

GENERAL EDUCATION

A Self-Study Guide for Review & Assessment

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purpose»mission»outcomes
process»design

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Introduction

GENERAL EDUCATION REVIEW CONTINUES TO OCCUPY MANY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AS IT HAS FOR THE PAST YEARS. And no wonder. With increasing attention of accreditors to institutional effectiveness—largely equated with student learning—and widespread legislative calls for accountability, general education's position at the center of undergraduate education makes it a focus of curricular reform.

This short publication is designed as a practical guide for campuses undertaking a review of their general education programs. Organized as a series of probing questions, it can help the faculty and academic administration plan a self-study. While not providing answers to the questions posed in the guide or recommending particular approaches, the outline can be read as steps of a process that either reviews an existing program or leads to general education redesign. In fact a campus might want to reflect on the questions at three levels: as they apply to the current situation, in the context of short-term changes, and while examining ideal, long-term aspirations. General education review is a major undertaking that may well occupy a campus's faculty for several years. An understanding of the entire process can help assure a successful conclusion that reflects best contemporary practice.

The framing concepts for this self-study guide come directly from *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U 2002), a report that describes both the aims and promising innovations of an undergraduate education for the twenty-first century.¹ Also influential were the lessons learned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) over the fifteen years it has offered an annual institute on general education; the authors direct that institute and since 2000 have worked with well over one hundred institutions engaged in general education reform.

The Greater Expectations vision of a New Academy stresses “intentional practice.” In an educational context intentionality means an alignment among what an institution hopes to accomplish, its actions, and the results obtained. The desired accomplishments derive from a campus's mission and broad goals and also from the learning expectations the faculty sets for students. The actions to align are manifest in the curriculum's structure, in teaching practices, and in the questions asked of assessment. Alignment also involves institutional support of students, resource allocation, and reward criteria.

¹ Part of AAC&U's Greater Expectations initiative, and much of the work leading to this publication, was generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

When general education is viewed through the lens of intentional practice, three anchoring concepts emerge, all related to an institution's desired accomplishments:

1. clear **programmatic purposes** for general education
2. resonance with the institution's distinctive **mission**
3. transparent, powerful **goals and outcomes of learning**

Ideally the **programmatic purpose** of general education, including its role in the entire undergraduate program, will influence both its curricular architecture (structure) and its interconnections with the majors. General education, however, is more than simply a curriculum; it is possibly the most important manifestation of an **institution's educational mission**. An intentional approach to general education, therefore, would assure that this important core of learning, shared by all students no matter their areas of concentration, reflects what is distinctive about the institution: its educational philosophy, culture, values, history, and student body. The **learning goals and outcomes** will also guide design of the general education curriculum but, in addition, should influence the choice of teaching methods and will form the basis for assessing student achievement.

These three anchors of intentional general education practice are interwoven into many of the questions in this study guide. However, the guide's organization follows the logical steps of a review. Some of these steps launch and steer the process itself or address issues of sustainability; others focus specifically on turning the goals and outcomes into reality through curricular design, teaching methods, and assessment.

This guide for general education review is part of the publication series from AAC&U's Greater Expectations initiative (see the copyright page for the complete list of publications). Its emphasis on program review makes it a companion piece to *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes* (2005), a monograph by Andrea Leskes and Barbara D. Wright that examines assessment at the level of learning outcomes. Additional resources, including examples of promising practices in general education, may be found on the AAC&U Web site (www.aacu.org/issues/generaleducation). ■

Step 1. Start the review

- Intentional change is a political act and curricular reform is no exception.
- “All politics is local” and campuses are not exempt.
- In politics—and also in education—the process can be as important as the product.

GIVEN THE TRUTH OF THESE THREE MAXIMS, successful general education reform will require careful attention to process from the beginning. A campus would do well to identify in its recent history major change initiatives that both built community and led to successful results. If the processes that were followed worked well in the campus’s culture, they could be models for the current general education review. Getting started involves setting clear expectations for the entire endeavor, assuring committed leadership for the process, learning about current practices in general education, and planning ways to guarantee iteration, inclusiveness, and transparency.

1. *Set expectations for the review*

- How do we describe our reasons for undertaking the review of general education (dissatisfaction with existing program, disturbing data about student achievement, internal mandate, external mandate, regular review, accreditation, etc.)?
- What do we expect to be the outcome(s) of the process?
- What is the time frame? What are the intermediate stages?

