway from the “breadth first, depth second” model emphasizing the necessity for students to be challenged every step of the way from first year to graduation.

Robin Heralds Cresiski, director of its Center for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching at **Goucher College**, explains that Goucher’s program has eliminated distribution requirements in favor of yearly seminars and courses which deal with real-world questions through an interdisciplinary lens. The so-called Goucher Commons general education totals a third of a student's 120 credits.

Ripon College’s Catalyst Curriculum, launched in 2016, requires just 20 semester credits out of the 124 required for graduation. It consists of five seminars, two each in the first and second years and an applied innovation seminar in the third year. The first year focuses on information literacy, collaboration, critical thinking, oral communication, and quantitative reasoning with a focus on writing similar to the existing USem courses. The second year builds on first-year skills providing a bridge to the courses specific to disciplines in the third year, but also adds intercultural competence and interdisciplinary integration. In the third year, students complete 15 weeks of independent research emphasizing skills similar to AAC&U’s data on what employers would like to students to have (Flaherty 2018). Graduates who complete the curriculum earn a concentration in applied innovation. Ripon, however, enrolls just 800 students.

⁴ Flaherty’s report summarized the 2018 AAC&U annual meeting panel on “From Content to Inquiry: How Three Liberal Arts Colleges Radically Reimagined General Education.”

Hiram College's New Liberal Arts™ model is focused on a topic or challenge that students explore through a range of classes and disciplines (Varlotta 2018). Hiram anticipates that these topics/challenges will change every few years, likely mirroring social questions and needs. Hiram's first-year experience pushes students to answer questions regarding the kind of person they would like to become, the skills they would like to build, how they can serve their communities and build a meaningful life. In addition, Hiram also requires students to participate in at least one high-impact experiential activity (such as internships, study-away, and service learning) that is connected to their major or their core. **Emory University**'s ORDER classes, which fulfill first-year and senior seminar requirements in general education, are multi-disciplinary, team-taught, research/project-based classes that fulfill liberal arts education goals through mentored undergraduate research (Kaiser et al. 2014).

The potential of stand alone general education is to teach critical thinking outside of disciplines and increased freedom to work across disciplinary boundaries, and to facilitate certain types of pedagogy and assessment (such as high impact practices and eportfolios).

Guided Pathways

Northern Illinois University's AcademicsPLUS Pathways allows students to choose among several general education tracks or as they put it to “Customize your general education with a pathway” with “a head start in your area of interest,” and a “the transcript notation you earn [that] will display your specialized study to employers and graduate schools.” The NIU pathways are Creativity, Innovation and Change; Global Connections; Health and Wellness; Learning; Origins and Influences; Social Justice and Diversity; and Sustainability.

Learning Communities

Many institutions, such as **Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)** and the **University of Utah**, are unifying current or new general education courses with a theme, aiming to provide students with a greater investment in their education and improving retention. **Western Oregon University** has currently revised the requirements for their general education (see the integration models section), and Western's general education task force has recommended the development of learning communities as an *optional* path for students—optional because learning communities might be challenging for its part-time students and there remain a number of “logistical uncertainties” (General Education Committee, 2018). The creation of a learning community involves the “linking or clustering courses that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional structuring of the students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, and foster more explicit connections among students, faculty, and disciplines.” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews, and Smith). Learning communities can be implemented together with other models of general education, as they

emphasize interdisciplinary examination of a topic throughout several courses with a specific instructor and do not specifically address content or skills development.⁵

Integration (into Major Program) Models

Some models feature the integration of general education into major programs. **Western Oregon University** will begin a new general education framework in the 2019-2020 academic year that distributes many of the general education requirements into existing departments, supplemented by 3-7 required foundations courses and a first-year seminar partitioned into quantitative- and writing-focused components. Consequently, many of the required general education credits (with a 44 credit minimum) can be taken within a student's major program of study, thus minimizing credit load and maximizing the development of critical thinking and high impact practices relevant to student interest. Institution-wide rubrics⁶ and assessment plans, adopted by the general education task force, ensure consistency of the learning objectives with diverse content (General Education Committee, 2018).

