

General Education at UIC: Setting the Foundations for University Study

Proposed by the Educational Policy Committee, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

GENERAL EDUCATION AT UIC: AN OVERVIEW

Over the last twenty years, several campus groups have been charged with reviewing and reworking our current general education system. Faculty groups and task forces met in 1985, 1987, 1997, 1998, and, most recently, last autumn (2003) to vet and discuss general education. Last academic year (2002-2003), the Provost's Office and the Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP) charged the LAS Educational Policy Committee (EPC) with developing a new general education curriculum for the campus. The EPC began its work by reviewing earlier discussions and participating in the discussions last fall. What has been quite striking in the review of these discussions is the recurrence of a common theme: our current system lacks coherence, intellectual direction, and a justification. The 1985 review found that "the current cafeteria of individual courses does not provide sufficient focus or coherence to meet the aims of general education" and recommended "the replacement of the current course menu with a limited number of thematic course clusters." Similarly, the LAS Committee on Undergraduate Education found in 1987 that the "catalog failed adequately to articulate the philosophy, goals, and objectives" of general education and lamented that "the present multiplicity of courses is bewildering to students and frustrates the attempts to create coherent programs." The Report from the Lake Geneva General Education Retreat (1997) and the Report of the Task Force on General Education (1999) echoed these concerns and recommended the creation of disciplinary, thematic clusters. Both reports emphasized that future catalogs ought to provide students with clear justifications and sense of purpose for the proposed plan of study. Although the reports of the Fall 2003 discussions are more anecdotal, many of the participating faculty members commented upon the need for a "cumulative experience that provides students with a sense of direction," "a coherent program that would lead to a sense of integrated knowledge," a model that would include "specific content areas and discipline themes based broadly on curriculum major areas" or "a roadmap that is somewhat more structured but not too restrictive."

During its last accreditation visit in 1997, the North Central Association (NCA) found our current system to be one of the few campus areas of concern. Its specific findings agree with those of our own faculty. It was critical of our "cafeteria style" (i.e., long, unstructured lists of courses under the three divisional headings of Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities) and recommended that we create a new model that would be more coherent and circumscribed. It further expressed concern about the way in which we assess achievement. The campus is currently preparing for the NCA's next visit in 2007, and it is essential that we have a new system in place.

The new model for general education proposed below specifically addresses and seeks to remedy the criticisms mentioned above. In developing the new model, the EPC attempted to provide enough structure to guarantee a certain level of intellectual breadth, while at the same time allowing students the opportunity to select courses or clusters of courses around areas of their own interests. Specifically, the model

- ❖ provides intellectual guidance by identifying six broad areas of knowledge that correspond to the kinds of experiences that a liberally educated person should have.

- ❖ makes clear to students what they are taking and why.

- ❖ is an open system that does not bind departments into one category. This model thus allows for the development of interdepartmental courses over time. It also allows students to gain interdisciplinary perspectives, which was one of the hoped for outcomes of revising general education.
- ❖ gives individual colleges some freedom to adjust the general education requirements to suit their own needs. Although there is a campus-wide minimum of one course from each general education category, colleges may add additional course requirements. For example, LAS will require students to take a total of nine courses. Seven of those courses will be prescribed: two laboratory courses in Category I, “Analyzing the Natural World,” and one in each of the other five categories. Students may then select the remaining two required courses from any of the six categories. They will thus be able to explore their own areas of interest in greater depth, experiment with major fields without being penalized, or perhaps even begin work toward a minor.

The New Model of General Education at UIC

General education at UIC is designed to serve as a foundation for lifelong learning. It will help prepare students for the world beyond the college experience, a world in which one needs to be able to

- ❖ think independently
- ❖ understand and critically evaluate information
- ❖ analyze and evaluate arguments
- ❖ develop and present cogent written and oral arguments
- ❖ explore one’s own culture and history as well as those of others
- ❖ understand, interpret, and evaluate the arts
- ❖ think critically about how individuals influence and are influenced by political, economic, cultural, and family institutions

General Education at UIC has two main components: a grouping of core courses that are clustered around six themes (see General Education Core) and sets of required proficiencies. The specific requirements vary from college to college. All colleges, however, require a minimum of 24 semester hours of credit (per Board of Trustees) with at least one course in each of the six categories of general education for the first component and proficiency in writing (as demonstrated by successful completion of English 160 and 161 or by certain scores on placement or other tests) for the second component.

