

Gen Ed Best Practices Overview

The Continuum

← Smaller core –
general
“distribution requirements”

→ Larger core -
high number of
specified courses.

- The place a school fits on the continuum seems to be determined by the role that the institution believes to be its responsibility in a particular “formation” of the students. For examples:
 - o A small, Catholic liberal arts college that sees its role as forming the students in the “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” is likely to have a large, very specific core.
 - o A larger institution that sees its role more as providing a basic “rounding” of a student’s education is likely to have a smaller, less specific core.
- However, the core (Gen Ed) always represents some institutional philosophy.¹
- One best practice (and recommendation) is that greater clarity of an institution’s philosophy about the core, seems to result in a core that is more clearly integrated into the whole institutional structure (rather than being a mere list of courses that must be “gotten out of the way” before any “real work” begins).

Some Goals for Gen Ed

One place – aside from state laws about gen ed – to look regarding educational goals is the leap report, which is summarized here:

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

The LEAP Report addresses education overall, but the Gen Ed program could be a foundational element of these goals.

Some Best Practices to Consider

These are simply a few innovative approaches to Gen Ed programs that would be worth considering:

- The core at Duquesne University (a combination of specified courses and thematic areas) <http://www.academicaffairs.duq.edu/corecurrintro.html>
- The core at St. Joseph College, IN (an eight-semester, thematically driven, core of seminars that are all team taught and interdisciplinary) <http://www.saintjoe.edu/academics/core/>
 - o This might not be feasible on the scale of UF, but it might be for some parts of UF, like the Honors program.
- The concept of learning communities
- Providing support to insure the quality of teaching, particularly when the economic pressures will likely result in more very large classes. These classes, in particular, require a particular approach to teaching in order to assure good learning. However, the support of quality teaching is a larger issue than just that of addressing large classes. Grad teachers need better support, as do many faculty.
- In tandem with support, some oversight, particularly that would address particularly poor classes would be a “best practice.” (UT’s plan calls for a “of a guardian of the core,” i.e., an administrative structure that will provide “ongoing, focused, and sustained attention to core undergraduate education.”)

A Couple of Matters Not to Forget

(Not necessarily specific to Gen Ed – or any other subtopic – but that need to be considered)

- How the promotion of 4+1 programs gets implemented in an undergraduate experience plan.
- How the acceptance of 3’s as passing grades (i.e., passing out of courses) in AP tests impacts the undergraduate curriculum and whether or not UF has any latitude in this matter.
- UT’s curricular plan is the most clear, concise and non-generic of several studied. It may not my implementable at UF, but it is worth studying. It proposes
 - o Creation of signature courses with a focus on interdisciplinarity
 - o Reorganization of the core by theme
 - o Restructuring undergrad program to allow more time for declaring majors
 - o Creation of a “guarding of the core”
 - o Substantial new financial resources to core and undergrad curriculum.

¹ FL Statute 6A-10.024, par. 3a requires 39 hours in “communication, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences.” There is no rationale. Some details in par. 5a1.