Early in its adoption, the new general education curriculum at **Arcadia University** dropped “general education” from its description and allowed programs of study to infuse significant portions of the curriculum in their major courses. This new curriculum was developed through dedicated participation in AAC&U meetings and projects, and designing new courses was popular among faculty, who were given stipends for their extra efforts. The underlying theme was one of globalization and developing significant knowledge and intellectual skills that could address complex, worldly issues (Rubin, 2009).

The Arcadia curriculum has been impacted, to some extent, following the economic crisis of 2008 and a number of presidential appointments and resignations over a 6-year period, with corresponding shifts in administration and culture. According to current faculty, this created a shift toward a more traditional structure in the university, but it is unclear how and to what extent this affected their novel approach to the general curriculum they had developed and implemented (Siskind, 2018).

Arcadia University's current website presents “Undergraduate Curriculum requirements,” which correspond to a number of courses rather than a number of credits in three areas: (a) integrative learning experiences, (b) areas of inquiry, and (c) intellectual practices. The integrative learning experiences include multi-year university seminars, a cross-cultural experience, and a capstone project. The areas of inquiry require several courses that focus on creative thinking, humanities, science, and society. And the intellectual practices develop skills in various areas, including communication, visual literacy, language, quantitative reasoning, and “crossing boundaries” across several courses (2019).

Hybrid Models

⁵ SOU's House program was initially conceived as a multiyear Learning Communities program.

⁶ These include 4 AAC&U VALUE rubrics and 2 rubrics under development at WOU, a foundational skills rubric and a diversity rubric.

SOU's current general education program (branded as University Studies since 2006) blends aspects of the core distribution model, which is most evident in the Explorations course categories, with aspects of other models aimed in theory at building cross-level connections (for example between first year seminar and junior level integrations courses). In its previous incarnation as the Nine Goals model about 90 credits of general education were required (some of which could also count toward a major); the current SOU model requires about 60 credits.⁷

The trend over the past decades has been for fewer credits; **Portland State's** highly regarded general education reform in 1992, went from a 63-credit requirement to a 45-credit requirement that included a year-long freshman course, 24 credits of interdisciplinary courses, and a 6-credit capstone experience, with the net effect that the number of student seats and the number of courses needed to deliver general education to students would be reduced.

Some universities have focused their general education reform in other ways: **Wayne State University's** 2018 general education revision added categories of global learning, diversity, equity and inclusion, and but reduced its general education to a maximum of 35 credits, which includes a required Wayne Experience course of one credit; among the changes was dropping of the mathematics requirement in favor of a Quantitative Experience course. The categories of global learning, diversity, equity and inclusion offer a wide range of options--well over 300 courses.

Pillars of General Education

As MacDonald (2003) notes developing or revising the General Education is a lengthy and complex process. It requires reaching institutional consensus on curricular and pedagogical issues, degree requirements, course content, skills requirement, and assessment methods. According to MacDonald, the benefit that can be gained include a stronger sense of institutional identity, greater faculty satisfaction, increased enrollment, higher student retention rates and performance and overall improved public profile and perception.

As we reviewed the general education models at other institutions, a handful of pillars or principles have emerged underlying many models.

⁷ Sixty credits is the advertised SOU average; the actual number of credits can vary from the mid-fifties to the low seventies, not including other BA/BS requirements. See Appendix 6 for SOU's current (2018-2019) requirements. The most recent general education revision at SOU was a three-year process led by a Committee to Realign the Curriculum or CREAC which took place during 2002-2006. For details, see <https://inside.sou.edu/academicassessment/index.html>

1. A common experience (some institutions have a first-year common experience, while others extend that beyond or through general education).
2. Breadth of cross-disciplinary knowledge in the form a coherent set of options that students must choose from. These can be discipline-focused or theme-focused.
3. Experiential, high impact activities such as a capstone, internships, research, and/or study abroad.
4. Twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills, computational skills, intercultural skills, teamwork, systems thinking, and similar skills.
5. A clear understanding and articulation of the relationship of general education skills to the skills required in majors.

