Balancing General Education and Major Requirements

At Private, Religious Institutions
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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

**Administrators establish requirements distributed across knowledge areas and learning outcomes for general education curriculum.** Institutions develop a general education curricula based on desired learning outcomes. General education requirements are grouped into knowledge areas (e.g. mathematical reasoning) with desired learning outcomes. Core requirements provide an academic foundation for students and help uphold a university’s mission. For example, institutions with a religious affiliation require all students to complete six credit hours of theology to maintain the institution’s religious identity.

**Due their expertise in academic areas, departments determine the requirements to complete a major.** The dean of the corresponding school must give his or her final approval of the required major credits. In addition to faculty preferences, accreditation requirements impact the number of required courses for a major. For example, at **Institution F**, engineering major requirements make up 73.3 percent of non-elective (i.e., major or general education) courses that a student in the major takes, while English major requirements make up 45.5 percent.

**Faculty develop and assess general education requirements to ensure learning outcomes.** Provosts appoint 12-15 faculty members from all schools to a general education requirements review committee (GERRC). This committee conducts a comprehensive review of the general education requirements every ten years. Changes to the general education requirements, particularly reductions to the number of requirements, must be approved by the faculty senate to ensure alignment between knowledge areas and learning outcomes in the new policy.

**Committees review a course proposal submitted by a department to ensure general education courses meet the learning outcomes criteria.** After the GERRC makes revisions to the requirements and the faculty senate and provost approve revisions, the provost appoints a 15-20 faculty-member general education curriculum review committee (GECRC). This committee reviews proposals for courses to be included in the general education curriculum. Proposals typically include a course syllabus and descriptions of applicable outcomes, assessment methods, and skills developed.

**Develop governance documents (i.e., learning outcome assessment rubrics) and a course review schedule to assess courses in the general education curriculum.** Learning outcome rubrics guide reviews of general education courses and serve as a reference for faculty who teach core courses. These rubrics list the knowledge-area learning outcomes and prompt instructors to allocate a score of three (proficient outcome), two (competent outcome), or one (developing outcome) based on a student’s work. The information collected through rubric-based assessment allows faculty to determine the percentage of students in a course who meet the learning outcome.
**Definition of Terms**

**General education requirements**: Set of requirements that all undergraduate students must complete in order to graduate, referred to by some institutions as university core, core of common studies, or general education program. Institutions with a core curriculum emphasize shifting towards requirements based on achieving learning outcomes, rather than completing specific courses.

**General education curriculum**: Defined body of courses that students may take to fulfill general education requirements.

**General education requirements review committee**: Provost appointed ad-hoc committee of 12-15 faculty and deans charged with conducting a comprehensive review of an institution’s general education requirements.

**General education curriculum review committee**: Provost appointed standing committee of 15-20 faculty and deans charged with approving courses to be included in general education curriculum.
2) General Education and Major Requirements

Require All Students to Complete a Minimum of 31 General Education Credit Hours

Six of the seven profiled institutions have an institution-wide general education curriculum that all undergraduate students must complete. A general education program, also known as a core curriculum, provides a common academic foundation for students across all schools and disciplines and creates an institution-specific academic experience. A university-wide general education curriculum also allows students to explore a range of fields before deciding on their major.

General education requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Minimum number of general education credit hours</th>
<th>Minimum number of general education courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution A</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17 (16 for students in the School of Engineering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution B</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution D</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17 (16 for students in the School of Business)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution E</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13 (12 for students in the School of Engineering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution G</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At Institution C, all students must take six common courses, but the remaining general education requirements vary by degree. For example, all students earning a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science complete different general education curricula. Institution A and Institution F require that students complete a school or college-specific core curriculum in addition to the university-wide general education requirements.
Faculty Committees Select Knowledge Areas and Determine Specified Learning Outcomes

At all profiled institutions, general education requirements are grouped into five to ten knowledge areas. Policies outline goals and learning objectives for each area. During reviews of general education requirements, an interdisciplinary group of faculty with expertise in the knowledge areas determines knowledge-area learning goals and learning objectives.

Most Common Knowledge Areas across Profiled Institutions

Number of Institutions with Each Knowledge Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Area</th>
<th>Number of Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing and Rhetoric</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Nature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematical Reasoning</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature/Performing Arts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual &amp; Social Behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-native Language</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All profiled institutions required students to take a seminar-sized, writing-intensive course during their first year, typically in their first semester.

