Benchmarking General Education Programs

At Institutions Offering Two- and Four-Year Degrees
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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

General education requirements and learning outcomes should focus on providing students with practical skills and applications (e.g., written and oral communication, critical thinking, social responsibility, global citizenship) rather than discipline-based competencies. The development of practical skills best prepares students for any career. However, all contacts still maintain knowledge domain requirements for social sciences, natural sciences, and arts and humanities in addition to skill-based requirements.

Administrators must engage all faculty members throughout the general education requirements and learning outcomes development process; inclusion of faculty members in the development process is the best way to mitigate resistance to changes in general education programming. Faculty members may regard changes to general education programming as micromanagement or overreach by the central administration. Administrators should solicit faculty input on the revisions to demonstrate that faculty members play a vital role in the development and implementation of a new general education program.

Write actionable learning outcomes that include assessable goals. Measurable goals for learning outcomes facilitate better assessment of student success. Administrators typically develop broad student learning outcomes with clearly defined goals for each outcome. Clearly defined goals within broader learning outcomes communicate expectations for general education courses and facilitate student completion and assessment.

Institutions assess learning outcomes, develop course assessment rubrics, and administer Educational Testing Service exams to measure general education program success. General education programs are assessed at the individual course level. Contacts find the Educational Test Service exam to be the least accurate measurement of program assessment since transfer students do not complete their general education requirements at their institution.

Contacts identify e-portfolios as an innovative and useful tool for the documentation of general education requirements and student learning outcome completion. Student e-portfolios may also be used for more advanced assessment purposes, like program assessment, accreditation, or certification. Profiled institutions currently only employ e-portfolios for intensive writing general education requirements.

All major curricula reinforce practical skills developed through the general education curriculum, like critical thinking and communication. Contacts report that knowledge-based general education courses, such as introduction to chemistry, introduce students to basic scientific principles and the scientific method. Science majors employ these basic principles and reasoning throughout all of their major course work.
2) Benchmarking General Education Programs

Developing a General Education Program

Profiling General Education Programs Require between 36 and 53 Credit Hours Distributed across Multiple Categories

The number of courses required within each category varies by institution; however, most institutions require two courses under natural sciences, languages, and humanities. Courses taken for the general education program also count towards a student’s major requirements.

In addition to general education requirements, most institutions require first-year students to participate in a one- to two-credit freshman seminar or university experience course that acclimates students to the campus and student organizations.

Distribute General Education Program Requirements by Category

Most profiled institutions distribute general education program requirements by general category (e.g., mathematics, social and behavioral science, humanities) with several subcategories. Contacts at Missouri Southern State University and Eastern Florida State College report that the state dictates a certain number of the general education program category requirements.

A new Florida state mandate dictates 15 credit hours of the general education requirements at Eastern Florida State College. Contacts report that while the five categories and number of credit hours required will not change, the institution will make significant changes to the courses offered to students under each category.

General Education Curriculum Committees Review and Revise Program Requirements and Student Learning Outcomes

Faculty from various disciplines serve on a general education curriculum committee that reviews, revises, and develops learning outcomes, course requirements, and assessment mechanisms for the general education program. Contacts at most profiled institutions report that department chairs do not serve as faculty representatives due to conflicting time commitments. The faculty committee approves changes to general education curriculum and assessment methods and send these changes to the faculty senate for a vote.

Common General Education Program Categories
- Human Civilization
- Foreign Language
- Mathematics
- Social Sciences
- Literature
- Natural Sciences
- Writing

“The general education program helps students develop breadth of view and judgment to be more intellectually, socially, and culturally responsive as citizens, consumers, and leaders in a global and multicultural society.”

- Forum Interview
The University of South Carolina – Aiken lacked a formal faculty committee to review the general education committee. Administrators selected a nine-member committee of faculty at various ranks chaired by the Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs to review the general education curriculum.

**Involve Faculty in General Education Program Revisions to Reduce Resistance to Curriculum Changes**

Profiled institutions assigned faculty to general education curriculum development committees to mitigate resistance to new student learning outcomes and general education requirements. Faculty members are more likely to support changes in the general education curriculum if administrators solicit faculty input.

Contacts suggest selecting faculty from various disciplines and rank to form general education curriculum review committees. A diverse group of faculty increases buy-in and provides diverse perspectives on general education curriculum and student learning.