We note that there are many ways to build such pillars and that nationally revision efforts are a priority for many institutions. The table below lists some of the design elements of general education programs nationally, from a survey of over three hundred chief academic officers commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Design Elements of General Education, 2015 Survey

Element	Percentage of Colleges
Distribution model	76%
Capstone or culminating studies (in majors)	60%
Upper-level general ed requirements	46%
Core curriculum	44%
Thematic required courses	42%
Common intellectual experience	41%
Capstone experience (in general ed)	26%
Learning communities	22%

Goals of General Education

As William Cronon noted in his 1998 piece in *The American Scholar*, some general education requirements read “And when we try to state the purpose of [a liberal education], we often flounder” ending up with “ the kind of language one expects from an academic committee, [...

but which hardly] stirs the heart or inspires the soul.” Cronon offers his own set of criteria, “not of required courses but of personal qualities.” He ends with the caveat that

my original question—“What does it mean to be a liberally educated person?”—is misleading, deeply so, because it suggests that one can somehow take a group of courses, or accumulate a certain number of credits, or undergo an obligatory set of learning experiences, and emerge liberally educated at the end of the process.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A liberal education is not something any of us ever achieve; it is not a state. Rather, it is a way of living in the face of our own ignorance, a way of groping toward wisdom in full recognition of our own folly, a way of educating ourselves without any illusion that our educations will ever be complete.

... Each of the qualities I have described is a craft or a skill or a way of being in the world that frees us to act with greater knowledge or power. But each of these qualities also makes us ever more aware of the connections we have with other people and the rest of creation, and so they remind us of the obligations we have to use our knowledge and power responsibly.

Universities often end up with less eloquent but perhaps essentially equivalent descriptions for the goals of general education. The AAC&U’s LEAP initiative, for example, which ties the goals of general education to learning outcomes, articulates the goals as knowledge of human cultures and the physical, an array of intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, integrative and applied learning (AAC&U, <https://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes>).

The Role of Employers and Learners in the Design of New General Education Programs

When it comes to the role of employers and learners in general education, employers vote with their payrolls and learners vote with their feet (or their seats). Both groups have traditionally been involved in general education as (satisfied or dissatisfied) consumers of graduates or of courses. Input into the design of general education has tended to emerge from surveys of student opinion or perception and from a survey of hiring managers. With respect to general education, such surveys might require a grain of salt in that evaluations of students' preparation for work might refer to the efforts of the whole university rather than to general education specifically.

Research such as *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work* (Hart Research, 2018) is one of the latest. Commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the work reported on an online survey of about 500 business executives and about 500 hiring managers and other non-executives involved in hiring. Two key findings were that:

... higher proportions of both executives and hiring managers say that recent graduates have the skills to succeed in entry-level positions than say that recent graduates have the skills needed to advance or be promoted. Majorities think that colleges and universities need to make improvements to ensure that their graduates possess the skills and

knowledge needed for workplace success at the entry level, and especially for advancement.

When hiring, executives and hiring managers place a high priority on graduates' demonstrated proficiency in skills and knowledge that cut across majors, and hiring managers are closely aligned with executives in the importance that they place on key college learning outcomes. The college learning outcomes that both audiences rate as most important include oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, working independently, self-motivation, written communication, and real-world application of skills and knowledge.

They noted too that executives and managers express a higher degree of confidence in universities than the general American public does: with 63% expressing "quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in colleges and universities." According to a January 2018 Gallup poll, only 45% of adults nationwide expressed similar confidence in colleges and universities.⁸

Still some employers think undergraduates are not ready for the world of work (Bauer-Wolf, 2018), despite college graduates spending 84% of weeks employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Based on the 2018 Job Outlook Survey, the largest divide was between students' professionalism and work ethic. Nine in 10 seniors believed they were competent in this area but only 43% of employers agreed. Similarly, 80% of students believed they were competent in oral and written communication as well as critical thinking skills. However, only 42% and 56% of employers agreed that college graduates had actually achieved these levels of competency.⁹ Other employer and groups are working to develop clearer expectations and reduce the ambiguity of expectations (Fain 2019).

