Answers to Frequently Asked Questions  
Regarding the Undergraduate Learning Requirements Proposal

Q: Why focus on learning goals and assessment? What is the empirical evidence that universities that focus on learning outcomes vs. those that have more traditional distributional/content-based requirements actually produce better/more successful graduates? Isn’t it just a fad?

A: As faculty, we all care about what our students are learning. When we develop courses, we usually have some expectations, ideas, aspirations, dreams (i.e., goals!) regarding what we hope our students will learn from these classes. Although specific goals will differ by class or major, the University Learning Goals are simply a set of goals that the university as a whole agrees our students should meet regardless of their eventual major or career path. Thus, unless we are OK as a faculty having no goals for our students at all, it makes sense to clearly articulate them for students, just as we do in our individual classes, our research, and our daily lives. And, just as we do in our classes, when we evaluate the extent to which students achieve our course-specific goals, we also need to evaluate the extent to which students are achieving the broader university-wide learning goals. As a result, some form of assessment is needed so that we as a university know how well our students are meeting these articulated goals.

Most faculty, students, employers and citizens expect that college graduates should have basic skills in critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, communication, to name the major skill sets, as well as broad knowledge of human cultures, of the arts, and of the natural and physical world. Though we explicitly teach the content, these skills don’t develop by chance very well, although to some degree they can be the byproduct of learning particular subjects, depending on the pedagogy used. However, many WSU faculty who teach upper division courses often wonder why students haven’t yet learned how to think critically, communicate effectively, use the library, etc. So, it’s time to stop wishing that students learn these skills as byproducts of learning other subjects and instead make sure that in some of the curriculum students are intentionally taught these skills directly as a central goal of the course.

Finally, the use of learning goals is not a “fad” that will pass. The professional schools have used learning goals for decades, and are achieving desirable results with them. Early evidence on university-wide learning goals is that they are effective at the classroom-, student career-, and even program-level. More generally, there is a large body of empirical studies (literally, hundreds of studies) in the psychology literature on goal setting and performance¹. Indeed, perhaps the most robust finding in all of workplace psychology is that specific, challenging goals lead to higher performance than do vague, “Do your best” goals. Specific studies have also found that learning goals lead to greater levels of competency in the targeted areas², more utilization of “deep learning” strategies, and higher levels of persistence in learning the material³. Students with learning goals also tend to be less focused on the evaluation of competence (i.e., grades) and more focused on the development of those competencies⁴. Finally, they also tend to have greater intrinsic motivation related to the material when the focus is on what is to be learned rather than what grade will be attained⁵.

Few studies have looked at the university level because few universities have completed the transformation to a significant, pervasive, focus on student learning. The evidence from those that have can be dramatic: Alverno saved itself from closure by restructuring around learning goals and assessment; King’s College pulled themselves out of enrollment crisis the same way.
As a more practical matter (and in part due to the evidence that goals do impact learning), we are mandated by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), our regional accrediting body, to have an established set of learning goals. Further, the NWCCU indicated during the last accreditation review that WSU may fall short of required standards regarding the assessment of those learning goals, stating:

*Implementation of the educational assessment plan remains inconsistent across the University, despite promising starts and a number of exemplary successes in selected programs. The Commission recommends that the University continue to enhance and strengthen its assessment process. This process needs to be extended to all of the University’s educational programs, including graduate programs, and programs offered at the branch campuses (Standard 2.B).*

The new standards focus even more clearly on student learning (www.nwccu.org). And, as most people know, federal funding is tied to accredited status.


**Q:** Why did the GE Committee propose re-naming the GE Requirements to “University Learning Requirements”? What was wrong with the term “General Education”?

**A:** Unfortunately, over time, there has developed this notion among some quarters that General Education is: a) lower-division; b) something to “get out of the way” as soon as possible so students can focus on the “real” learning that takes place in the major; c) something that focuses on basic/general introductory courses; and/or d) the World Civilizations courses only. With the name change (and, more importantly, the structural changes), we are trying to emphasize that:

- The University Learning Goals are equally applicable and valuable for all students. Yes, there may be additional requirements imposed by the student’s College, and there definitely will be additional requirements imposed by the student’s Major. But, there are university-wide learning goals that (hopefully) all faculty recognize as valuable and essential to our students, regardless of their major. The University Learning Requirements are designed to maximally ensure (to the extent it is possible) achievement of those goals by every WSU graduate.
- In addition, University Learning Goals cannot be “accomplished and achieved” in the first two years (i.e., gotten out of the way). Progress toward and achievement of these goals requires a steady accumulation of learning and experiences occurring over the course of the entire undergraduate experience, including those in and out of the major and the integration thereof.
Finally, the term University Learning Requirements is more transparent to students than is “General Education.” Because the World Civilizations courses have a GENED prefix, many have confused those two courses with the four-year set of liberal education requirements.