**Strategies to Generate Faculty Support**

- **Solicit Input**
  - Allow faculty to review all decisions and proposals from the general education committee. Contacts suggest these consultations with the faculty senate engage faculty, even if the senate cannot alter decisions.

- **Reassure Faculty**
  - Administrators should assure faculty that the goal of general education program revision is to improve student performance and outcomes, not to monitor or evaluate faculty. Faculty support revisions when they believe it will not affect their course instruction.

- **Provide Professional Development**
  - To promote the incorporation of general education learning outcomes into existing courses, contacts suggest administrators provide professional development on how to structure assignments to assess general education programs.
Most Profiled Institutions Require a Major-Specific Capstone Rather than a General Education Program Capstone

At several profiled institutions, the general education program is the same for the baccalaureate and associate degree programs. Administrators at the University of Rio Grande cannot include a capstone requirement in the general education program because all courses that fulfill general education requirements must be below the associate (200) level.

Administrators at Dickinson State University seek to transition from the current two-year foundational general education program towards a vertical, more integrated program. The revised general education program may culminate with a general education program capstone.

Student Learning Outcomes Emphasize Action and Assessable Goals

Contacts stress that learning outcomes should emphasize student action and avoid vague terminology that allows administrators to develop assessable, measurable outcomes. Student learning outcomes at most profiled institutions identify what students will demonstrate in each outcome, rather than what they will discuss or what a student will be able to do effectively. The use of precise, action-orientated language in learning outcomes ensures that faculty members and students understand the expectations set forth in the general education program.

Develop Either Standalone Learning Outcomes or Align Learning Outcomes to General Education Program Requirements

Administrators at profiled institutions design student learning outcomes as either standalone, performance-based competencies applicable to any program, discipline, or course or align learning outcomes to individual general education requirement categories.

Administrators at Eastern Florida State College designed their core abilities to provide a skill set apply throughout the academic experience, whether in the general education program, bachelors and associate degree programs, or career and technical programs.
Standalone Student Learning Outcomes at *Eastern Florida State College*\(^1\)

**Work Cooperatively**
- Demonstrate the ability to act cooperatively and effectively in a diverse environment
- Demonstrate respectful interpersonal skills when working with others
- Provide and accept constructive feedback
- Contribute to a group with ideas, suggestions, and effort

**Think Critically and Solve Problems**
- Demonstrate the ability to research, evaluate, interpret, synthesize, and apply knowledge and understanding of problem-solving activities
- Demonstrate the integration of culturally and aesthetically-based knowledge and understanding of problem-solving activities
- Demonstrate the integration of mathematically and scientifically-based knowledge and understanding into problem-solving activities

**Process Information**
- Identify, locate, and use appropriate technology and information tools for research purposes
- Gather required information
- Select, synthesize, and organize information
- Evaluate and document sources

**Model Ethical and Civic Responsibility**
- Accept responsibility for his or her learning
- Demonstrate respect for the rights, views, and work of others
- Exhibit personal and academic honesty
- Exhibit responsibility in personal, civic, professional, and educational environments

**Communicate Effectively**
- Apply appropriate reading, writing, speaking, new media, and active listening skills to express information, ideas, and opinions
- Use appropriate technology that supports or facilitates communication
- Communicate effectively, appropriately, and professionally in verbal, nonverbal, and written formats

Administrators at *Dickinson State University* align student learning outcomes with each general education category. The course catalog designates aligned learning outcomes and general education requirements under the general education program description.

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Aligned Student Learning Outcomes at *Dickinson State University*²

**Critical Thinking**
Students will demonstrate critical thinking in a variety of contexts for life-long learning.

**Communication and Technology**
Students will demonstrate proficiency in communication skills in a variety of forms including the effective use of current technologies and other information resources.

**Global Awareness**
Students will demonstrate knowledge of national and international multiculturalism and the importance of global citizenship.

**Aesthetic Appreciation**
Students will demonstrate knowledge of the arts and humanities including participation in artistic activities.

