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UNIVERSITY™

# General Education

A report from the General Education Task Force | October 2022



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# Introduction

Mississippi State University is a public, land-grant university whose mission is to provide access and opportunity to students from all sectors of the state's diverse population and other states and countries and offer excellent programs of teaching, research, and service.

The majority of the University's approximately 23,000 students are pursuing baccalaureate curricula which include a significant portion of courses intended to ensure all students receive a strong basis in liberal arts studies. This task force has been guided in its work by the University's Vision statement:

Mississippi State University will be a leading student-centric public research university that is globally involved, accessible, inclusive, community engaged, and responsive to the many constituencies it serves while fully integrated with the intellectual, social, and economic development of the state and beyond by delivering excellent programs of teaching, research, and service, and instilling in its community the timeless values of integrity, hard work, and respect.



# Preamble

The work of the General Education Task Force has been to envision a more robust and coherent liberal arts education for Mississippi State University while preserving the spirit of both the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Mission and Vision of the university. This includes reaffirming our institution's commitment to the education of all undergraduate students in the liberal arts and sciences.

The Morrill Act established land grant universities to offer equitable education...

... **without excluding other scientific or classical studies** and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such a manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, **in order to promote liberal and practical education** of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.<sup>1</sup>

Mississippi State University is a comprehensive and research-intensive university whose mission statements include the following:

**Mississippi State University is committed to its tradition of instilling among its community ideals of diversity, citizenship, leadership, and service.**

One of the goals of the "State of Excellence" Strategic Plan is:

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, Mississippi State University must apply its academic, scientific, artistic, and Extension capabilities to global challenges while providing its community with diverse perspectives that allow them to address social and economic issues. This goal seeks to provide diverse and global experiences in teaching, research, and service.

This and other goals of the strategic plan are best accomplished not in the major, but in the general education of its undergraduate students.

In order to fulfill the vision of the strategic plan, in order to maintain our commitments to Phi Beta Kappa, in order to recruit and retain a diverse and qualified faculty, and in order to continue to grow as an R1 university, the General Education Task Force encourages the consideration of the following recommendations contained in this Final Report.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrill Act (1862) | National Archives



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# Guiding Principles, Goals, & Task Force Charge

The goal of this Task Force's efforts is to provide guidance to shape Mississippi State University's General Education curriculum into a program that serves students' needs by creating a curriculum that:

- a. is equitable and sustainable;
- b. has clearly articulated student learning outcomes that align with philosophical foundations;
- c. is mapped into academic majors;
- d. is built with consideration of our large transfer population and our first-time college students;
- e. provides opportunities to develop critical competencies and skills, such as critical thinking, communication, quantitative literacy, scientific inquiry, problem solving, intercultural awareness, artistic expression, and teamwork; and
- f. integrates ongoing faculty development.



**The Charge of the Task Force is specifically to**

1. redefine and reimagine the goals and objectives of the General Education program at Mississippi State University;
2. consider how Mississippi State University can move from a disciplinary focus to a learning outcome focus in its General Education curriculum;
3. focus the General Education curriculum on student understanding of relevance of the information to life skills and a holistic educational experience;
4. align the General Education curriculum with the university's strategic plan and goals; and
5. determine how these revisions can be articulated with community college and transfer credits



# The Current State of Mississippi State University's General Education Curriculum

## Current General Education Requirements

As a public institution of higher learning in the state of Mississippi, Mississippi State University requires all students to complete a core curriculum approved by the Board of Trustees, Institutions of Higher Learning of the State of Mississippi (IHL). This core curriculum consists of the following:

English Composition .....	6 credit hours
College Algebra, Quantitative Reasoning, or higher level mathematics .....	3 credit hours
Natural Sciences.....	6 credit hours
Humanities and Fine Arts .....	9 credit hours
Social and Behavioral Sciences.....	6 credit hours

These requirements serve as the basis for and are included in the MSU General Education Curriculum, which has additional refinement of this core curriculum:

All students graduating from Mississippi State University must earn a minimum of 36 semester hours of credit (or equivalency) in courses making up the General Education Curriculum. Specific courses to satisfy the General Education Curriculum will vary by academic major.

English Composition .....	6 credit hours
Mathematics and Natural Sciences <sup>1</sup> .....	15 credit hours
Humanities/Fine Arts <sup>2</sup> .....	9 credit hours
Social/Behavioral Sciences .....	6 credit hours

Students may select courses to fulfil their general education curriculum based on their academic major's approved general education courses which are drawn from the university's comprehensive list of approved courses for each category within the General Education curriculum. See Appendix for the complete list of approved General Education Courses.