Business students at Institution F are exempt from the university’s non-native language general education requirement to ensure they can complete the business school accreditation requirements.

Example Knowledge Areas with Learning Outcomes at Institution F

- **Multicultural Experience**: Students will be able to identify differences and similarities in communication, values, practices, and beliefs between their culture and other cultures, explain how categories of human diversity (race, gender, ethnicity, disability) influence personal identities and create structural and institutional inequity, critically reflect upon personal and cultural presuppositions and how these affect values and relationships.

- **Writing**: Students will be able to use rhetorical strategies and processes to analyze and compose texts, produce effective written, visual and oral text given diverse purposes, genres and audiences, explain the importance of ethics in academic, civic, and professional applications.

- **Theology**: Students will be able to describe theologically the basic content of the Catholic faith in relation to other Christian and religious traditions as well as other world views, interpret theological texts and frameworks in their historical contexts, articulate implications of Christian faith for growth in holiness and the promotion of justice in the contemporary world.
Departments Determine the Number of Credit Hours Required to Complete a Major, Pre-professional Majors Require More

The dean of a department’s corresponding school or college approves major requirements policies. Faculty preferences and discipline-specific accreditation requirements (e.g. classroom observation, student teaching, ABET required courses) explain the difference in the number of credit requirements between majors. Accreditation requirements impact pre-professional majors (e.g., education, accounting, engineering) more than liberal arts majors.

Balance between Major Requirements and General Education Requirements

**Electrical Engineering, Number of Credits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institution E</th>
<th>Institution F</th>
<th>Institution G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institution E</th>
<th>Institution F</th>
<th>Institution G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**English, Number of Credits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institution E</th>
<th>Institution F</th>
<th>Institution G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typically, students may take a class that satisfies both a major and a general education requirement, but may not count a class for more than one general education requirement.
3) Development and Implementation of Revisions

Reduce the Number of General Education Requirements to Provide Students with Greater Choice

Administrators reduce the number of general education requirements to ensure that students feel a sense of autonomy over their course selection at all stages of their undergraduate career, including the first two years. General Education Requirements Review Committees (GERRC) at Institution A, Institution B, Institution D, and Institution F revised their institution’s core curriculum in an effort to reduce the number of courses and credit hours.

Institution A reduced the number of general education courses from 20 courses to 17 courses. Institution D did not reduce the number of required general education courses, but changed the timeline for students to complete the requirements so that the curriculum is not concentrated primarily in the freshman and sophomore year; requirements are now spread out over all four years.

Across all profiled institutions, general education requirements review committees (GERRC) carry out revisions to ensure the institution’s academic excellence. Reviews are an opportunity to evaluate the requirements and to reiterate the university’s commitment to a well-rounded education based in the liberal arts. Additionally, revisions allow administrators, faculty, students, and alumni to give feedback on the requirements, and to adhere to changing standards in higher education policies and practices.

Motivations to Review Every Ten Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Least important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Evaluate success of learning outcomes (e.g., Do students meet the learning outcomes established for each knowledge-area)**
- **Consider budget changes (e.g., If core has a lab science requirement and student population is growing, can the university afford new facilities?)**
- **Assess knowledge areas (e.g., Does each knowledge area expose students to an integrated set of ideas and intellectual approaches?)**
- **Poll faculty opinions (e.g., Do students need to take more writing-intensive courses in the first year?)**

Theology Requirement
Credit Hours

6

Administrators at the profiled institutions with a religious affiliation incorporate six credit hours of theology into the general education requirements to uphold the university’s religious mission. This ensures that all students are exposed to theology, particularly those with strict major requirements, who may not otherwise take a class in the knowledge area.
**Conduct an Institution-wide Revision of General Education Requirements Every Ten Years**

Administrators at five profiled institutions conduct a university-wide review of the general education curriculum every ten years. Six of the seven profiled institutions completed revisions to their general education requirements in the past decade, and **Institution A** and **Institution E** are currently implementing revisions made in 2013.

