



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)



Survey of colleges finds that distribution requirements remain popular but with new features

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on January 19, 2016 - 3:00am

When colleges discuss general education reforms or announce curricular revamps, it's common to hear professors talk of the need to replace "cafeteria-style" approaches. Distribution requirements, critics say, may assure that all students take a course or two in such broad fields as the humanities, the social sciences and the physical and biological sciences. But the requirements don't necessarily encourage thoughtful integration of different fields of study -- and many students simply look for the easiest options to check the requirements off. (Think "physics for poets.")

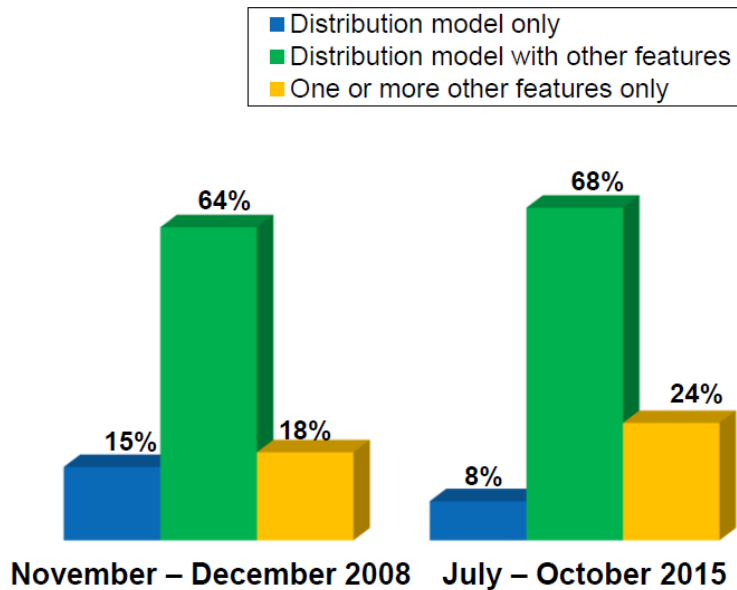
But for all the talk about moving past distribution requirements, it turns out that they are alive and well, but with twists that deal with some of the criticisms.

That is one of the key findings of a survey ^[1] -- released today by the Association of American Colleges and Universities -- of its members on issues such as general education, learning outcomes and teaching approaches. The results being released today are the second from a survey completed by provosts or chief academic officers at 325 AAC&U member colleges and universities.

Other key findings relate to a growing majority of colleges having intended learning goals or outcomes for all students, and some skepticism about whether faculty members are using technology in the most effective ways.

Distribution Requirements

Many general education programs have been built around distribution requirements. And the AAC&U survey suggests that relatively few institutions have abandoned them. In the 2015 survey, 76 percent of colleges reported using distribution requirements, down only modestly from the 79 percent of colleges that reported using distribution requirements in a 2008 survey. But the norm -- even more now than in 2008 -- is a distribution requirement plus other features for general education. In fact, the share of colleges relying only on distribution requirements fell nearly in half between the two surveys.



According to the AAC&U report, colleges are building on distribution requirements by also requiring common intellectual experiences of students, thematic courses, learning communities (in which groups of students take a common sequence of courses) and other techniques.

In the survey, academic leaders were asked to indicate the design elements of their general education programs -- and they could list more than one such element.

Design Elements of General Education, 2015 Survey

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

The University of Nevada at Las Vegas is an example of a university keeping distribution requirements but also adding other approaches to general education. So undergraduates across

fields are still required to complete courses in writing, mathematics, fine arts and humanities, social sciences, and life/physical sciences, among other categories. But UNLV has added other required elements, such as a first-year seminar, a second-year seminar and new upper-division requirements in majors, leading to a "culminating experience."

Chris Heavey, vice provost for undergraduate education at UNLV, said the university was trying to more closely link its general education requirements to the major and to institutional learning goals. But he said it was "very challenging for most institutions to go entirely away from distribution models because the structure and resources of the institution [have] probably grown up to support those offerings."

Debra Humphreys, senior vice president for academic planning and public engagement at AAC&U, said that "many people theoretically get that it's not adequate" to just create categories of courses for students, and to require them to take some number of courses in each category. But she agreed with Heavey that "institutions are still organized largely by disciplinary categories that correspond to knowledge areas." As a result, colleges "continue to chip away" at reliance on distribution requirements "but we're still not quite there yet" in terms of moving to an entirely new model.