The following rules apply to the new model:

- 1) Departments decide into which categories each of their courses fit.
- 2) Departments must justify placing a course into more than one category.

- 3) Students who register for a course that is listed in more than one category will have flexibility in deciding which category the course will satisfy. They will not have to decide right away but may wait to see how their plan of study develops over time. The course, however, will fulfill the requirement of only one category. (In other words, the course will not fulfill the requirement of two categories just because it is listed in two categories.)
- 4) Each category of courses has its own content criteria that reflect the general theme of the category (see Appendix B). In addition to satisfying those criteria, each general education course must include at least *one* of the following components: (1) a laboratory, (2) a substantial paper writing assignment appropriate for the subject matter (no changes will be made to the current minimum number of pages), or (3) assignments that include either problem sets or written data analysis. In all three of these cases, students must be given written feedback on such assignments during the semester (i.e., these assignments cannot be given only at the end of the term or as a final, but students must be given feedback on their work during the semester).
- 5) The existing Cultural Diversity requirement has been reformulated into its own general education category, Exploring World Cultures.
- 6) Students may count up to two courses in their major toward their general education requirements. If students have a double major, then two courses from each of the majors may be applied toward general education.
- 7) As before, only 100- and 200-level courses will be included in the list of courses. The current prohibition of courses with non-general education prerequisites will be eliminated.

Implementation

The planned implementation date for incoming first-year students is Fall 2007. There will be a two-step process for approving courses for the new categories. Existing general education courses will be provisionally approved according to a streamlined process incorporating the rules outlined above. Once the majority of the existing courses have been processed, new course proposals will be considered against more detailed criteria that reflect both the core themes and the expected proficiencies. In addition, a schedule will be established to review all provisionally approved courses according to the more detailed criteria. A schedule will then remain in place for a regular and cyclical review of courses.

The existing general education policies will apply to transfer students until the second phase of the implementation process is completed. Then, as now, each transfer course will be mapped to one of our existing courses or subject area. Articulation may allow a course not matched to a UIC course to fulfill or partially fulfill a required area. Transfer students who have completed their general education requirements as outlined in the Illinois Articulation Initiative will have the same status, i.e., we will consider them to have completed the UIC general education requirements. College-specific requirements are not affected in that they exceed those of the campus general education requirements.

A. General Education Core (A “Limited Choice” Model)

I. Analyzing the Natural World

A central principle of a knowledge-based society is that, where possible, experimental tests should be designed to critically evaluate the accuracy of an idea or physical law. It is crucial that students understand both how accurate experimental results are obtained and how uncertainties in these results affect scientific conclusions. Courses in this category provide an understanding of scientific method and the factual knowledge necessary to develop hypotheses, to test them, and to distinguish those conclusions resting on unsupported assertion from those verified by sound scientific reasoning. Theories also play an important role in the way we see the world around us. In the natural sciences, theories are developed to explain experimental observation, form the basis for the design of further experiments, and provide the foundation for advances in technology. Mathematics provides appropriate tools (such as calculus) necessary to formulate the scientific theories.

II. Understanding the Individual and Society

The primary goal of the Individual and Society requirement is to enhance understanding of the complex activities of individuals and their relations with each other and with groups, institutions, governments, media, and society. Courses within this category seek to (1) enhance knowledge and appreciation of the diversity of individuals, societies, and cultures; (2) advance the understanding of human relationships within different contexts; and (3) explore the gathering and assessing of knowledge within any social setting or activity. Courses present theories about the human activities and ideas and demonstrate how scholars use qualitative, quantitative, and humanistic methods to evaluate those theories. They may also explore the ways that knowledge is formed about the self and the world in historical, literary, philosophical, and scientific realms.