2. *Assure leadership*

- Who is leading the review?
- How was the group/committee appointed and to what body will it report? Did the process reflect our campus’s culture or way of doing business? Is it an effective approach?
- How has the group’s authority been established?
- Are all the necessary groups/perspectives included?
- If we are using a standing committee, will the review conflict/interfere with its ongoing responsibilities and representative composition?

3. *Gain knowledge*

- What information have we gathered about our program? What more might we learn?
- Do we know about national trends in general education?
- Has the committee reviewed the literature and shared some of it with the broader community?
- What similar institutions have we learned about?
- What dissimilar institutions might offer interesting models or modules that could be adapted to our campus?

4. *Build support*

- Does the committee have a clear, succinct charge for the review? How well does our campus community understand the charge?
- Who will bring strategic thinking to the process? Where might we expect resistance and how might it be overcome?
- What is the political culture of our campus and how will this influence the process?
- How iterative and inclusive should our process be?
- Have we made certain that the process respects faculty governance for formal approval? What are the required points for such authorization and would it be strategic to seek endorsement along the way?

5. *Guarantee transparency*

- How has transparency been modeled from the beginning?
- What is our plan for ongoing campus-wide communication and input at all stages of the process? ■

Step 2. Agree on major parameters

A BROAD UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH THE PURPOSE a campus assigns to general education and how the program embodies mission needs to precede the definition of learning outcomes and design of a curricular structure.

1. Elucidate the purpose of general education

- What is the purpose of the general education program in our entire undergraduate curriculum (foundational, integrative, summative, or a combination)?
- What kinds of learning do we want general education to further (e.g., essential intellectual and practical skills, a knowledge of many disciplines and modes of inquiry, integration across disciplines, experiential learning)?
- Is the approach based on competencies, the disciplines, or is it interdisciplinary?

2. Illuminate distinctiveness

- How does the general education program reflect our mission, culture, history, and values? Are the answers sufficiently clear and widely known?
- How is the nature of our student body reflected in our approach to general education?
- What makes our general education program distinctive?
- What makes it essential for students? ■

Step 3. Reaffirm or determine learning goals and outcomes

INTENTIONAL PRACTICE STARTS WITH CLEAR GOALS. While it might seem axiomatic that before modifying or designing a general education program the faculty would agree on the resulting learning goals and outcomes, regrettably many institutions lack operational statements about what they expect students to know and be able to do. Too often committees launch right into discussions of courses or curricular structure, omitting the essential steps of articulating and reaching for consensus on the learning goals and outcomes.

I. Clarify important outcomes

- Have we articulated clear learning goals and outcomes?
- How well do our goals and outcomes align with the growing national consensus about the important aims of college study (see *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*, AAC&U 2004, 12-13)?
- How do our outcomes describe the complex content knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, and dispositions students and society will need for the complexities of the twenty-first-century world? Have we made certain to include important outcomes even if they are difficult to measure?
- How have we articulated the aspects of personal and social responsibility necessary to the reflective, engaged citizens we want general education to develop?
- In what ways do we acknowledge, over time and across courses, the developmental changes students undergo to achieve general education's key learning goals and outcomes? Have we collectively developed clear expectations for novice, intermediate, and advanced levels of performance? How do they relate to the beginning, middle, and end of students' college careers?

2. Relate goals to mission

- In what ways are our learning goals and outcomes aligned with the institution's central aims and mission?
- How do these goals and outcomes reflect our distinctive values, culture, history, and student body?

3. Show centrality of the learning goals and outcomes

- Do our students, faculty, and administrators accept and possess common language for describing the goals? Are they "owned" by the faculty as a whole?
- In what ways have the learning goals and outcomes taken on a real life at the center of our undergraduate program? What is our process for using them to shape curricular structure, course design, and the choice of teaching methods?
- Have we refined the outcomes into assessable objectives (clear statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do)? ■

Step 4. Design or review curricular structure

ONCE AN INSTITUTION UNAMBIGUOUSLY UNDERSTANDS general education's purpose and the important, shared outcomes, it can examine an existing program or consider a new curricular structure. Initially—and through most of the process—the focus should be more on the entire program than on individual courses. High-quality general education tends to be coherent (which means that it embodies a conscious design for learning in which curricular and cocurricular elements form “purposeful pathways,” visible to students and faculty alike). Many institutions—especially complex universities—may find that, to accommodate disciplinary variation, multiple paths to the end goals are not just acceptable but preferable.