Humphreys is encouraged by moves like that of UNLV's, which use distribution as a base for general education but don't leave it there. She also said it was important that general education requirements be linked to desired learning outcomes, as the survey suggests colleges are doing.

On learning outcomes, the survey found that 85 percent of colleges report that they have a common set of desired outcomes for all undergraduates, regardless of major. That figure is up from 78 percent in the 2008 survey.

Further, of those institutions that have a common set of learning outcomes for all students, there is consensus about some of the elements that are included. The table below shows, from the 2008 survey and the 2015 survey, the share of colleges reporting that these skills and knowledge areas are part of their learning outcomes.

Common Elements of Colleges' Learning Outcomes

Skills/Knowledge	2008	2015
Writing skills	99%	99%
Critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills	95%	98%
Quantitative reasoning skills	91%	94%
Knowledge of science	91%	92%
Knowledge of mathematics	87%	92%
Knowledge of humanities	92%	92%
Knowledge of global world cultures	87%	89%
Knowledge of social sciences	90%	89%

Knowledge of the arts	n/a	85%
Oral communication skills	88%	82%
Intercultural skills and abilities	79%	79%
Information literacy skills	76%	76%
Research skills and projects	65%	75%
Ethical reasoning	75%	75%
Knowledge of diversity in the United States	73%	73%
Integration of learning across disciplines	63%	68%
Application of learning beyond the classroom	66%	65%
Civic engagement and competence	68%	63%
Knowledge of technology	61%	49%
Knowledge of languages other than English	42%	48%
Knowledge of American history	49%	47%
Knowledge of sustainability	24%	27%

Humphreys said she was pleased by one of the topics that saw the biggest increase from 2008 to now: research skills and projects. She said this was consistent with the idea of working in teams and working to solve problems -- skills that employers seek and that promote cohesive learning that goes beyond one course or discipline.

Some of the scores on the list may be hard to explain. For example, the results suggest more colleges include study of a language other than English as a learning outcome. But [a report from the Modern Language Association](#) [2] a year ago found foreign language enrollments declining, and many foreign language departments in the last few years have found themselves the target of cuts.

The high percentage (85 percent) of colleges reporting that knowledge of the arts is a learning outcome is also at odds with the relatively few colleges that require arts study for all students. Humphreys said she suspected that the high figure was due to provosts looking at requirements for arts and humanities courses and counting them as arts requirements.

Are Students Aware?

The provosts were also asked whether they believed students were aware of the desired learning outcomes at their institutions. Only 9 percent said that they believed all students understood the desired learning outcomes, and only 36 percent said that a majority of students understood them.

Humphreys said that academics should be "very worried" about these findings. She said she worried that faculty members may spend lots of time developing a general education program

consistent with their institutions' missions, launch the system with fanfare and then not do enough to promote understanding of it. That may mean that, a few years after a program launch, students may not know much about it.

The findings also point to a need for more of a focus on academic advising and for advisers to talk to students about the broad goals of general education, and not just requirements to be finished.

The completion agenda, she said, may make this more difficult. Many advisers are "under pressure to get students through as soon as possible," she said. That is admirable, but means that students aren't necessarily being asked about how course plans "relate to learning broadly," but rather are encouraged to find "an efficient way to get this done."

Technology and Online Learning

The survey also asked chief academic officers about their impressions on the use of digital tools by faculty members.

Thirty-six percent of survey respondents said they believed that most faculty members were using the tools effectively, while 61 percent said that some faculty members were doing so, and 3 percent said that very few faculty members were doing so.

Even if some of the academic leaders think that most of their faculty members are using digital learning tools effectively, most of the provosts want more.

Asked to respond to the statement that "all or most of our teaching faculty should be using more digital learning strategies in undergraduate courses or programs," 89 percent said that they totally agreed.

There is less of a consensus, however, on offering more online courses for undergraduates, with 26 percent of chief academic officers saying that was a high priority, 36 percent saying it was a medium priority and 38 percent saying it was a minor priority or a nonpriority.

Teaching and Learning ^[3]

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/19/survey-colleges-finds-distribution-requirements-remain-popular-new-features?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

[1] <http://www.aacu.org/about/2015-membersurvey>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/11/mla-report-shows-declines-enrollment-most-foreign-languages>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning>

undefined

undefined