**General Education Requirements Review Process at Institution F**

- University Provost **proposes a review** of general education requirements
- Provost appoints 15-20 faculty members and deans from all schools to the **GERRC**
- **GERRC** assesses the knowledge areas and learning outcomes, consults with faculty focus groups
- **GERRC** submits the review proposal to the Faculty Senate
- The Faculty Senate reviews and approves or denies the new proposal
- The Provost and Board of Trustees review the proposal and give final approval
- The provost appoints 10-16 faculty members to **GECRC**
- **GECRC** determines what courses to include in the general education curriculum
- Registrar adds courses to the general education curriculum list

Contacts at **Institution A** and **Institution D** note that after an institution-wide revision of general education requirements, it is important to allow up to one academic year for faculty to create new courses. This also provides the committee with time to approve new and existing courses that meet altered requirements.
Faculty Conduct Institution-wide Revisions to General Education Requirements

General Education Requirements Review Committee (GERRC)

Provost appoints 12-15 faculty and deans from all schools on an ad hoc basis.

- Evaluates core through consultations with faculty
- Submits recommendations in formal proposal to provost and board of trustees about changes to:
  - Credit hour requirements
  - Knowledge areas
  - Learning outcomes

At Institution B and Institution F, a representative from the student government sits on the GERRC. This student relays committee developments to the greater student body during student government meetings and meets with students who wish to provide their input to the committee. This ensures that the committee takes student opinions into consideration during the review process.

General Education Curriculum Review Committee (GECRC)

Provost appoints 15-20 faculty and deans from all schools, to serve three-year terms.

- Oversees implementation of changes to general education requirements
- Reviews all applications for courses seeking inclusion in the general education curriculum
- Assesses whether a course syllabus supports the knowledge-area learning outcomes and votes to accept or reject proposals
- Provide a list of all approved courses to the registrar and provost at the end of each month
- Answers any questions from faculty, students, or staff related to the general education curriculum
- Meets bi-monthly

At Institution B and Institution G, knowledge area-specific subcommittees determine what courses to include in the general education curriculum; the larger committee hears appeals of rejected proposals. Six to ten faculty members with expertise in a knowledge area serve on subcommittees for three years, and the subcommittee chair sits on the general education curriculum review committee. At Institution G, subcommittees complete a review of all area courses every three years.
**Improve Faculty and Student Understanding of General Education Requirements**

During the general education requirements review process, committees communicate any changes in policies to faculty, staff, and current and incoming students. This ensures that current students know of any changes that will impact them, facilitates advising, and improves the timely completion of requirements. Contacts at **Institution G** emphasize the importance of explaining revisions to staff in the office of undergraduate admissions and department chairs prior to new student orientation and registration to avoid confusion as incoming students register for courses.

**Roadblocks to the Revision Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Roadblocks</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty members feel left out of review process</td>
<td>Provide multiple opportunities for faculty to speak with review committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty members worry their department will lose funding if courses are no longer</td>
<td>members through faculty-wide forums and knowledge-area specific meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a part of the general education curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Department chairs and school deans emphasize requirements are area-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>specific and not owned by any department. Across profiled institutions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>contacts noted that reductions to the core did not reduce the size or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>funding of departments, although introduction of new requirements could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lead to increases in budget size (e.g. lab science requirement increases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>funding for lab equipment).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At six of the seven profiled institutions, students who were already enrolled followed the requirements in place in the catalogue year that they entered the university; only students who enrolled after the changes to general education requirements were approved by the provost and committee were affected by the changes. Following revisions to the requirements at **Institution E**, seniors followed the old requirements, juniors could choose what requirements to follow, and sophomores and freshmen were required to follow the new curriculum.
Assessment

Conduct Knowledge-area Assessments on a Four-year Cycle

Members of the general education curriculum review committee partner with personnel from the institutional research office to analyze collected data and calculate the percentage of students in each core course that meet learning outcome criteria. Administrators at Institution D and Institution F stagger course reviews according to outcome or subject area to limit committee time commitments.

Knowledge-area Assessment Review at Institution F:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing, Mathematical Reasoning</td>
<td>Ethics, History</td>
<td>Human Behavior, Scientific Reasoning,</td>
<td>Multicultural Experience/Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Theology</td>
<td>and Performing Arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Develop Written Policy Documents for Faculty to Assess Learning Outcomes Associated with Every Knowledge-area

Administrators primarily use learning outcomes data gathered from assessments to review and revise general education courses. At Institution F, the goal of knowledge-area assessment is to identify any knowledge-areas in which students are not meeting learning outcomes, so that faculty can alter courses to ensure students gain proficiency. Committee members share results with all departments participating in assessment, and produce an annual report to vice provost.

