

Parameters of General Education: A Primer for the DU Community

The General Education Review and Inquiry Committee | December 2017

GERI maintains a set of resources visible to the DU community at
<http://portfolio.du.edu/GenEdReviewInquiry2017>

For inquiries or comments, please contact Doug Hesse, chair, at dhesse@du.edu

Professors have debated what individual colleges and universities should require of their students for centuries—and with particular vigor since the rise of the majors/research model of the American university in the 19th century. Various philosophies, goals, and models of general education have been theorized and implemented, resulting in a vast scholarly literature. These, along with analyses of institutional environments and missions, have informed regular reviews and revisions of general education programs on nearly every American campus. Indeed, at least five of the ten schools in DU’s institutional comparison group have revised their programs in the last five years.¹

The General Education Review and Inquiry (GERI) committee is analyzing DU’s current Common Curriculum against this backdrop. As we mentioned in a letter to the faculty on 11/3/17, we see little value in reinventing wheels or ignoring smart thinking elsewhere. We thought, further, that it would be helpful to distill the literature and context for the faculty as a whole. For colleagues who’d like a more complete, yet still concise overview of this literature, we recommend Cynthia A. Wells’s *Realizing General Education* (AEHE and John Wiley & Sons, 2016). The book is available digitally through Penrose library.

Wells characterizes general education programs as enacting options along two

dimensions. One dimension concerns **Functions** or philosophies/purposes. These can perhaps best be answered by answering the question “Who (or what) does the program primarily intend to benefit?” There are three main foci.

General education might be understood primarily as an **Individual Student Good**. Its purpose can be valued as developing intellectual capacities (such as bodies of knowledge), skills (such as quantitative reasoning, writing, communications), and philosophies of life, meaning, or ethics, all to the ends of creating “holistic” or “well-balanced” individuals and/or the ends of developing their employment skills.

General education might be understood primarily as a **Community/Societal Good**. Its goals can be articulated as creating an educated citizenry who are dedicated to certain civic and social values and knowledgeable about how to enact them. It has the goal to foster democratic ideals, domestically and globally.

Or general education might be understood primarily as an **Institutional Good**. Its purpose can be valued as forwarding the school’s mission and values, establishing and reinforcing the school’s identity. It may do so by fostering course integration or connections between curricular and co-curricular experiences. Another institutional purpose can be to provide

¹ DU’s current Common Curriculum was developed in 2009, through a revision process chaired by Professor Luc Beaudoin. Please

look for our separate primer, “A Recent Brief History of General Education at DU.”

teaching opportunities to meet faculty interests and staffing resources.

Obviously, these three functions can braid together—and often do. The more all three are valued equally, however, the more potentially difficult is the challenge of developing and delivering a particular model.

Wells identifies four main models. The **Core** model requires all students to take the same prescribed set of courses—not selections from a menu but, rather, the same courses or a least a very narrow set of choices. The Core model prizes consistency and centrality. It may have the advantages of simplicity, although that can come at the cost of significant challenges in deciding that narrow core, attracting sufficient faculty interest and expertise, staffing the core courses, and student choice.

The **Distribution** model requires students to fulfill requirements by choosing from a menu of offerings in each of several identified categories. (A venerable division is to require courses in social sciences, arts and humanities, natural sciences, communications, languages, and so on.) The Distribution model prizes breadth across a variety of disciplines. It may have advantages of choice to accommodate both student choice and faculty interests and, as a result, a political expediency, although these can come at the cost of consistency and coherence.

The **Competency** model requires students to develop particular skills and abilities rather than accumulate a particular set of courses. Those skills could include such things as written or oral communication, quantitative reasoning, languages, critical thinking, digital literacies, and so on. Or they might include facility with different epistemological traditions: methods of inquiry and research. The Competency model prizes development of skills. While this model may feature courses that focus on the skills, courses may also count toward the requirement by manifesting certain features (a

certain amount of writing, primary research, etc.). It may have the advantages of flexibility, as skills can be designed into a range of courses, although this can come at the cost of breadth, centrality, and perhaps logistical tidiness, especially as particular competencies are layered over many courses.

