

SENATE STANDING JOINT COMMITTEE FOR GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT

Update on General Education Assessment 2023 – 2024

(Informational)

Introduction

Penn State faculty have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to General Education as a core component of Penn State undergraduate education. With that commitment comes a shared responsibility to assess the effectiveness of the General Education curriculum. Administrative offices support this work and faculty participate by providing data from their courses, reviewing findings, and using these data to make recommendations to the University Faculty Senate (UFS) for continuous curricular improvements. In the years since the establishment of the Senate's Standing Joint Committee for General Education Assessment, we have regularly shared the results of this work with the Senate to build understanding of both the strengths and challenges in our General Education curriculum. This report serves as the annual update.

General Education Enrollment Dataset Update

In fall 2023, Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (OPAIR) analysts updated the General Education Enrollment findings last shared with the UFS in 2022. The updated dataset focuses on 2022 – 2023 enrollment in General Education courses by college (University Park colleges, Campus Colleges, and University College). It also includes the number of students who earned specific grade ranges (C or above, D or F, late drop or withdrawal, or other grade (deferred, no grade, satisfactory, unsatisfactory) in each course by students' college of major/pre-major. The new dataset has been made available to Faculty Senators via the confidential interactive online report [General Education Enrollment \(AY 2022 – 23\)](#). This marks the first time that General Education course enrollment and outcome data like this have been shared with the UFS and is a first attempt at data transparency balanced with protecting student and faculty confidentiality. The report is intentionally designed to limit user ability to drill down to specific course, course location, and student college combinations to encourage use for broader questions rather than focusing on specific individual instructors and to protect student confidentiality. It could be used, for example, to examine the distribution of enrollments by student standing (e.g. 4th semester), examine outcomes variations by domain or foundation area (e.g. examine Inter-D broadly), and examine late drop rates.

Despite the breadth of General Education courses offered at Penn State (1,222 unique courses were offered in 2022 – 2023), there has been a consistent concern that students are not fully taking advantage of the breadth of offerings. In prior years, the Committee used the enrollment dataset to identify the specific courses that comprised 70% enrollment in each domain (see Table 4 in the [General Education Assessment 2015 – 2019](#) report and Table 4 in the [2022 Update on General Education Assessment](#)). We repeated this analysis (see Appendix A for the detailed course list) with the updated dataset and found that there has been little change over time. Table 1 illustrates this point by providing the total number of courses offered by domain and the number of courses in each domain that accounted for 70% or more of the enrollment in that domain for each year that this was analyzed. Several factors contribute to this consistency over time. A review of General Education prescription by majors and options in the [Update on](#)

[General Education Assessment 2022 – 2023](#) revealed nearly 50% of Penn State students are enrolled in programs that double count large numbers of General Education credits and the nature of these credits does not change much over time. Finally, course availability, due to resource constraints especially at smaller campus locations, and student choice also play a role. The breadth of offerings varies by campus with the most required and recommended General Education courses offered at the greatest number of locations. Even with these considerations, the committee believes this trend is unlikely to change unless efforts are made to reduce the prescription of General Education courses by majors.

Table 1. Number of unique General Education courses offered by domain and number of courses that make up 70% of enrollment in a given domain

| Year | GQ | GA | GH | GN | GS | GHA/ GHW | GWS | Inter-Domain |
|--------------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------------|-----|--------------|
| 2022 – 2023 | | | | | | | | |
| Total courses: | 52 | 155 | 337 | 110 | 172 | 80 | 28 | 288 |
| 70% of enrollment: | 9 | 29 | 76 | 19 | 24 | 17 | 4 | 44 |
| 2019 – 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| Total courses: | 52 | 158 | 359 | 122 | 163 | 75 | 27 | 201 |
| 70% of enrollment: | 9 | 26 | 68 | 18 | 23 | 16 | 4 | 24 |
| 2016 – 2017 | | | | | | | | |
| Total courses: | 50 | 153 | 335 | 129 | 171 | 72 | 24 | NA |
| 70% of enrollment: | 9 | 26 | 63 | 20 | 26 | 17 | 5 | NA |

Table Notes: Cross-listed courses are counted once in each domain they are listed in.

Global Learning and Creative Thinking Assessment

Global Learning and Creative Thinking are two of the seven learning objectives in Penn State’s General Education curriculum. The Office for General Education and OPAIR assessed the University’s effectiveness at addressing these objectives in 2022 – 2023 using a rubric developed and applied by faculty and the findings from that study were reviewed by the Joint Committee.

During the fall and spring semesters, 399 unique instructors (teaching 401 courses) across the Commonwealth were invited to participate in the Global Learning Assessment process.