Mechanisms to Assess General Education Courses

- **Rubrics**: Rubrics assess student competency in a learning outcome. Each rubric separates the outcome into several proficiencies. At Institution F, instructors of a course included in the general education curriculum rank a student’s level of proficiency in each area according to a scale.

- **In Course Questions in Exams and Reflection Essays**: Faculty create one question specific to a course learning outcome on the final exam. Administrators track the percentage of students who correctly answer these questions to assess progress toward that learning outcome. Contacts at Institution E are considering including these questions in course evaluations, rather than final exams.

- **Require E-Portfolios and Collect Student Artifacts**: Faculty at Institution G collect student work that demonstrates progress toward a learning outcome in the Digication learning management system. Department administrators then consolidate this information into a report, which they submit to the general education committee to demonstrate students meet learning outcomes.
Contacts Desire to Collect Metrics to Evaluate Changes to General Education Requirements

With the exception of Institution F, changes to the general education requirements at profiled institutions are too recent to evaluate their success. All contacts express a desire to collect metrics to inform future revisions with data-driven analysis and to support the decisions of the general education curriculum review committee. While faculty can better select the types of data collection most useful to gauge student learning within their discipline, institutional research offices also collect data on the number of students completing two majors or a minor, the number of students studying abroad, student transfer between colleges, the number of newly designed, and approved courses.

Percent Increase in Students Declaring a Second Major or Minor at Institution A

Anecdotal evidence shows the revision of general education requirements positively impacts retention, particularly from freshman to sophomore year. Administrators in Institution D’s office of the provost note that adjustments to the requirements reduced the number of transfers and improved the first year experience, as students feel the core does not prohibit them from taking courses of their choice. In order to improve retention at Institution C and Institution E, administrators reduced the number of requirements that need to be completed in the freshman year. Students report that these changes improved the first year experience, as they had greater freedom to select their first year courses.

At Institution G, all first year students enroll in a university college, a non-degree granting college that introduces them to university life. In order to enroll in a degree-granting school or college, students must complete a subset of the general education requirements. This ensures students are on track to complete their degree within four years, and centralizes first year advising.
**Institution-wide Core Curriculum Facilitates Transitions between Academic Programs**

A university-wide common core allows students to switch majors or schools more easily than degree or school-specific core requirements. A common core based off of knowledge areas and learning outcomes, rather than required courses, also facilitates this flexibility. At **Institution D** and **Institution F**, academic advisors must approve a student’s schedule before he or she can register for courses each semester. This ensures that they complete general education requirements early in their college careers and that general education requirements do not inhibit changes in major.
5) Research Methodology

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

- How many credit hours do contacts require to complete general education requirements?
- How many credit hours do contacts require to complete major requirements?
- For institutions with a religious affiliation, what impact does this have on general education and major requirement policies?
- How do general education and major requirement differ between academic units or schools? What variables account for this difference?
- How often are general education and major requirements revised? What factors motivate revisions?
- What departments and staff are responsible for changes to general education and major requirements? What roles do each staff member play in the process?
- What committees participate in the development and implementation of change to general education and major requirements?
- How do contacts solicit student input during the process to revise general education and major requirements?
- What metrics do contacts collect to evaluate the effectiveness of adjustments to general education and major requirements?
- What benefits did contacts anticipate as a result of changes to credit requirements?
- To what extent have adjustments to general education and major requirements made transitions between academic programs easier?
- How have changes to general education and major requirements changed the size and funding of departments? What departments were most impacted by changes and why?
- What challenges did contacts face in modifying general education and major credit requirements?

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Advisory Board’s internal and online research libraries (eab.com):
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov/)
The Forum interviewed faculty and members of the provost’s office or academic planning committees at private institutions.

## 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>Carnegie Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution A</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>5,300/8,800</td>
<td>Master’s Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution B</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>7,300/12,900</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution C</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>12,900/15,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution D</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>8,300/15,200</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution E</td>
<td>Pacific West</td>
<td>6,100/9,500</td>
<td>Master’s Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>8,300/11,800</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution G</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>8,500/12,100</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>