III. Understanding the Past

The study of past events and ideas enables students to view the present within the context of the past, appreciate both the liberating and constraining features of tradition, and understand what forces have affected their own lives as well as those of peoples in different cultures. The objects of study in these courses include the human past and its historical record; the emergence and transformation of nations, states, ideas, and civilizations; traditions and modes of human thought; the relationship between ideas and practices; and the implications of scientific discovery and technological innovation.

IV. Understanding the Creative Arts

Courses in literature (e.g., fiction, poetry, drama), the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, design, music, theatre and dance, film, photography, new media) and philosophy examine materials that explore and express the potential of the human imagination. Courses fulfilling this requirement acquaint students with issues involved in making, interpreting, analyzing and evaluating written texts, musical works, visual and material culture, performing arts, and other media presentations in the context of the histories and cultures that have shaped and been shaped by their production. The aim is to develop the ability to read, experience and view carefully, to think critically, to argue cogently and to communicate ideas effectively in written and oral form.

V. Exploring World Cultures

A global society demands that individuals gain an appreciation of cultures that are different from their own. Courses in this category explore how cultures function and how they may arise and change, whether through the internationalization of economies, social or political forces, changes in environment, or the development of new technologies. Further, these courses aim to provide students with the necessary tools to study and evaluate disparate social systems and cultural products.

VI. Understanding U.S. Society

The United States is a country that is often characterized by its diversity, including diversity of cultures, religions, classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and gender practices. The aim of this category is to study these diversities, explore the principles and experiences that unite us in the face of them, and perhaps most importantly, to examine critically the social, cultural, and political tensions that arise between that which unites and that which divides us. The goal is thus to understand our society and our political and economic systems, whether to gain knowledge of the past events that have shaped current ones, to gain the means to evaluate critically current policy and to shape future ones, or to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of our current communities.

B. General Education Proficiencies (Prescribed)

All colleges require English 160 and 161 or the equivalent. Individual colleges may require additional proficiencies.

APPENDIX A:

LAS GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

Students in LAS are required to take nine total courses. Of those, seven are prescribed: two laboratory courses in Category I and one course in each of the other five categories. Two courses then may be freely chosen from among any of the six categories.

Students who register for a course that is listed in more than one category will have flexibility in deciding which category the course will satisfy. They will not have to decide right away but may wait to see how their plan of study develops over time. The course, however, will fulfill the requirement of only one category. (In other words, the course will not fulfill the requirement of two categories just because it is listed in two categories.)

Part A: General Education Core

- I. Analyzing the Natural World (two laboratory courses required)
- II. Understanding the Individual and Society
- III. Understanding the Past
- IV. Understanding the Creative Arts
- V. Exploring World Cultures
- VI. Understanding U.S. Society

Part B: General Education Proficiencies (Prescribed))

(This portion of the LAS general education requirements remains unchanged.)

- 1) Foreign Language: Four semesters of one foreign language or the equivalent
- 2) Quantitative Reasoning: One of the following: (1) placement into Mathematics 180; or (2) successful completion (grade of “C” or better) of one of the following courses: Mathematics 121, 123, 145, 150, 160, 165, 180; Communications 201; Criminal Justice 262; Political Science 201; Psychology 343; Sociology 201; or Philosophy 102 or 210.
- 3) English Composition 160 and 161 or the equivalent

APPENDIX B:

GENERAL EDUCATION CRITERIA AND OUTCOMES

The general education criteria that follow were established to provide guidelines for new course development and for the placement of existing courses within the six general education categories. Faculty members should consult these criteria when proposing a course for inclusion in a general education category. These criteria, however, are not meant as a checklist. A course need not satisfy all the criteria in order to be included in that particular category. The course should capture the main intention of the category. The current process of approval by the Senate Committee on Educational Policy, in consultation with the LAS Educational Policy Committee, will continue. These lists of criteria will not appear in the undergraduate catalog.