As the general education review proceeds, a campus should realize that it may not need to redesign a program from scratch. Often curricular or cocurricular elements exist that, while not part of general education, could logically become so with minor alterations. Incorporating such elements might simplify the formal approval process as they are already known to the faculty and have successfully functioned in the institution's culture. Finally, general education cannot be the sole site for developing the complex learning students need from college. For graduates to reach the sophisticated level of achievement an institution expects, all aspects of the curriculum and cocurriculum should contribute in transparent, intentional ways.

1. *Identify intentional elements*

- How well does the structure (the architectural design) of our general education correspond to the purpose we have assigned to the program (e.g., if supposedly foundational, are the courses introductory)?
- In what ways does the structure manifest our mission and our distinctiveness?
- How are the learning goals and outcomes advanced by the design?
- What is the mechanism for assuring that individual courses and other structural elements relate to our general education program's purposes and to the learning goals?

2. *Review coherence*

- How does our program foster coherent learning for students?
- Does general education include the “bookends” of a first-year experience and a last-year integrative component (e.g., a capstone or portfolio in which students can demonstrate their most advanced levels of achievement)?

- What are the shared experiences of all of our students (core courses, common experiences such as learning communities, matrix of outcomes)? How well do our students and faculty understand the shared elements?
- Is our program mostly a list of courses or distribution requirements? If so, how do we assure intentionality and coherence?
- Can we map out purposeful pathways for students to achieve the goals and outcomes? Have we done an audit to look for these purposeful pathways?

3. Build on what already exists

- What existing curricular and cocurricular elements could be reshaped to become part of general education (e.g., first-year program, learning communities, service learning, writing across the curriculum, leadership development)?
- Have we done an audit to identify these elements and, if so, what does it reveal?

4. Relate general education to the majors and the cocurriculum

- Are general education outcomes intentionally integrated with and further developed in our students' other coursework?
- What are the venues and processes that help our faculty create this integration?
- To what extent do the majors (including the professional programs) build on the knowledge and transferable skill outcomes introduced in general education? How necessary is this "general learning" for success in a major?
- What are the contributions to general learning from the cocurriculum, internships, etc.?
- Have our academic departments mapped out clear pathways through general education, the major, and the cocurriculum to develop the expected knowledge, skills, and dispositions at advanced levels? ■

Step 5. Evaluate pedagogical methods

THE TEACHING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES are often ignored even while titanic struggles occur over the list of included courses. Yet some important outcomes (e.g., teamwork, oral communication fluency, respect for others) can be advanced better by well-chosen classroom practices than through particular content or a program's design. While teaching methods are often left up to individual instructors, the faculty collectively can commit to both encouraging active learning and sharing their experiences.

1. *Look at classroom practices*

- Are the pedagogical methods we use in general education intentionally chosen to help students achieve the desired goals and outcomes? How about methods in courses that serve both general education and the majors?
- In what ways do our methods foster active student engagement?
- Are the syllabi of courses in general education, in the majors, and for those that do double duty explicit in their identification of general learning outcomes and objectives as aims of the course?

2. *Evaluate faculty expertise*

- How skilled are our faculty members who teach general education courses in using a range of methods for multiple learning styles?
- How well can they teach to diverse groups of students with a variety of cultural experiences and levels of preparation?
- How well versed are our faculty members who teach general education in the research about how people learn?
- What support structures do we have available to further develop faculty expertise in teaching methodologies and student learning? ■

Step 6. Plan assessment

ASSESSMENT ANSWERS IMPORTANT QUESTIONS that an institution poses for itself. When designed for improvement purposes, assessment is an essential part of high-quality teaching and provides evidence of how well students are learning what the faculty believes it is teaching. An assessment of general education will reveal the extent to which the program is meeting its many goals and can be performed at several levels of analysis, each requiring appropriate data aggregation: individual student (learning both within and across courses), general education courses, the program as a whole or its sub areas (e.g., distribution categories), and the institution. A comprehensive assessment plan would look at multiple levels and include a range of evidence-gathering methods, both formative and summative (see *Levels of Assessment: From the Student to the Institution* [Miller and Leskes 2005] and *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes* [Leskes and Wright 2005]). A well-constructed plan would gather just the right amount of appropriate data at the best points and use it in powerful ways to improve learning. The collaborative process of clarifying both criteria for assessment and scoring rubrics can help build a culture in which assessment can flourish: a true “culture of evidence” that reflects a university’s commitment to scholarly inquiry.