Overall, employers' emphasis on strong communication skills, critical and creative thinking, and ethical judgment also suggest that liberal arts education and workforce preparation are not antithetical, despite some claims (Harris 2018).

Finley and Horan (2018) also noted the importance of examining equity gaps in general education success rates--the degree to which different demographic groups succeed or fail to succeed in general education.

There is a broad literature on student perceptions of general education. A more recent piece by Thompson, et al. (2015) reported that half of students surveyed at Oklahoma State University agreed or strongly agreed (36.8 percent and 13.2 percent) that "If General Education courses were not required by OU, I would probably not enroll in these courses." Over two-thirds agreed

⁸ On the other hand, the report notes a statistically significant difference in confidence levels among executives regionally, with only 53% of executives on the West having a lot or a great deal of confidence in colleges.

⁹ The graduate and employer divide may have to do with definitional differences. Employers may see critical thinking as generating new ideas or original thought while from an academic standpoint, it may mean exploring an idea more in depth. The same may be true for writing skills; in academia, writing may include lots of citations which is different from writing for marketing purposes.

or strongly agreed (49.9 percent and 21.7 percent) that they would prefer to take additional major courses and about a third (30.6 percent) of students planned to take general education courses at other institutions. (p 286). Among the qualitative comments were some that may sound familiar: “I want to take classes over the summer closer to home to get some credits out of the way,” “Why would I pay more for General Education when these classes aren’t my focus?”) A 2015 survey of provosts at over 300 institutions conducted by the AAC&U, found that just 9 percent of respondents believed all students were aware of their desired learning outcomes and just 36 percent said that a majority of students understood them. This mismatch between requirements and awareness of their purpose suggests that learner input about general education should be treated carefully and cautiously and that better communication is necessary. And a recent report on notes that “Politicians question the value of it, specifically requirements that aren’t explicitly job oriented. Students don’t always get it. And creating and adopting a strong general education program demands much of already time--if not resource--strapped professors and their institutions” (Flaherty 2019).

Thompson et al. (2015) also cited research suggesting a difference in perceptions of general education between faculty and students, one survey across seven institutions implying that faculty saw the need as being for administrators to “articulate clearly to campuses and within broader state communities the purpose and value of general education . . . explain its importance to the general population” (Paulson, 2012, pp. 26–27). Thompson et al. are perhaps being ironic here because the responsibility for advocacy and information sharing about general education --its relevance and goals--is a broad responsibility. If general education is seen as peripheral, then there is little of using a shared general education program to strengthen and enhance all forms of intellectual inquiry and practice. If, on the other hand, general education is seen as essential to all who pursue higher learning, then it becomes the communal point of pride for a university.

The Institutional Equilibrium

In their discussion of general education models over time, Brint, et al., (2009) coyly caution that “The guild interests of faculty strongly mitigate against wholesale changes in general education.” They note that where general education is based on distribution requirements, any major changes to requirements can be seen as a threat to enrollments and hence resources and workloads. Varlotta (2018) describes the challenges Hiram College faced, and the strategies used, in creating systemic change, including to the college’s general education program. General education change also has implications for student affairs professionals dealing with transfer, legacy catalogs, and degree audits. For discussion of some of the potential pitfalls see Gaston and Gaff (2009), White (1994), and Awbrey (2005); for a model of a possible larger study, see the 2018 Final Report and Recommendations The University of Arizona General Education Program Review Task Force.

Transfer Issues and the Interstate Passport

One general education issue that comes up again and again has to do with transfer issues, as a barrier to completion and a factor in student (and legislative) dissatisfaction. Revising its general education program in the 1990s, Portland State noted:

A key concern for transfer students is the equivalency of their coursework at other institutions to courses meeting the distribution requirements at Portland State. In addition to creating a substantial workload for those involved with transcript evaluation, the "equivalency problem" appears to generate a good deal of dissatisfaction among transfer students. ...