Aggregate student performance data were submitted for 28% of all course sections invited to participate in the study. Instructors reported their expectations for student performance and the actual percentage of students in their section(s) whose performance was evaluated as *developing*, *satisfactory*, or *exemplary* for each of the three Global Learning criteria:

1. Analysis: Analysis of power structures and dynamics in natural, physical, social, cultural, and economic systems.
2. Interdependency: Identification and critique of interdependent global, regional, and local cultures and systems.
3. Implications: Engagement in the community and evaluation of the implications for people’s lives stemming from solutions to global problems.

In general, students performed similarly across the three Global Learning criteria: 84% percent scored satisfactory or exemplary on analysis, 82% on interdependency, and 78% on implications. Across each course level and Domain category (except Health and Wellness), instructors expected a greater percentage of students to perform at the satisfactory level (43%) than the developing (21%) or exemplary (35%) levels. While most 000- and 100-level students did perform at the satisfactory level, a greater proportion of 200-level students performed at the exemplary level than any other performance level. **The study found that at every course level across each criterion, more students performed at the exemplary level than instructors expected.** Students also outperformed the Global Learning expectations of their professors across all Domains.

During the same time, 364 unique instructors (teaching 370 courses) across the Commonwealth were invited to participate in the Creative Thinking assessment process. Aggregate student performance data were submitted for 17% of all course sections invited to participate in the study. Faculty expectations and student performance findings were submitted for the two Creative Thinking Criteria:

1. Synthesis: The incorporation of existing ideas, images, or expertise into novel ideas or solutions.
2. Creativity: The successful completion of an idea or plan via activity, performance, or production in an inventive or imaginative way that involves divergent thinking and risk taking.

Overall, students performed similarly across both Creative Thinking criteria: 84% scored satisfactory or exemplary on Synthesis while 77% scored the same on Creativity. Despite course level and Domain category, instructors expected more students to perform at the satisfactory level (49%) than the developing (20%) or exemplary (31%) levels. The actual performance of 000- and -200 level students within the Synthesis criterion, and 100- and 200- level students within the Creativity criterion, matched instructor expectations. A greater proportion of these students performed at a satisfactory level than at developing or exemplary levels. However, the performance of 100-level students in the Synthesis criterion and 000-level students in the creativity criterion exceeded instructor expectations. These students achieved the exemplary level at a greater rate than the developing or satisfactory levels. The study found that more students at the 000- and 100- level, across both criteria, performed at the exemplary level than instructors expected. While 200- level students exceeded instructor expectations in synthesis, they tied with instructor expectations in creativity. Students also performed at the exemplary level, across all Domains, at a rate that was equal to or higher than expected by instructors.

Based on recommendations from faculty and other stakeholders, three modifications have been made to the 2023 – 2024 General Education Learning Objectives (GELO) assessment process: 1) instructors are now encouraged to use multiple assignments if necessary to address all GELO criteria, 2) not applicable and not demonstrated categories have been added to the General Education rubrics, and 3) all data are being reported in terms of percentages rather than raw numbers.

Overall, these two studies provide evidence that the majority (75% or more) of Penn State students are developing satisfactory or exemplary skills in Creative Thinking and Global Learning. While Penn State has not set an aggregate performance target for General Education achievement, these findings provide a baseline from which the University may choose to monitor

achievement in the future. For more information including detailed findings, see the [Creative Thinking Assessment](#) and [Global Learning Assessment](#) reports.

Office for General Education

The Office for General Education was established in the fall of 2016 to develop and lead the General Education curriculum for all undergraduate students at Penn State University and to support faculty development in this area. The office is led by Assistant Dean for General Education and Director Maggie Slattery and shares one full-time staff member in an administrative support role with the Office for Prior Learning Assessment. In 2020 – 2021, Penn State awarded 17,243 undergraduate degrees (source: [University Data Digest](#)). As the component of a Penn State curriculum that impacts every single undergraduate student, the impact of General Education and this small office is profound.

The Office for General Education supports students, faculty, and advances University priorities such as meaningful assessment and highlights student learning in sustainability and civic engagement. As part of Undergraduate Education, the Office for General Education actively collaborates with units like the University Registrar, the UFS, OPAIR, and the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence and serves as a resource for the university community on General Education policy and related curricular topics. Fundamental to the success of the office is the General Education Scholars program which includes 16 faculty members representing the intellectual and geographic diversity of Penn State (seven faculty members from University Park – one representing each General Education area, one faculty member from each College Campus, and four faculty members from the University College). Faculty are compensated for their work, which includes work over the summer. The scholars have been instrumental in the success of many of the following projects.

