

# A 'Core Conversancies' Model for General Education at DU

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## I. Rationale

This model is based on concepts proposed some years ago by the philosopher Rudolf Weingartner in his book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means* (1992). Weingartner distinguishes between *Proficiencies*, *Competencies*, and *Conversancies*. Proficiencies include basic writing, math, and language skills. Competencies cover learning in the academic major. The pedagogically distinctive element of the model—Conversancies—implies the cultivation (through discussion-rich seminars, studios, and other methods) of an intellect that enables a student to see a major field's relations to other worlds, and to imagine new worlds. For Weingartner, the “pedagogic road to conversancy” is best served by courses that address big topics, issues, and problems.

Weingartner's prioritization of conversancy as an educational value is echoed by other philosophers like Ruth Grant and Richard Rorty. Grant (in *The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics*) considers "good conversation" to be a "non-partisan, ethical activity necessary for effective public discourse in a democratic society." In her words, it "establishes our sense of ourselves in relation to society as a whole...to be part of the conversation is to be part of the community." For Rorty (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), "edifying conversation" is a discourse in which we join with others in an attempt to "make sense of the multidimensional aspects of human experience." It's a project of finding "new, better, more interesting, and more fruitful ways of speaking." The conversation involves "being prepared to listen and learn from others, as well as to respond and reconstruct our own views, as we investigate together what it means to be a human being and how this might be brought about through education." These ideas about conversation as an anchoring educational trope are deeply rooted in an honorable and extremely influential tradition of pragmatist thought beginning with William James and John Dewey.

The Conversancies Model is based on what American universities have always done best: create and disseminate knowledge. It respects and prioritizes the transmission of accumulated knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. However, the model also respects and invites contributions from other professional disciplines and fields of inquiry. It takes for granted the value of critical and creative thinking. It respects new initiatives to *co-produce* knowledge with internal and external partners and collaborators. The curriculum aims to foster self-aware and civically-minded citizens who are simultaneously informed and interesting conversationalists. Someone who's proficient in basic skills and competent in the conventions of a particular discipline isn't necessarily worth talking to, keeping company with, or hiring (e.g., see Mark Bauerlein, 'The Underestimation of Cultural Literacy', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2009).

The Conversancies Model restores a high-end, thematic general education curriculum akin to what was successfully created under University Requirements (2000-2010). It builds on foundational learning in the great domains of human knowledge as well as in the major. The distinctive Conversancies element of the curriculum is back-loaded in the junior and senior years to address the new reality of high student mobility; i.e., transfer students who have acquired proficiencies and competencies at other institutions before settling in at DU, and high school graduates bringing advanced placement credit. Back-loading also capitalizes on student gains in cognitive maturity over four years, as established by the vast literature on Reflective Judgement.

The concept of Conversancies dovetails with the original, inclusive intent of DU's Public Good vision. It is consistent with many aspects of the Impact 2025 strategic plan. It addresses widespread national worries that we're becoming a civically-illiterate and scientifically-ignorant people. The Conversancies Model is taxonomically unique. It would put a distinctive stamp on DU's Gen Ed program. It speaks to our institutional identity, and has “branding” potential.

## II. Structure

The curriculum is structured into **Core Competencies** (basic proficiencies and literacies in the liberal arts and sciences) and **Core Conversancies** (high-end, theme-based encounters between and across disciplines, professions, and emerging transdisciplinary fields of inquiry).

**A. Core Competencies (44-52 credits; the precise number and distribution of credits in WRIT, QUAN, LANG and new areas like Information Literacy/Computing can be further negotiated by faculty)**

FSEM: 4 credits.

WRIT: 4 credits.

QUAN: 8 credits

LANG: 4-12 credits.

AHUM: 8 credits: two courses cultivating shared knowledge around fundamental questions, texts, and concepts.

SOCS: 8 credits: two courses cultivating shared knowledge around fundamental questions, texts, and concepts.

NATS: 8 credits: two course sequence providing broad-based scientific literacy focused on Big Questions, Ideas, and Concepts that would better prepare students for the Conversancies curriculum.

**B. Core Conversancies (12 credits)**

Students take one seminar (or, “studio”—see Rebecca Chopp, ‘Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining: The Liberal Arts College Takes Advantage of Change’, 2013) in each of three high end Conversancy categories, choosing from menus created by faculty across the university including the professional schools. Experienced and trusted adjunct faculty are also welcome to teach these courses. Particular course topics and emphases are open, but relate to the category theme *as broadly understood*. Courses are designed and titled to excite students, and to explicitly *test* their academic major’s relevance to bigger issues and problems. Classroom pedagogies (writing intensive, discussion intensive, lab intensive, field intensive, graphics/design intensive, performance intensive) are selected by the instructor and tailored to the specific objectives and learning outcomes of the course. Team teaching across academic units is encouraged (but not required) in all three categories, so as to better illustrate the generative power of conversation and the fundamental unity of knowledge. Category themes might be pitched as follows, in keeping with AAC&U reports about areas in which college graduates are weak, to their detriment:

- *One Interdisciplinary “Knowledge Bridging” Seminar/Studio.* Especially suited for faculty teaching in the natural sciences and STEM/“STEAM” disciplines. *Serves the cause of general scientific literacy as well as “visual literacy.”*
- *One Civic Engagement or Applied Scholarship Seminar/Studio.* Especially suited for faculty teaching in the professional schools, social sciences, and the arts, including those keen on civic engagement, community partnerships, and service learning. Service learning is not required, however. Courses in or about “citizen science” would fit here. *Serves the cause of general civic literacy.*
- *One Global Awareness or Cultural Diversity Seminar/Studio.* Especially suited for faculty teaching in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and professional schools such as JKIS, the College of Education, and the School of Social Work. Can be satisfied by a Study Abroad program. *Serves the cause of general cultural literacy.*

**Note:** This curriculum reflects priorities of the university’s Vision, Values, Mission, and Goals, as well as the Impact 2025 strategic plan. It aligns with AAC&U manifestos about general education. It addresses workforce needs identified by AAC&U surveys of executives and hiring managers. In fact, the notion of “Conversancies” dovetails with the increasing importance, to employers, of oral communication as a desired skill (see *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work*). If desired, the three very general Conversancy categories described above can be given greater specificity akin to the old University Requirements’ specification of the high end Core themes of *Identity, Community, and Change*. For example, themes like *Urbanization, Citizenship, and Pluralism* would work as alternatives and accommodate research and teaching interests known to exist across the liberal arts and sciences and the professional schools. They would easily invite participation from STEM and natural sciences faculty. If in doubt, special incentives and/or faculty development opportunities could be created to boost participation from the sciences, engineering, and professional schools. Participation of science and engineering faculty means that a fair number of non-science majors will pick up another 4 credits of science education, and conceivably even more credits, at the Conversancies level. Graduate students employed in the sciences continue their GTAs at the Conversancies level.

**TOTAL: 56-64 credits.**