Q: Why does the proposal allow students to take ULR courses within their major? Why not retain the current prohibition on “double-dipping”?

A: Another reason for the name change from General Education Goals and Requirements to University Learning Goals and Requirements is the explicit acknowledgement that ALL faculty within the university are jointly responsible for helping students to achieve these goals (not just faculty OUTSIDE a student’s major). It also explicitly recognizes that learning goals are not the “domain” of particular departments or colleges. Rather, the ULR system recognizes that there may be courses offered within a student’s major that help students achieve these learning goals. If we truly care about the goals themselves and student achievement of those goals, then it should be the responsibility of all of us and shouldn’t matter if learning that facilitates achievement of those goals takes place in or out of the major.

Q: If students can take ULR courses within their major, does this mean students would never take courses outside their major? Isn’t breadth important?

A: It is difficult to envision how students could fulfill all of the proposed University Learning Requirements within a single major. Depending on the major, particularly if it is already interdisciplinary in nature, it may be possible for students to have a certain degree of overlap between major requirements and ULRs. However, breadth is an explicitly stated learning goal (Depth, Breadth, and Integration of Learning); therefore, the proposal is designed to ensure that students cannot be overly narrowly focused during their entire undergraduate experience. Finally, with the freed-up credits resulting from a reduction in ULR required credits, we envision students increasingly being able to pursue a second major or minor to achieve their required 120 credits to graduate. This would also have the effect of graduating students with greater breadth of expertise and knowledge.

Q: When the proposal states that students may take ULR courses in their own major, does that mean, for example, that English faculty teach science courses and Astronomy professors offer humanities courses?

A: No, this is not what the proposal intends or states. It only states that students no longer would be prohibited from counting certain major courses as ULR courses, as is the case in the current GE system.

Q: Why is this so urgent? Doesn’t WSU have enough problems already without having to add this to the pile?

A: First, let’s be honest. We all know the current budget situation is bleak. Unfortunately, WSU has faced budget cuts many times in the past and will likely do so again all too often in the future. If we wait for large infusions of funding from the legislature to make any improvements in the delivery of our undergraduate education, we all know we may be waiting a long time.
Second, this is not a newly identified problem, but rather one that continues to crop up. Faculty Senate reports from as early as 1999 have called for the reworking of various aspects of the general education program. In 2005, consultant Robert Shoenberg pointed out that WSU was long overdue for a reconsideration of the goals and delivery of general education. Ideally, this self-examination should take place every 10-15 years. We are now at the 25-year mark since the current GE program has been fundamentally altered. Further, the A2P2 process in 2008 resulted in a call for revision of GE and a reduction of credits required.

Thus, there is evidence from the Faculty Senate, from external consultants, and from the administration that the current GE program is breaking down. Here are some of the specifically identified issues (summarized in much greater detail in the GE Visioning Committee Report available at www.vpue.wsu.edu/gevc):

- The general education requirements are experienced as fragmented by students, advisors, and faculty.
- The purpose and value of the current requirements is not clear to participants.
- Faculty complain that students are taking upper division courses without sufficient skills that they ‘should have’ learned in lower division GE courses.
- The “Alphabet soup” of requirements is not visibly aligned with university or general education learning goals and outcomes.

Third, university accreditation—which is the gatekeeper for federal funding— is now demanding learning-goal centered bachelor degrees and assessment of student outcomes. In our last accreditation review (2009), we were taken to task for insufficient evidence of real assessment of real learning goals. Under the new accreditation standards and expectations, the bar will be set even higher. Given that GE reform typically takes three years or more, we have to get started now rethinking how general education courses help students achieve university expectations for their education.

Finally, while the timing of general education reform may never be perfect, there are some reasons why it makes practical sense to revise general education now while we’re changing everything else (e.g., budget, student information system). Once other structural changes are made and frozen, it will constrain GE revision options.

**Q:** Can’t we just have no GE program?

**A:** No. GE programs are required for all accredited universities in the US. Indeed, accreditation requires at least 30 semester hours of GE.

**Q:** With all the budget cuts, we have no money to improve GE. How are we going to pay for this?

**A:** We may not need as much new money as some think. Remember, there is money being spent on GE now. The question is, how is it being spent, and can it be moved around within departments and colleges to support a more efficient and effective program?

