GENERAL EDUCATION DESIGN   ◎   **a primer**

There are two main GE models, core and distribution, in US universities. GE programs built around a shared core of courses are fairly rigid and have a vertical structure with course outcomes that grow in complexity as students move through the program. Traditionally they espouse the idea that there are some shared ideas, books, etc. with which all students should become familiar. In the distribution model, popular since the 1960s, students take a variety of courses from a broad menu of options divided usually by discipline.

Our current GE program, like many, is a hybrid of these two models. We have a significant shared core, that builds from English 101 through History 201 & 202 to our IDS capstone. The rest of our GE program mostly follows a distribution model and is organized horizontally into five areas: **artistic expression, literary expression, human environment, biological science, physical science**. Students can take these classes whenever they wish (often in their final semester on campus). Some questions to consider:

1. How much of the program to devote to a shared core?
2. How much of a vertical structure do we want to build? Sequencing is good if we want to build capacities, but it also can lead to scheduling complications.
3. How much flexibility do we give to students both in the core and in the distribution courses? For example, how many distribution areas is best?
4. What's the right balance between breadth and depth in GE?

EXAMPLES

Harvard, **Union College**, **Southern Virginia University**

GE CAPSTONE

The 300 level IDS courses currently serve as our GE capstone. These are interdisciplinary courses with a heavy research and writing requirement that ask students to synthesize knowledge and skills they've been learning throughout their studies. GE capstones are growing in popularity, though often the capstone is a project rather than a course. Capstone projects – a creative work, a research paper, community service – can be individual or collaborative. Capstones also provide a good site for assessment of GE outcomes.

EXAMPLES

Lenoir-Rhyne University (scroll to bottom of page), **Portland State**

FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

A program, usually offered in the freshmen year, which brings small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. Emphasis is placed on critical inquiry, writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. First year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research (from AAC&U's high-impact practices).

EXAMPLES

Whittier College:

First Year Experience,   **Freshman Writing**,   **Living–Learning Communities**

Wagner College (scroll down a bit),   **Berry College**

SERVICE LEARNING / community-based learning / experiential learning

Service learning gives the opportunity for experiential learning and helps students see how what they are learning makes a difference in the world. It can come as a project attached to a class, as the central focus of a class, or in a center on campus. Some programs have a requirement that students take an SL/EL (experiential learning) designated course; courses must meet specific criteria to receive this designation. Service learning can be interdisciplinary or discipline-specific.

EXAMPLES

Portland State (community-based learning senior capstone; same link as above)

Wagner (experiential learning component within learning communities)

University of Illinois-Springfield (Engaged Citizenship Common Experience)

Purdue University (teams of engineering students work with community partners)

Additional resources: http://www.servicelearning.org/fact-sheets/filtered-by/1

INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSES

A typical interdisciplinary course (often with two or more teachers) examines a single subject – causes of war, for example – from the perspective of different disciplines. For a brief discussion of the value of interdisciplinary courses see *What Works in Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning in Science and Mathematics*. Click here for details of a report on interdisciplinary projects which include the arts and humanities.

EXAMPLES

Portland State,   **Roanoke College**,   **Wagner College** (first year program)

PROBLEM BASED LEARNING

Problem based learning (PBL) uses complex, "real world" challenges and scenarios as a framework for learning and as a tool for student engagement. PBL courses take as their primary subject not an academic discipline but a problem in which many disciplines may be applied to reach a solution. The idea behind PBL courses is that as students work with classmates to solve a specific, authentic problem, they develop critical thinking skills, social skills, and problem solving skills that foster knowledge of content areas and move towards achieving academic capacities and outcomes. Proponents also argue that PBL courses motivate students to engage with content and disciplines that might not have otherwise interested them.

EXAMPLES

Roanoke College,   **Whittier College**

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

WAC is an educational design in which writing is emphasized in all disciplines across a curriculum; writing components are required in classes in all fields, as opposed to just English, History, and other traditional writing intensive classes. Colorado State has a useful FAQ about the *why* and *how* of WAC.

EXAMPLES

UH Mānoa

A list of WAC programs around the country

CLUSTERS / LINKED CLASSES

Courses are linked together in order to provide opportunities for subject integration. Linked courses often provide opportunities for contextualized skill development. For example, reflective writing seminars or service experience seminars have been linked to content-based courses. Although this approach has long been used in lab courses, broader application though the curriculum is novel.

EXAMPLES

Wagner,   **Portland State**

SECOND LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT

Knowledge of a second language encourages deeper awareness of the structure of language and its relation to thought. It develops sensitivity to other ways of ordering personal experience and social institutions, provides a direct way of comparing another culture to one's own, and provides insight into the workings of one's native language (from UH). Currently, students at BYUH choose between a math track and a second language track. The GE working group is seriously considering requiring a second language of all students. Most programs require students to take at least 3 courses (through 201) although some require fewer.

EXAMPLES

UH Mānoa, **SUNY Buffalo**

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, other ideas

We're interested in any ideas that can help students reach the goals of the GE program and university, develop a better atmosphere of curiosity and intellectual inquiry on campus, help students see the value of GE, etc. Please come prepared to share any ideas you have.

EXAMPLE

USC offers micro-seminars at the beginning of a semester on topics of interest.