I. Analyzing the Natural World

Courses in this category should introduce students to scientific and mathematical concepts and methods. They should be designed to facilitate the students' ability to:

1. Understand and critically evaluate information and concepts in the natural and mathematical sciences.
2. Use and understand scientific method to analyze ideas and obtain knowledge.
3. Appreciate the value of and difference between scientific laws, theories, hypotheses, and speculation.
4. Use scientific and mathematical reasoning to make relevant distinctions among ideas.
5. Think critically about contemporary issues in science and technology.
6. Logically and clearly communicate experimental results and observations to others.
7. Analyze quantitative information and draw conclusions from these analyses.

II. Understanding the Individual and Society

Courses in this category should introduce students either to the complexities of the individual or the relationship of the individual to social structures. They should be designed to facilitate the students' ability to:

1. Recognize, describe, and explain social institutions, structures, and processes and the complexities of a global culture and diverse society.
2. Think critically about how individuals influence and are influenced by political, geographic, economic, cultural, and family institutions in their own and other cultures and explain how one's knowledge and beliefs may differ from others.

3. Explain the relationship between the individual and society as it influences (1) individuals' cognition, ethics, social interactions, communication practices and affect; and (2) the quality of life of the individual, the family, and the community.
4. Examine how literature, history, ethical systems, scientific inquiry, or communicative practice shape our knowledge and perception of individuals and social structures.
5. Using the most appropriate principles, methods, and technologies, gather and analyze previous inquiry regarding the relationships between individuals and society, draw logical conclusions about such inquiry, and creatively or scientifically apply those conclusions to one's life and society.

III. Understanding the Past

Courses in this category should have as their primary focus significant past events. They should be designed to facilitate the students' ability to:

1. Understand the implication and meaning of technological innovation and scientific discovery for the development of human society.
2. Critically analyze the cultural, economic, geographical, and political processes that influenced historical events.
3. Recognize, describe, and explain the nature of past historical events and their consequences for the present.
4. Examine the relationship between individuals and past events, their interactions, and the repercussions of these interactions.
5. Understand and explain the significance and influence of the past and its connection to current political, scientific, and cultural forces.

IV. Understanding the Creative Arts

All cultures create stories, images, objects, built environments, dramas, music, etc. The study of such cultural products is an area with its own questions, techniques, and traditions. A student taking courses in this area can expect to study in close detail a number of significant works of literature, art or other media. Courses in this category should facilitate a student's ability to address such questions as:

1. Basic issues of interpretation. How does a work mean anything? How does one determine meaning? How can a work have numerous meanings, often at the same time?
2. Questions of poetics. How do the traditions of genres and forms, materials and means of production, and philosophies and theories influence individual literary and artistic works and their interpretation?
3. Questions of value. How can such creative works be evaluated? How are critical vocabularies developed? How does a work come to be called a "classic"? How do new works and genres become accepted as art?

4. Questions of cultural and historical context. How do creative works relate to the societies in which they are produced and received? How do cultural roles of creative products, definitions of art, institutions, markets and patronage affect the creation of works of architecture, art, music, literature and other media?

V. Exploring World Cultures

Courses in this category should address significant aspects of any culture that is not part of the mainstream American culture. They should be designed to facilitate the students' ability to:

1. Analyze a culture, including its political, social, ethical, communicative, or economic systems.
2. Analyze how cultures are formed, transmitted, and changed.
3. Compare different cultures.
4. Explore the values or cultural products of non-U.S. cultures.
5. Analyze the influence of other cultures upon U.S. culture.

VI. Understanding U.S. Society

Courses in this category should address some significant aspect of U.S. society as their central focus. They should be designed to facilitate the students' ability to:

1. Analyze aspects of U.S. society.
2. Analyze the communicative, political, social, economic, or cultural systems in the U.S.
3. Explore the diverse communities—racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, and sexual—that define cultural and political life in the United States.
4. Critically examine the tensions among various groups within U.S. society.
5. Explore contemporary governmental policies.
6. Analyze the role and influence of the U.S. in the world.
7. Study events, ideas, or movements that have influenced U.S. society.