**Health and Wellness**
Students will demonstrate knowledge of the importance of health, wellness, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

General Educated Requirement Categories and Aligned Learning Outcomes at *Dickinson State University*³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Education Requirement Category</th>
<th>Aligned General Education Learning Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication and Technology</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communication and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences and Mathematics</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communication and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Health and Wellness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressions of Human Civilization</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Global Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aesthetic Appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Human Civilization</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Global Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aesthetic Appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Cultural Studies</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Global Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aesthetic Appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Wellness</td>
<td>• Health and Wellness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


³) Ibid.
Integrate Co-Curricular Learning into General Education Programs through Experiential Learning Requirements

The University of South Carolina – Aiken integrates co-curricular learning into general education programs through an experiential learning requirement to reinforce the holistic mission of the general education program. Students complete this requirement through study abroad, internships, service learning courses, faculty-mentored research, or a capstone course.

Student Options to Complete the Integrated Learning Requirement at the University of South Carolina - Aiken

3) Evaluation and Assessment

Program Assessment

Institutions Assess Individual Courses to Measure General Education Program Success

Most profiled institutions do not employ a program-wide assessment method for the general education program and rely on faculty and departments to assess individual courses. Faculty and administrators assess these courses with rubrics, e-portfolios, general education exams, and course surveys.

Assessment Methods at Profiled Institutions

Course Rubrics

Each rubric separates the learning outcome into several proficiencies. Faculty then rank a student’s level of proficiency in each area according to a scale. Contacts report that faculty either develop their own rubrics or utilize rubrics published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) or other universities. Administrators caution that although rubrics increase uniformity of assessment, faculty do not always use rubrics consistently, which limits the validity of assessment.

Student E-Portfolios

A collection of student exams, essays, and projects through e-portfolios allow administrators to better assess student growth and development longitudinally over the course of their education. Most profiled institutions only use e-portfolios to track student completion and assessment of general education program writing requirements.
Faculty that teach different sections of the same general education course (e.g., English 101) may assess courses with different evaluation methods (e.g., course rubrics versus e-portfolios). The use of different assessment methods for the same course limits the validity of general education program evaluation.

The assessment committee at Eastern Florida State College is working with faculty to develop discipline-specific assessment rubrics. Instructors from courses that fulfill a general education requirement will convene at the end of the semester to collect and score blinded student work according to these rubrics.

Faculty at Eastern Florida State College complete an online survey at the end of the semester. The survey collects information on the type of assessment tool faculty employed, how many students achieved “success” (70 percent or above), how many students passed, and which students passed (e.g., B.A. or A.A.). If faculty employ a rubric for assessment purposes, they must upload the rubric to the website.

Contacts at most profiled institutions do not rely on student surveys to assess learning outcomes, as students typically fail to put significant thought or effort into their responses.

Missouri Southern State University and Dickinson State University utilizes the Educational Testing Service (ETS) proficiency profile to assess core skill competencies. Administrators report that the ETS proficiency profile alone is not an accurate measure of program success because every student does not complete their general education requirements at the institution.

Education Testing Service (ETS) Exams

Course Surveys

Missouri Southern State University and Dickinson State University utilizes the Educational Testing Service (ETS) proficiency profile to assess core skill competencies. Administrators report that the ETS proficiency profile alone is not an accurate measure of program success because every student does not complete their general education requirements at the institution.

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4) Research Methodology

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How many credits do general education programs require? How are general education program credits distributed (e.g., by discipline, category, learning outcome)?
- What are some examples of essential learning outcomes for general education programs?
- What capstone requirements exist at other institutions?
- When do students complete the capstone course?
- Are capstones presented as standalone interdisciplinary course or offered within a discipline or major?
- What connections exist between the capstone course and university learning outcomes?
- How do institutions integrate co-curricular learning into general education programs?
- What collaboration was there between the curricular (i.e., faculty) and co-curricular (i.e., staff) parts of the institution?
- Who was involved in this process?
- What were the roles of those involved?
- What were the challenges were encountered during this process? How were these challenges addressed?
- When was the most recent general education program review?
- How are skills from the general education program reinforced in the major curriculum?
- How do institutions assess success in their general education programs?