Finally, the **Thematic** model requires students to complete a strand of courses commonly denominated by a topic, issue, or theme (“sustainability,” for example, or “poverty” or “climate change”). A campus may offer a single thematic strand for each cohort of students or may allow students to select from a select menu of strands, and there may or may not be a distribution imperative (“choose one humanities, one social science, and one natural science course on the theme of war,” for example). The Thematic model prizes depth and integration. It may have additional advantages of common experiences and identities across campus, although these can come at the cost of achieving faculty agreement on themes and the concern by some faculty about “disciplinary integrity” as those faculty may find some themes less amenable than others to what’s central to their fields.

For obvious reasons, few general education programs manifest purely just one of these models (with those that do mainly enacting Distribution). Instead, programs exist as a conglomerate—and sometimes a compound—of each. There maybe a few core requirements, a further layer of distribution requirements, and perhaps some overarching learning outcomes or competencies. Thematic elements are less frequent in general education programs, but not absent. Furthermore, any given program embodies one or more Functions, explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or accidentally.

The current Common Curriculum at DU combines Core, Distribution, and Competency elements, in a fairly ambitious and comprehensive fashion.² The most

² For convenience, we’ve reproduced the DU Common Curriculum as Appendix A.

explicit Core element is the requirement of two writing courses, offered in multiple sections but all featuring the same goals, amounts and types of writing, similar minimal terminologies and content, and so on. Language study is another core element, though students obviously choose among different languages. FSEM and ASEM also manifest core elements. They're specific courses required of all students and explicit characteristics for all sections, although contents intentionally vary across their many sections.

The DU Common Curriculum's distribution element is most obvious in the "Ways of Knowing" category of requirements. As Appendix A lays out, students must take

- 1 course in mathematics, formal reasoning or computational sciences
- 3 sequenced courses in one core area of science
- 2 courses in the arts and humanities
- 2 courses in the social sciences

It's important to note, however, the larger framework in which this distribution is set, within the categories of "Ways of Knowing." There is an intentional design to develop student awareness of and competency with epistemology. That is, there are different knowledge-making traditions in the academy, marked by not only by differing content knowledges, traditions, and disciplinary histories, but also by differing inquiry and research processes, differing assumptions about what counts as evidence, differing ways of making arguments or reporting ideas, and so on.

The Common Curriculum foregrounds two broad epistemologies, Analytic Inquiry and Scientific Inquiry. The second required writing course, WRIT 1133: Writing and Research, introduces students to the ideas of how ways of knowing manifest in ways of writing that are important in the university. Students practice writing in three broad research traditions, each with its own set of genres and assumptions. Quantitative research seeks to subject phenomena to

