

General Education in the Context of 2020
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Link to the university mission/rationale

PLU seeks to educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and care—for other people, for their communities, and for the earth. The experiences provided by the curricular and co-curricular programs of the university carry forth this mission, and the values, knowledge, and skills and abilities it maintains as crucial to its attainment.

As an overarching framework, the Integrative Learning Objectives (ILOs) provide a common understanding of the PLU approach to undergraduate education, encompassing both the outcomes of the General Education elements and those of the major and minor areas of study as well as at important intersections with co-curricular experiences. The ILOs provide a clear reflection of the mission and a framework for curricular and co-curricular endeavors: we value critical reflection, clear and effective expression, the importance of interacting with others in respectful ways, the understanding of our own and respect for other's values, and acknowledgement of multiple frameworks. These objectives support the achievement of the mission within the context of the values and traditions of a Lutheran higher education.

A clear and intentional link between the General Education curriculum and the mission of the university is provided in the Principles of General Education statement on p. 4 of the 2010-11 catalog.

At the heart of the university is the general education curriculum. Through this program of study, students begin the process of shaping not only a career, but more importantly a life of meaning and purpose. This general education, in which students grapple with life's most fundamental questions, is deepened and complemented by the specialized work students undertake in their majors.

We believe that education is a process, and thus the General Education curriculum holds forth the components of values, knowledge, and skills and abilities as not discrete, but interconnected and mutually supportive. The General Education program at PLU reflects faculty commitment to an interdisciplinary approach via the distinct elements of the program: Embracing the Life of the Mind: First Year Experience Program; Engaging Arts and Performance; Interpreting Living Traditions for a Humane Future; Exploring Nature and Number; Investigating Human Behavior, Culture, and Institutions; Encountering Perspectives on Diversity; Producing and Presenting Culminating Scholarship.

In Fall 2009, a revised General Education curriculum as approved by the faculty was implemented. With this revision, the university upheld its commitment to the crucial foundational nature of this curriculum by insuring oversight within the Provost's Office

in consultation with an advisory group of faculty and administrators. With this oversight, the ultimate goal of fostering a sense of the integrative whole of the habits of mind as outlined by the ILOs would become a common understanding and on-going conversation.

In round table discussions, the overall conceptual framework of the General Education curriculum was supported as were the ILOs. However, several key issues/themes surrounding General Education have begun to emerge vis a vis the 2020 conversations.

Key Issues and Discussion Points

We believe we must consistently ask ourselves the question: Does our General Education curriculum continue to provide the outcomes as described through the ILOs? Do we adequately acknowledge the match between the backgrounds and learning needs of our students, and the opportunities provided by our curriculum? As we consider our future in 2020, the same question must be addressed: Will this curriculum be appropriate for our future generations of students to attain our mission-related goals and outcomes?

The revised curriculum carried with it the initiative to have an administrator to oversee the curriculum and its implementation. Currently, the Associate Provost for Curriculum holds these responsibilities, in collaboration with the General Education Council. The Council and the Associate Provost work with departments to facilitate the delivery of the various elements of General Education. The General Education Council takes seriously its role as caretaker and promoter of the General Education Program. In its infancy, the Council is working to systematically review specific elements of the curriculum and to consider appropriate assessment strategies to help understand better what our students are learning, as well as who they are as learners. Currently, the council has two initiatives in progress: one, a review of the capstone experiences across academic programs, and, two, the construction of a survey of first-year and senior students on their experiences in the General Education program. We are confident that our efforts to systematically review curricular outcomes via a robust assessment cycle will insure that we monitor the effectiveness of the program for our student population and guide us to make any changes necessary to maintain the integrity of the curriculum.

Two elements—the First Year Experience Program and Encountering Perspectives on Diversity—are multidisciplinary in nature. The First Year Experience is facilitated by a Program Director and operates in a way similar to other departments in the curricular and delivery aspects. The Encountering Perspectives on Diversity element, however, is overseen by the Council and the Associate Provost in conjunction with departmental offerings. Within the revision, the Encountering Perspectives on Diversity element remained the same as in the previous iteration of General University Requirements. On one hand, the requirement remaining is evidence of commitment to the issues of diversity within the mission and goals of the university. On the other, it remains true that a reconsideration of this element is timely at this juncture: Is this component of the curriculum appropriate and adequate to reflect the needs of the student population now, as well as in 2020? This recommendation for review has begun to emerge through discussions within other committees, including the Diversity Committee. Important questions for consideration around this element include:

- Are the definitions and expectations of “cross cultural” and “alternative” perspectives appropriate (both in a contemporary sense and within a sense of future students)?
- How does our focus on global education interface with this requirement?
- Are we ready to move from focusing on promoting a diverse community to the aspiration of developing a socially just community?
- Are the classes recommended to meet this requirement still appropriate?
- How does this element of General Education interface with other university entities and initiatives?

As the General Education Council continues to guide the on-going implementation of the program, the struggle to come to a common language and ownership around the elements and their purpose continues. The following questions emerge to guide this work:

- How can the campus community embrace General Education in a more robust manner that highlights the importance of the interconnected nature of the program?
- How can we use the ILOs as the framework for communicating the essence and importance of the General Education curriculum as a foundation for vocational and career goals (e.g., majors and minors)? How can we promote a common language that moves us beyond a checklist of courses?
- How can we best support assessment of student outcomes, and thus the success of the curriculum, to provide the richest feedback to stakeholders?

Fiscal Implications

It is important that the university maintain the fiscal commitment to appropriate resources for the General Education curriculum, including an administrator to oversee the program and guide faculty input, and the ability to manage and revise a robust curriculum.