Transfer students frequently experience difficulties with the present system and may encounter delays in graduation for purposes which often seem to them more bureaucratic than educational.

Pre-articulated block transfer programs are one approach to transfer issues. Another model being promoted by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is the Interstate Passport, which aims to facilitate block transfer of lower-division general education, improve graduation rates, shorten time to degree, and save students money.¹⁰ WICHE explains it this way:

Interstate Passport® is the only nationwide network of regionally accredited, nonprofit, public and private two- and four-year institutions dedicated to the block transfer of lower-division general education attainment based on multi-state faculty-developed learning outcomes and proficiency criteria instead of on specific courses and credits.

Interstate Passport (IP) components are based on existing articulation agreements designed in consultation with faculty, registrars, institutional researchers, and academic advisors. In Oregon, IP allows for a student to transfer credits earned, in a block, beyond the borders of Oregon to meet lower division general education. For students from other states, receiving a passport means a student can arrive with lower division general education completed through the IP transcript.

Since both the IP and SOU's current Foundations and Explorations of University Studies are based on the AAC&U's LEAP framework, the model looks similar in many ways to the current SOU lower-division general education outcomes. (For more on the Interstate Passport Study, visit: www.witche.edu/passport (*Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, WICHE*).

Another program, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs), is working to "develop a portable and competency-based framework for general education." Funded by a \$2.3 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the AAC&U GEM program will look at both online and face-to-face programs in what one report called "an upmarket migration of some of the approaches used in competency-based programs that so far are almost entirely confined to adult-serving, open-access online institutions." According to Carol Geary Schneider of the AAC&U, the effort reflects a move

¹⁰ According to the Interstate Passport website, Western Oregon University and Blue Mountain Community College are members.

away from the credit hour as the marker of tabulating student achievement. For more on the AAC&U GEM project visit <https://www.aacu.org/gems>.

Customizability

The question of customizability can be anxiety producing for institutions, but in some sense it is already answered in practice. Students are often able to customize their general education experience by choosing from various distribution requirements; it is a type of unstructured customization driven by advising, happenstance, double-dipping in the major or (seat and time) availability. Students can also customize other university requirements by selecting a BA or a BS or a BFA. And at SOU specifically, customized general education options are available on a small scale through programs like the Oregon Transfer Module, the Accelerated Baccalaureate Program, the Honors College, and the Jackson-Josephine Pledge. Each of these tailors general education options to particular enrollment types.

Some institutions, as noted in the models discussion, allow more structured and intentional customization. However, customizability can be expensive, depending on the kind of customization, the resources to keep all of the options open/accessible, and the opportunities to manage students who might wish to change a custom option later in their program. Questions of sustainability arise in much the same way as conversations about the number of majors and minors a university can sustain.

Other research on customizability can be found in Spaulding, et al. (2019).

Key Points for SOU to Consider

The Chronicle of Higher Education special report on Reforming General Education, which profiled three reforms efforts (at Concordia-Irvine, the University of Kentucky, and Portland State) offered advice for successful general education reform (McMurtrie, 2018), which we think is useful as a concluding note.

- Begin with the big picture
- Consider the best structure to support decisions
- Collect evidence
- Be mindful of the needs of transfer students
- Think about resources
- Consider incentive structures
- Communicate
- Form subcommittees to begin the deeper work.