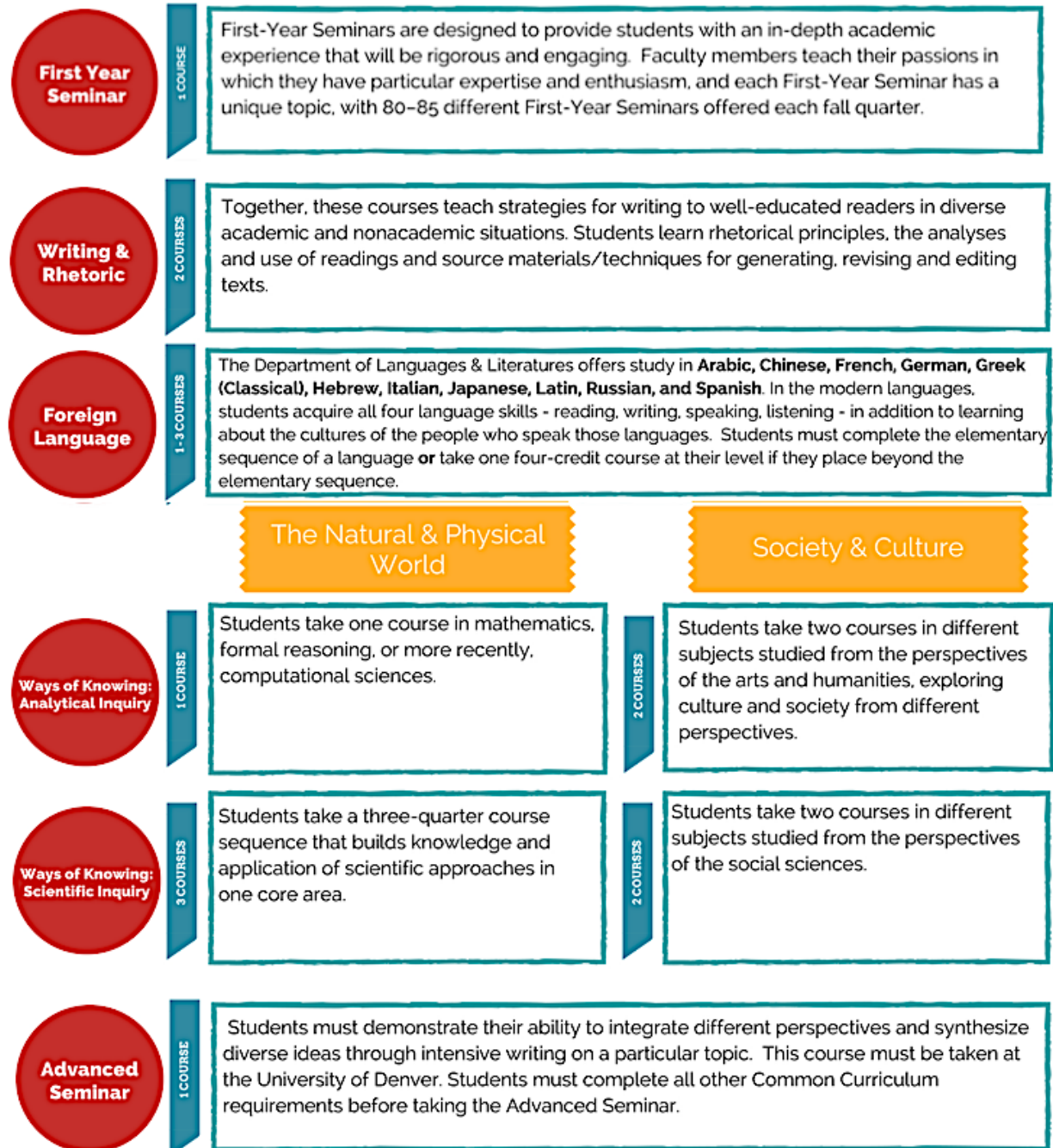
measurement, followed by analysis through statistical means. Qualitative research gathers systematic observations (through interviews, open-ended surveys, ethnographic observation and so on) of phenomena and subjects them to interpretation. Textual (or artifact-driven) research analyzes and interprets writings (or paintings, musical compositions, buildings, or so on) through particular lenses. All three traditions have an interpretive element in light of bodies of previous scholarship. (And clearly they intertwine.)

The Common Curriculum is one important way that DU strives to achieve its Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. (The other important channels are through majors and minors, elective coursework, and co-curricular initiatives.) Appendix B of this report lists the six Undergraduate Learning Outcomes (which aren't under review at this time). Following them are the sixteen outcomes of all the requirements within the common curriculum, accompanied by their mapping onto the Undergraduate Outcomes. One thing the GERI Committee noted is that Common Curriculum outcomes are fragmented and siloed in ways that have made it difficult to assess the Common Curriculum *as a whole*. There are productive assessments of individual courses and categories, no doubt facilitated by the particularity of those 16 outcomes, but a larger focus is difficult. We're working through a number of measures to assess the efficacy of the common curriculum.

Why does all of this context matter? An important first step is to agree on the purpose and goals of general education at DU, understanding options and desiderata not only in terms of DU's mission, circumstances and local traditions and resources but also in relation to the best thinking and practices extant in the wider universe of higher education.

Appendix A: The Current Common Curriculum at DU

Following is a graphic layout of the existing Common Curriculum requirements at DU.



Appendix B
Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes and
The Common Curriculum at the University of Denver

Discussed in GERI Committee, 9/27/17

Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes

Adopted 2007, <https://www.du.edu/uap/learning-outcomes/>

Over the course of a three-year planning process, the Undergraduate Student Learning Group met with each undergraduate academic department and with the Faculty Senate to develop the Undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes. These outcomes flow directly from the University's educational mission and goals as they emphasize learning across and within the disciplines, intellectual engagement, as well as engagement with both local and global communities.

We are dedicated to helping students achieve the following learning and developmental outcomes by the time they graduate. These outcomes demonstrate that the University values liberal learning and the breadth of thinking that derives from it, as well as disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning and the depth of thinking derived from those.

QUANTITATIVE REASONING

Students describe quantitative relations and apply appropriate quantitative strategies to examine significant questions and form conclusions.

COMMUNICATION

Students develop considered judgements and craft compelling expressions of their thoughts in written, spoken, visual, technologically-mediated, and other forms of interaction.

INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT AND REFLECTION

Students demonstrate a commitment to self-sustained learning and cultivate habits, including self-discipline, self-reflection, and creativity which make such learning possible.

ENGAGEMENT WITH HUMAN DIVERSITY

Students critically reflect on their own social and cultural identities and make connections and constructively engage with people from groups that are characterized by social and cultural dimensions other than their own.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Students consider their relationships with their own and others' physical and social communities as they engage collaboratively with those communities.

DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

Students demonstrate breadth and depth of knowledge within at least one discipline including the fundamental principles and ways of knowing or practicing in the discipline(s).

DU Common Curriculum Student Learning Outcomes

Adopted 2009, <https://www.du.edu/uap/common-curriculum/>

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

AREAS OF INQUIRY		
	The Natural & Physical World	Society & Culture
First Year Seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who successfully complete the FSEM will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in critical inquiry in the examination of concepts, texts, or artifacts, and Effectively communicate the results of such inquiry 	
First-Year Writing & Rhetoric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate the ability to compose for a variety of rhetorical situations Demonstrate the ability to write within multiple research traditions 	
Foreign Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate basic proficiency in a language of choice in the following skills: writing, speaking, listening, and reading Demonstrate proficiency in learning about a culture associated with a language of choice 	
Ways of Knowing - Analytical Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply formal reasoning, mathematics, or computational science approaches to problem solving Understand and communicate connections between different areas of logic, mathematics, or computational science, or their relevance to other disciplines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate the ability to create in written, oral, or any other performance medium or interpret texts, ideas, or cultural artifacts Identify and analyze the connections between texts, ideas, or cultural artifacts and the human experience
Ways of Knowing - Scientific Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply knowledge of scientific practice to evaluate evidence for scientific claims. Demonstrate an understanding of science as an iterative process of knowledge generation with inherent strengths and limitations. Demonstrate skills for using and interpreting qualitative and quantitative information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe basic principles of human functioning and conduct in social and cultural contexts Describe and explain how social scientific methods are used to understand the underlying principles of human functioning
Advanced Seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate the ability to integrate and apply context from multiple perspectives to an appropriate intellectual topic or issue Write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions 	

Outcomes listed

- Engage in critical inquiry in the examination of concepts, texts, or artifacts, and effectively communicate the results of such inquiry
- Demonstrate the ability to compose for a variety of rhetorical situations
- Demonstrate the ability to write within multiple research traditions
- Demonstrate basic proficiency in a language of choice in the following skills: writing, speaking, listening, and reading
- Demonstrate proficiency in learning about a culture associated with a language of choice
- Apply formal reasoning, mathematics, or computational science approaches to problem solving
- Understand and communicate connections between different areas of logic, mathematics, or computational science, or their relevance to other disciplines
- Demonstrate the ability to create in written, oral, or any other performance medium or interpret texts, ideas, or cultural artifacts
- Identify and analyze the connections between texts, ideas, or cultural artifacts and the human experience
- Apply knowledge of scientific practice to evaluate evidence for scientific claims.
- Demonstrate an understanding of science as an iterative process of knowledge generation with inherent strengths and limitations.
- Demonstrate skills for using and interpreting qualitative and quantitative information.
- Describe basic principles of human functioning and conduct in social and cultural contexts
- Describe and explain how social scientific methods are used to understand the underlying principles of human functioning
- Demonstrate the ability to integrate and apply context from multiple perspectives to an appropriate intellectual topic or issue
- Write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions

From 2014 DU Assessment Plan and Report

“The dark green areas are components of the Common Curriculum that always address the particular outcome, while the light green areas are components that may do so, as applicable.”

Table 3. Alignment of the Common Curriculum with the Undergraduate Learning Outcomes

		Undergraduate Learning Outcomes						
		Epistemology & Inquiry	Quantitative Reasoning	Communication	Intellectual Engagement & Reflection	Engagement w/ Human Diversity	Community Engagement	Disciplinary Knowledge & Practice
Common Curriculum	First-Year Seminar							
	Writing and Rhetoric							
	Language							
	WAYS OF KNOWING	Analytical Inquiry & The Natural and Physical World						
		Scientific Inquiry & The Natural and Physical World						
		Analytical Inquiry & Society and Culture						
		Scientific Inquiry & Society and Culture						
	Advanced Seminar							