Projects in support of students:

- Work with the advising and student records community on understanding and documenting General Education requirements for students.
- [Collaborate](#) with the Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses to refresh General Education courses on the Digital Learning Cooperative to increase variety and access. The priority topic changes yearly, but this effort has highlighted courses addressing topics such as social justice and sustainability. On average 5-7 courses are selected each year.
- Support advisers and students by advocating for and strengthening the development and maintenance of the [GenEd planning tool](#). Over 28,000 student plans have been created since the system launched in 2018, and more than 6,000 plans were created last academic year. This tool has been entirely developed and maintained by Penn State IT's Academic Services team within the Academic Technologies and Customer Experience unit.

Projects in support of faculty:

- Providing professional development opportunities and resources unique to teaching General Education. Some recent examples are detailed below. The resources and websites from these projects will remain, but in most cases new workshop and project opportunities like these are not currently available due to budget reductions.

- [OL 1400 Integrative Thinking in Teaching & Learning](#) - a collaborative effort with the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence to provide professional development for those interested in teaching and learning in Integrative Thinking
- Writing in Integrative Studies – a professional development opportunity supporting faculty who want to use writing as pedagogy and student assessment in inter-domain courses – 20 faculty participated in AY22-23 and there are 10 participants in AY 23-24.
- Sustainability in General Education workshop – during summer 2023 and in collaboration with the Sustainability Institute, 19 faculty members participated in a three-day workshop to infuse existing General Education courses with sustainability and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals content.
- [Teaching Engagement](#) website – a project that includes development and sharing resources for faculty who wish to help students understand US elections and their right to enfranchisement. It is also a place to broadly share first amendment materials and a teaching module for faculty developed by the Communications Arts and Sciences department.
- [Destination Unknown](#) - a project hosted at Penn State Altoona that uses dialogue to explore the impact of General Education on the complicated, winding careers of professionals. The website now makes these materials more broadly available and includes a video repository of professionals sharing how college graduates 5, 10, 15 or more years after graduation view their General Education experiences as critical to their long-term professional success.
- Microgrants to support an engaged General Education classroom. Funding intended to better engage students in course learning. No award is greater than \$500 and historically there has been a maximum of one per faculty member per semester, although for AY 23-24 this was reduced to one per faculty member per academic year due to budget limitations.
 - For AY 22-23, 73 micro-grants were awarded. The average award amount was \$425. Awards were made to faculty at all five college campuses, 12 University College campuses, 6 University Park colleges and the World Campus. Nearly 2,750 students directly benefited from enhanced engagement in their General Education course.
 - For Fall 23, 42 micro-grants were awarded. The average award amount was \$400. Awards were made to faculty at four college campuses, five University College campuses, four University Park colleges and the World Campus. Nearly 1,800 students directly benefited from enhanced engagement in their General Education course last semester.
- Curiosity and Collaboration: A General Education Colloquium – Working toward creating an engaged faculty community this is a series of interactive lunchtime sessions that engage faculty in a series of cross-disciplinary dialogues about teaching and learning in the General Education Curriculum. In 2023-24, to date approximately 175 people have attended the series.

The budget of the Office for General Education is part of the student support and administrative funding. For the future, funding priorities of the Office for General Education have been reassessed to determine the best use of available funds considering reductions. Higher impact (number of students impacted relative to overall cost) projects and opportunities have been prioritized, such as microgrants, as well as projects with co-funding and collaboration. In addition, the General Education Scholars program will continue to be prioritized as direct faculty engagement is critical to remaining relevant and impactful to the university community.

General Education Assessment Timeline

No significant changes were made to the General Education Assessment Plan Timeline in 2023 – 2024 (Table 1 and Table 2). Currently underway are assessments of the Critical and Analytical Thinking and Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning learning objectives. In 2024 – 2025, the University will move on to reassess Integrative Thinking, providing our first opportunity to look for change over time in a learning objective. In addition, the first Domain assessment will take place in the Natural Sciences, using the same approach that has been taken to assess the GELOs. Also on the agenda for next year is a new administration of the General Education Student Survey.