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB’s internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
  - Education Advisory Board, Identifying and Articulating Student Learning Outcomes, 2014.
  - Education Advisory Board, Outcomes-Based General Education Programs, 2012.
  - Education Advisory Board, Considerations for Development and Assessment of Outcomes-Based General Education Curricula, 2011.
- Profiled Institution Websites
The Forum interviewed academic affairs administrators at primarily small, comprehensive colleges and universities, including recently established four-year universities that offer two-year degrees.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson State University</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>1,800/1,800</td>
<td>Baccalaureate Colleges--Diverse Fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Florida State College</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>17,200/17,200</td>
<td>Associate's--Public Rural-serving Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri Southern State University</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>5,000/5,400</td>
<td>Baccalaureate Colleges--Diverse Fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of South Carolina – Aiken</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>3,100/3,200</td>
<td>Baccalaureate Colleges--Diverse Fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Rio Grande</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>2,200/2,300</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics
## Appendix A - Overview of General Education Program Requirements

### Overview of General Education Program Requirements at Profiled Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Total General Education Credit Hours</th>
<th>General Education Categories and Subcategories (Credit Hours)</th>
<th>Last Program Review (Estimate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of South Carolina – Aiken</td>
<td>50-53 credit hours</td>
<td><strong>Natural and Physical World</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Natural Sciences (7-8)&lt;br&gt;• History of Civilization (3)&lt;br&gt;• Social and Behavioral Science (6)&lt;br&gt;• Languages (6-8)&lt;br&gt;• Humanities (9)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Practical Skills</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Critical Inquiry (1)&lt;br&gt;• English (6)&lt;br&gt;• Oral Communication (3)&lt;br&gt;• Mathematics (6)&lt;br&gt;• Writing Proficiency - three courses designated as Writing Intensive, at least one of which is in the major&lt;br&gt;<strong>Personal and Social Responsibility</strong>&lt;br&gt;• American Political Institutions (3)</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri Southern State University</td>
<td>46-47 credit hours</td>
<td><strong>Written Communication (6)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Oral Communication (3)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Mathematics (3)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Life Sciences and Physical Sciences (8-9)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Social and Behavioral Science (12)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Humanities and Fine Arts (6)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Health and Wellness (2)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>University Experience (2)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>International Studies (3)</strong></td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Rio Grande</td>
<td>42-43 credit hours</td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Fundamentals of Speech (3)&lt;br&gt;• Composition I and II (6)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Health and Physical Education</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Human Wellness and Physical Fitness (2)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Arts and Humanities</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Fine Arts (3)&lt;br&gt;• Philosophical Inquiry (3)&lt;br&gt;• World Civilization (3)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Social Sciences</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Introduction to Social Sciences (3)&lt;br&gt;• American History (3)&lt;br&gt;• Economics, Psychology, Sociology (3)</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Credit Hours</th>
<th>Core Abilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson State University</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Liberal Arts&lt;br&gt;• Gateway to Success (3)&lt;br&gt;Mathematics and Natural Science&lt;br&gt;• Mathematics (4-5)&lt;br&gt;• Biology (4)&lt;br&gt;• Natural Science (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Florida State College</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Communications&lt;br&gt;• Composition I and II (6)&lt;br&gt;• Public Speaking (3)&lt;br&gt;• Technology (3)&lt;br&gt;Natural Sciences and Mathematics&lt;br&gt;• Natural Sciences (4)&lt;br&gt;• Mathematics (4)&lt;br&gt;Expressions of Human Civilization&lt;br&gt;• Studio and Performing Arts (6)&lt;br&gt;• Literary Expressions (3)&lt;br&gt;Understanding Human Civilization&lt;br&gt;• Humanities and Social Sciences (9)&lt;br&gt;Multi-Cultural Studies&lt;br&gt;• Three designated courses from Expressions and Understanding Human Civilization&lt;br&gt;Health and Wellness&lt;br&gt;• Concepts of Fitness (2)&lt;br&gt;Intensive Writing&lt;br&gt;• One course designated as “writing intensive” completed within a student’s major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communications&lt;br&gt;• Composition I and II (6)&lt;br&gt;• Public Speaking (3)&lt;br&gt;Mathematics and Natural Science&lt;br&gt;• Mathematics (6)&lt;br&gt;• Life and Biological Science (4)&lt;br&gt;• Physical Science (3)&lt;br&gt;Humanities&lt;br&gt;• Literature, Art History, History, Religion (6)&lt;br&gt;Social and Behavioral Science (9 Total)&lt;br&gt;• Social Science (3-6)&lt;br&gt;• Behavioral Science (3-6)&lt;br&gt;“Gordon Rule”&lt;br&gt;• State-mandated writing requirement - one course must be writing intensive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Networking Contacts

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