Goal One of SOU's strategic plan is to "develop curriculum and provide learning experiences that prepare all learners for life and work in an evolving future; connect directly with the challenges of our community, region, and world; and build self-confidence and the capacity to think critically, innovate boldly, and create lives of purpose." This suggests that the University's should not defer reviewing general education. The first step is determining what level of re-engineering is needed, building on the best of what we have rather than reinventing the whole of everything. As this unfolds, SOU should

- assess the effectiveness of general education, looking at data from various groups of learners and at various groups of courses as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of general education courses that also count as majors courses.
- review studies on student perception of general education and collect campus data on the perceptions of SOU students, faculty and staff.
- find ways to align changes in general education with the needs of current and future student demographics in terms of transferability, content, pedagogy, and especially SOU's ability to attract and retain students.
- carefully monitor and further explore dual credit transfer alignment and growth potential in general education such as the Interstate Passport and the General Education Maps and Markers effort.
- review models in more depth, consult with other campuses and consider submitting a team application to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Institute on General Education and Assessment.
- involve those whose healthy skepticism can lead to the discovery of unintended consequences and unanticipated problems.
- consult broad constituencies throughout the university community while also following the regular shared governance procedures for curriculum change.
- set a reasonable timeline and be mindful of the resources and incentives needed for innovation, planning, and implementation.
- develop a broad-based communications effort for general education focusing on the goals and value of a liberal education.
- identify synergies with the work of other professional learning communities such as those dealing with upper division education, creativity, lives of purpose and learner satisfaction.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Definitions

Liberal Education: An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.¹

Liberal Arts: Specific disciplines (i.e., the humanities, sciences, and social sciences).

Liberal Arts College: A particular type of institution—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, and whose curriculum is grounded in the liberal arts disciplines.

General Education: That part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes introductory, advanced, and integrative forms of learning

from <https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education#survey>

Appendix 2: Models Discussed

Traditional liberal arts: St. John's College

No general education: Evergreen State College, Amherst College, Brown University

Stand-alone general education Goucher Commons, Ripon College's Catalyst Curriculum, Hiram College's New Liberal Arts™

ORDER classes, Emory University

AcademicsPLUS Pathways Northern Illinois University

Learning communities: Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, University of Utah, Western Oregon University

General education integrated into the major: Western Oregon University, Arcadia University

Hybrid models with fewer credits: Portland State, Wayne State University

Transfer frameworks: Interstate Passport, AAC&U General Education Mapping and Markers

Appendix 3: The AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise Learning Outcomes

Essential Learning Outcomes

The LEAP campaign is organized around a robust set of "Essential Learning Outcomes" -- all of which are best developed by a contemporary liberal education. Described in *College Learning for the New Global Century*, these essential learning outcomes and a set of "Principles of Excellence" provide a new framework to guide students' cumulative progress through college.

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving
-

Practiced extensively across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, Including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning
-

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative and Applied Learning, Including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
-

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

<https://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes>

Appendix 4: Common Elements of Colleges' Learning Outcomes, 2008 and 2015, AAC&U

Skills/Knowledge	2008	2015	Change
Writing skills	99%	99%	-
Critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills	95%	98%	+3%
Quantitative reasoning skills	91%	94%	+3%
Knowledge of science	91%	92%	+1%
Knowledge of mathematics	87%	92%	+5%
Knowledge of humanities	92%	92%	-
Knowledge of global world cultures	87%	89%	+2%
Knowledge of social sciences	90%	89%	-1%
Knowledge of the arts	n/a	85%	-
Oral communication skills	88%	82%	-6%
Intercultural skills and abilities	79%	79%	-
Information literacy skills	76%	76%	-
Research skills and projects	65%	75%	+10%
Ethical reasoning	75%	75%	-
Knowledge of diversity in the United States	73%	73%	-
Integration of learning across disciplines	63%	68%	+5%
Application of learning beyond the classroom	66%	65%	-1%
Civic engagement and competence	68%	63%	-5%
Knowledge of technology	61%	49%	-11%
Knowledge of languages other than English	42%	48%	+6%
Knowledge of American history	49%	47%	-2%
Knowledge of sustainability	24%	27%	+3%

Appendix 5: Samples of Data Available at SOU (from Division of Undergraduate Studies)

The Division of Undergraduate Studies has data on participation in general education by academic division, which will be useful to inform future planning and implementation efforts.