Table 2: General Education assessment timeline 2018 – 2029

| Year | Category | Objective assessed |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 2018–2019 | Learning Objective | Integrative Thinking |
| 2019–2021 | --Pandemic Pause-- | --Pandemic Pause-- |
| 2021–2022 | Learning Objective | Effective Communication |
| 2022–2023 | Learning Objective | Creative Thinking |
| | Learning Objective | Global Learning |
| 2023–2024 | Learning Objective | Critical and Analytical Thinking |
| | Learning Objective | Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning |
| 2024–2025 | Learning Objective | Integrative Thinking |
| | Domain | GN |
| 2025–2026 | Domain | GA |
| | Domain | GS |
| | Learning Objective | Effective Communication |
| 2026–2027 | Domain | GHW |
| | Domain | GH |
| | Learning Objective | Creative Thinking |
| 2027–2028 | Foundation | GWS |
| | Foundation | GQ |
| | Learning Objective | Global Learning |
| 2028–2029 | Learning Objective | Key Literacies |
| | Learning Objective | Critical and Analytical Thinking |

Table 3: Core General Education data set update timeline

| Last completed | Data set | Next scheduled | Periodicity |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| 2018–2019 | Student survey (dates subject to revision based on the University Survey Calendar) | 2024–2025 | Every 5 years |
| 2019–2020 | General Education courses mapped to General Education Learning Objectives | 2029–2030 | Every 10 years |
| 2022–2023 | General Education and undergraduate majors’ relationship maps, General Education prescriptiveness in the majors | 2032–2033 | Every 10 years |
| 2023–2024 | General Education course enrollment dataset and analysis | 2027–2028 | Every 4 years |
| NA | <i>Possible alumni survey (need to complete a feasibility and cost-benefit analysis before moving forward with this)</i> | TBD | Every 5-10 years |

Peer Review of the General Education Assessment Process

Over the past six years, the Joint Committee, the Office for General Education, and OPAIR have developed a systematic assessment process for General Education. In 2023, OPAIR recognized the need for an objective assessment of the University’s assessment processes, operations, impact, and potential areas for growth and decided to invite external experts to critically assess the University’s assessment activities and outcomes to gain a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of the University’s efforts and identify opportunities for enhancing our capabilities and effectiveness. The review team included:

Dr. Monica Stitt-Bergh, an educational psychologist, has co-directed the Assessment and Curriculum Support Center at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa since 2008. She provides technical support, resources, and workshops on learning outcomes assessment. She has taught first-year writing and social science research methods courses. Her publications and conference presentations address learning outcomes assessment, program evaluation, equity in assessment, self-assessment, and writing-across-the-curriculum.

Dr. Megan Good is the interim executive director of the Center for Assessment and Research Studies (CARS) and an Assistant Professor of Graduate Psychology at James Madison University (JMU). Prior to JMU, she spent 7 years at Auburn University – first as their inaugural Director of Academic Assessment leading the institution from a Southern Associate of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Monitoring Report to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment Excellence in Assessment Designation. During her last 1.5 years at Auburn, she served as the SACSCOC liaison, state academic liaison, and articulation agreement representative.

Laura Lambert is a PhD student in the Assessment & Measurement program at JMU. She also has a full-time faculty appointment in the department of Integrated Science and Technology as the biotech lab coordinator. Her assessment research has focused on learning improvement, particularly in the STEM fields.

In undertaking this voluntary external evaluation, Penn State reaffirmed its commitment to excellence, transparency, and continuous growth. As part of the external review, OPAIR prepared a comprehensive self-study that included the General Education assessment processes. Review team members interviewed a wide variety of people including members of the Joint Committee for General Education Assessment, OPAIR staff, faculty, administrators, and students during the review process.

Forthcoming in March 2024 is Penn State's accreditation review with the Middle States Commission for Higher Education (MSCHE) which will include General Education and its assessment. General Education assessment was a focus of Penn State's last MSCHE review, and we anticipate that the upcoming review will address our progress in this area.

OPAIR was presented with the external review team's findings and recommendations in December 2023 and the University will receive the results of the MSCHE review after the site visit in March 2024. The Joint Committee will review both sets of findings and recommendations and develop a General Education assessment response plan in 2024 - 2025. By subjecting our achievements and processes to rigorous examination, Penn State is in an excellent position to build upon our assessment strengths, address our weaknesses, and set a trajectory for future student learning success.

Summary

In summary, the Joint Committee for the Assessment of General Education finds that:

- Students are still taking advantage of a relatively narrow range of courses to fulfill their General Education requirements. The Committee believes this is not likely to change unless the prescription of General Education courses by majors is reduced.
- Penn State students are demonstrating proficiency in the General Education Learning Objectives (GELOs). More than three-quarters of students assessed as part of the Global Learning and Creative Thinking studies were scored as satisfactory or exemplary.
- The Office for General Education provides critical University support for General Education support with a minimal University investment.
- The University is on track to complete a full cycle of GELO assessments in 2024-2025 and to begin assessing the Domains.
- Next year the University will have feedback from the Middle States Commission for Higher Education and a separate external review of the University's assessment processes to guide further improvements to our assessment approaches and outcomes.

SENATE STANDING JOINT COMMITTEE FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

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Note: A list of all General Education courses by domain can be found in the [University Bulletin](#).