Because GE reform has budget implications, the first thing we have done is form a resourcing committee to find out how we pay for GE now, and what budget options might work for a revised GE program.
Q: Who is on the resourcing committee?

A: Faculty and administrators from around the system, including experts on budgeting:

- Jane Cote, Accounting, WSU Vancouver
- Catherine Fulkerson, Director of Institutional Research
- Dick Pratt, Vice-Chancellor, WSU Tri-Cities, General Education Visioning Committee
- Robby Rosenman, School of Economic Sciences
- Matt Skinner, Budget Office
- Mary Wack, Vice-Provost of Undergraduate Education
- Rich Zack, Entomology, General Education Committee

Q: Who is in charge of GE and GE reform?

A: The GE committee handles policy and oversight issues regarding the current GE program, which will be in effect for up to six years (to allow grandfathering after the new ULR program rolls out in 2012). However, the Vice-Provost of Undergraduate Education, as acting director of GE, handles all student petitions for GER exceptions.

Regarding GE reform, ultimately the Senate is in charge. No program can be implemented without the Senate’s approval. In terms of working groups who will propose a program, the GE committee is the central working group. As needed, the GE committee and the Vice-Provost of Undergraduate Education form other committees and task forces (e.g., the resourcing committee) to research particular issues.

Q: Is a more “flexible and simple” GE program just code for “reduce emphasis on General Education” and a sign that the university is caving in to some professional programs’ desire to reduce GERs?

A: No. First, simplicity is needed because students and faculty frequently complain that the current system of GER’s and Tiers is non-intuitive and Degree Auditing Reports are too hard to read to know what a student needs to do next. Moreover, many students, faculty (especially those trained overseas in universities that have no GE programs) and even professional advisors don’t understand the rationale for why these requirements exist in the first place.

Second, flexibility is needed so that the GE program continues to mesh easily with all majors, and permits students to change majors with minimal retaking of GE courses.

Third, as budget pressures mount, some look to relief through reduction of general education credits; however, accreditation demands that we maintain at least 30 credits for GE. In addition, 120 credits is still the minimum number required for a bachelor’s degree.
Q: In the GEVC report is a vision statement (p.8) that includes, “Knowledge of human cultures, of the arts, and of the natural and physical world.” Isn’t that at odds with the learning goal focus?

A: No. Breadth of knowledge is as much a learning goal as quantitative reasoning. In fact, the Senate is considering revision of the Six Learning Goals of the Baccalaureate, which has renamed the goal “Specialty” to read “Depth, Breadth and Integration of Learning” to reflect that breadth is important, as is developing expertise in a major. And, further, being able to integrate those areas of knowledge and apply/transfer knowledge from one area to another is equally valuable.

The GEVC report does not recommend getting rid of content at all. Indeed, it’s impossible to teach skills without also teaching content. What the report calls for, however, is to reverse the current focus of “intentionally teaching content and hoping for skills as a byproduct” to “intentionally teaching skills using content as the means to that end.”

Q: Won’t many departments lose student enrollment as a result of restructuring and possibly not be able to offer the smaller ULR “boutique” courses?

A: No, not necessarily. First, the GEVC report does NOT recommend any such design principle that dictates or requires FTE-based funding. Further, there is nothing to prevent departments from offering courses in the new program. Many of the current GER courses would likely (with a little effort) be approved for the new program. Finally, while some ULR courses may be large-enrollment courses, some of the requirements actually rely upon small, individualized “boutique” courses (i.e., the First Year Seminars).

Q: What about transfer students?

A: The proposal envisions that the direct transfer associates’ degree (DTA) would satisfy all the requirements except for the integrative capstone. Students who transfer without a degree would meet requirements through course-by-course matches, as they do currently.

Upper division programs that require specific courses as prerequisites to the major may need to develop more explicit advising pathways for prospective students, so that they take the appropriate course at the community college as part of the DTA.

Q: You keep going back and forth between “learning goals” and “learning outcomes.” What is the difference?

A: Experts usually define goals as a set of skills and knowledge to be obtained, whereas outcomes are more specific and assessable exemplars of those skills and knowledge.

Q: Why do students have to take any courses outside of their major?

A: Evidence shows that graduates likely will have 3-5 career changes in their lifetime. So, clearly exposure to the content of one major will not give students what they need. Therefore, students need to learn skills and knowledge that transcend specific majors and careers, that will serve them well no matter what they do with their life.