University Studies Committee course count for the 5-year review process conducted AY 2016- 2017.

Exploration Strands	Received Current	<i>Pending</i>	Total Possible
E Strand	38	20	58
F Strand	26	10	36
G Strand	14	10	24

Integration Strands	Received Current	<i>Pending</i>	Total Possible	Honors College
H Strand	14	22	37	1
I Strand	30	22	55	3
J Strand	35	28	65	2

After updates and eliminations (courses no longer offered), there are 275 University Studies Exploration and Integration courses offered. Of the 275 courses, 118 are Exploration offered as E, F, or G strand designations. During the review, 78 Explorations courses were submitted for review or held a current status, 40 are still pending action (outdated or no paperwork on file).

There are 157 Integrations courses possible for H, I, or J strands. Of those, 79 were submitted for review or are current, 72 still need to be resubmitted (or have no paperwork is on file), and six courses are template level classes taught only in Honors College. Honors College submits templates for every new course taught in each of the designated Integration Strand areas. To highlight the distribution of courses among divisions, below is a snapshot of the distribution of H-Strand Integration courses from Fall 2018.

Fall 2018, H Strand Integration Courses

As of Spring 2019, the following represents the eligible Exploration and Integration courses offered for each strand.

Foundation Strands A – D	<i>First Year Experience</i>	
Strand A, B, C	Seminar (several theme options)	101, 102, 103 required
Strand D	Mathematics	10 possible classes

Exploration	(100 – 200 level)		Integration	(300 – 400 level)	
Strand E	73	3 classes	Strand H	54	1 class
Strand F	38	3 classes	Strand I	68	1 class
Strand G	33* 5 non-lab	3 classes	Strand J	76	1 class

Since the 2016-2017 University Studies review, our offerings have expanded to:

University Studies	Possible Courses	Growth Since Review <i>(2 Academic Years 2017/18 to 2018/19)</i>
Explorations	144	26
Integrations	198	41
Total Offerings (E – J)	342	67

University Studies Petition For Substitution: Approved

Many transfer courses are articulated and directly come to SOU as equivalent. Classes that do not directly articulate to University Studies may be petitioned for substitution by a student. Below is a snapshot of courses Strands E – J, Academic Years 2013 – 2019.

Explorations

Strand	AY 13/14	AY 14/15	AY 15/16	AY 16/17	AY 17/18	AY 18/19	Total
E	58	179	81	61	102	100	581
F	23	77	28	26	30	36	220
G	46	289	116	112	154	118	835
Grand Totals	127	545	225	199	286	254	1,636

Integration

Strand	AY 13/14	AY 14/15	AY 15/16	AY 16/17	AY 17/18	AY 18/19	Total
H/ I/ J	65	89	54	53	62	48	371

Appendix 6:

University Studies Requirements Fall 2018 – Summer 2019 Catalog Year Catalog expires end of summer term 2026

Foundation Strands – Lower Division		
# of credits		
12	ABC - Writing and Oral Communication (3 courses with a C- or better in each course)	First-Year Seminar - USEM, HSE or HON; 101, 102 and 103 or WR 121, 122 and COMM 125 or 210 or 225
4-8	D - Quantitative Reasoning 4-8 credits of college level coursework required*	From approved course list
Exploration Strands – Lower Division		
9-12	E - Humanities	From approved course list. <i>Note: Each approved exploration course is at least 3 credits.</i>
9-12	F - Social Science	
11-12	G – Science (2 of these courses must be taken with labs)	
Integration Strands – Upper Division		
3-4	H - Science, Technology, and Society 3-4 credits required (1 course)	From approved course list <i>Maximum of 2 courses in the same subject</i>
3-4	I - Citizenship and Social Responsibility 3-4 credits required (1 course)	
3-4	J - Diversity and Global Awareness 3-4 credits required (1 course)	
AAOT, ASOT, OTM, DTA, IGETC, CSUGE Associate Transfer Degrees fulfill Strands A-G. Degrees DO NOT fulfill Strands H-J.		