1. Clarify purpose of assessment

- Why are we doing assessment (for educational improvement, for external accountability, or for both)?
- What are the important questions we expect to answer by assessing general education?
- At what levels of analysis do we want answers?
- Do we use assessment both formatively and summatively?

2. Examine practices

- Have we constructed rubrics for the learning outcomes that will help us judge performance in a consistent manner?
- Are we employing direct, authentic assessment methods that can reveal student achievement of complex outcomes?
- What methods best answer which questions?
- How well does our assessment work reflect accepted principles of good practice?
- How are our various methods (direct, indirect, locally developed, commercial, embedded, etc.) coordinated to provide a comprehensive assessment over time?

3. *Collect evidence*

- What are students already producing as evidence of their achievement that could serve assessment purposes? What relevant evidence do we already collect at the programmatic or institutional levels?
- Have we identified when and how to collect just the right amount of important evidence (not too much and not too little) to answer our assessment questions? Are our assessment plans manageable?
- Where are the periodic touch-points built into the assessment plan (e.g., at first-year, middle, and senior levels) at which evidence can be collected to gain insight both into students' learning progress across courses and into the success of the general education program as a whole?

4. *Use the data*

- How are we planning to aggregate and interpret the evidence collected? Who will be responsible? Who involved? Where on the campus can we find relevant expertise?
- In what appropriate ways will we use the data to improve learning?
- How will we determine whether our general education goals have been achieved and to what extent?

5. *Build a culture of evidence*

- In what ways do we publicly acknowledge assessment's value as part of good teaching and as a potential form of scholarship on teaching and learning? How do we factor faculty assessment work into our reward processes (reappointment, promotion, tenure, and annual merit review)?
- How do our students experience assessment? Is it transparent and meaningful to them? Do they receive feedback from the findings? How regularly do they participate in conversations about the meaning of evidence or ways to strengthen learning in general education? To what extent do our students learn to be self-assessors?
- What mechanisms exist for making our assessment findings public, for sharing them with internal audiences, and for communicating them to external stakeholders? ■

Step 7. Implement changes: the transition

IN THE REDESIGN OF GENERAL EDUCATION, the implementation stage is often shortchanged. Yet the process is far from over with formal approval of a new program. Unfortunately, inadequate attention to implementation has derailed many otherwise promising reforms.

- Who will oversee implementation? How will this person/committee/office be related to the committee that led the review?
- Will responsibility for implementation be centralized or assigned to academic departments?
- Have we committed sufficient resources for the period of transition to a new program? How well does the administration understand transition costs?
- Will we pilot aspects of the new program, accept asynchronous progress, or insist upon an immediate change? If we run the old and the new programs simultaneously for students already enrolled, how might they function together?
- What is the timetable for implementation? ■

Step 8. Plan for or assure sustainability

THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION is built on the conviction that “general” or transferable learning has a long-term positive impact on students. Given the institutional effort involved in a substantive general education review, it behooves a campus to create both climate and infrastructure to sustain its benefits over time.

1. *Examine the student perspective*

- Where and how do students get a meaningful introduction to our general education program (its goals, design, expectations, requirements)?
- How well are the goals and outcomes integrated into students’ academic planning?
Is a plan to achieve the outcomes part of advising?
- Where and under what type of faculty guidance does student reflection on the learning process—including general education—take place?
- What is the lived student experience of general education? Do actual course offerings mirror the curricular design? Are courses easily available? How do course-taking patterns compare to institutional intent?

2. *Design program oversight*

- What will be the structures and mechanisms for overseeing the integrity of the general education program? Are staffing and funding adequate?
- How often will we review the general education program as a whole? Individual parts of the program? Will the review be staggered or occur all at once?
- What is the timetable for keeping the faculty and the rest of our community informed about the effectiveness of the program?
- What is the mechanism for the program’s evolution?

3. *Commit to quality*

- How are we facilitating ongoing faculty conversations about the collective responsibility for general education and student learning?
- In what ways have we provided adequate, base-budgeted institutional support for the general education program (for teaching by excellent professors, for faculty development, for the scholarship of teaching and learning)?
- How do we mentor new faculty members and orient them to our goals, outcomes, educational approaches, and general education program?
- Do we have processes to facilitate transfer that also attend to the general learning of students who enter partway through the program? How will they develop the same distinctive characteristics as our native students?
- Is the general education program featured and well explained in all our written materials? Do our leaders include general education in their speeches?
- How well would an external person who reads about our campus understand what the educational program as a whole adds up to? Can all members of the campus community explain what characterizes a graduate from our institution? ■

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