

General education requirements are an integral part of a quality education. They form an indispensable element in the dual academic emphasis on breadth and depth, providing students with a broad set of essential intellectual and social skills and competencies needed to excel in whatever discipline and career they choose and to become informed, concerned and engaged members of a diverse and complex society and world.

As our campus contemplates General Education reform, we feel that, to borrow from the Association of American Colleges & Universities General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS), GE should “focus on the most empowering forms of learning and make quality of learning, not ancillary metrics, the guiding compass for quality and equity as this global century progresses.” Best practices research directs faculty to start with learning outcomes and build structures to serve those, not the other way around. Thus, discussing a GE model change before first agreeing on what we want students to learn is premature.

Breadth and depth should not be posed as in mutual opposition and competition. They are compatible and complementary, with each serving its essential role in developing in students both broad and specialized competencies, necessary for an inclusive academic excellence, personal development, professional success, effective social engagement and life-long learning.

Depth and expertise are the purview of majors, minors, and certificates; they are important parts of higher education, but breadth in higher education is equally essential, and must be preserved on this campus. Breadth gives students a springboard to higher level positions—their second, third and fourth jobs—their careers. Myriad organizations (including the American Management Association, American Council on Education, AAC&U, and NAFSA: Association of International Educators) agree on the key workforce needs: problem solving, critical thinking, writing, oral argument, working in teams, ethical judgement, civic knowledge, intercultural skills, global competencies, understanding of and engagement with diversity, information literacy, technological literacy, and application of knowledge. A degree that does not cover these areas fails to effectively contribute to the American economy.

Integrating GE coursework and skills into “major” courses will not allow students to understand different perspectives and to effectively communicate with those with varied educational and life backgrounds. Students learn not only from faculty in the classroom but from their interactions with students from other majors. GE courses are one of the few remaining places where students have this experience. By creating pathways or concentrations to GE within majors or colleges, we will rob them of future opportunities to advance and be promoted into leadership positions that require a broader perspective and ability to communicate with those having a different worldview. Further, teaching General Education in-major calls into question the effective teaching of essential learning outcomes. University faculty are specialists, and expert-level proficiency in these vast skill areas is not held in a single department. Teaching GE in-major would require significant faculty development and retraining across seminal skill areas, requiring unrealistic time, investment, and repurposing of faculty expertise. We thus strongly oppose the creation of more narrowly-focused models limited by concentrations, values, disciplines, or colleges.

At this time of increasing isolation and exclusion in America, we call for a renewed emphasis on connection, openness, and broad-mindedness, and a continuation of the breadth in general education that our students and community so desperately need.