<sup>1</sup> Mathematics 6-9 credit hours; Natural Sciences 6-9 credit hours.

<sup>2</sup> Six hours must be humanities and three hours must be fine art.



## Current General Education Approval, Review, and Oversight Structure

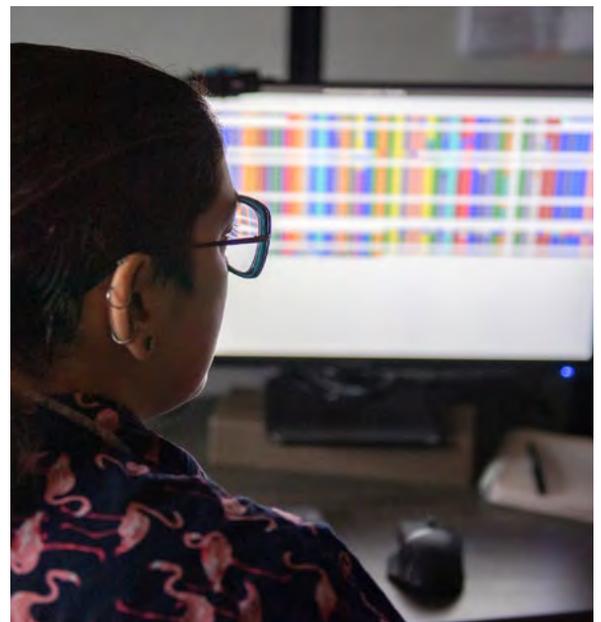
General Education courses may be proposed by faculty members of any academic department. Proposed General Education courses must provide documented support for how the course is designed to fulfil the learning outcomes of the General Education category for which it is seeking approval. The approval process for General Education courses follows the same procedure as all course curricular approval. The University Committee on Courses and Curricula (UCCC) serves as the institutional curricular approval structure for all courses and programs at the university. The Guide and Format of the UCCC states:

The purpose of the UCCC is to determine if proposed curricula and courses are within the scope of the stated purpose of the university and of the college, school or department concerned as required by the AOPs of the University. Any addition, modification, or deletion to a course, degree, or program offered through traditional semester formal (fall or spring semester, or summer school), or through the Center for Distance Education must follow the approval process as described in the Guide and Format. Additions, deletions, or modifications cannot be made by the Registrar's Office or the Center for Distance Education without following the approval process. This applies to all course or degree additions, deletions, or modifications. Modifications are defined as any change to a current course, degree, or program in an area/item described in the Guide and Format (i.e., content, title, number, description, method of delivery, method of evaluation, etc.). Addition, deletion, or modification of a course, degree, or program will become effective the semester following final approval. It is only at this point that the change can be advertised in MSU publications.

(MSU UCCC Guide and Format, pg.1)

The UCCC also oversees the approval of General Education course designations as a part of their approval of course additions, deletions, and modifications. Procedures for approval of a General Education course are similar to those for approval of courses and require additional information specific to the proposed MSU General Education category for the proposed course. Academic units must include specific “learning outcomes/competencies, course criteria/knowledge, and cognitive skills students will learn from the course as it applies to the general education core.”

(UCCC Guide and Format, pg. 25).



The UCCC also maintains the Criteria for Inclusion of Courses in the Mississippi State University General Education Curriculum, which states: “The purpose of the Mississippi State University General Education curriculum is to provide a foundation upon which students may successfully achieve the following overarching goals:

- **English** – students will write clearly and effectively.
- **Fine Arts** – students will understand the formal elements of the fine art(s) and develop an awareness of both the values and functions of works within their historical and/or social contexts.
- **Humanities** – students will understand the diverse dimensions of human culture.
- **Mathematics and Statistics** – students will understand and make use of the basic approaches and applications of mathematics and statistics for analysis and problem solving.
- **Natural Sciences** – students will apply science to natural systems and understand its impact on society.
- **Social/Behavioral Science** – students will understand and appreciate human behavior and social structures, processes, and institutions.

(UCCC Guide and Format, Appendix A)

It is the expectation that courses approved for General Education categories will comply with specific requirements and criteria. “Courses in any category may be of special interest to students in particular majors, but must be open to, and designed to serve the educational interests of, undergraduate students from all colleges. Courses considered for inclusion in the General Education Curriculum must ensure breadth of knowledge in the field. Likewise, the proposals should provide a coherent rationale for inclusion in a specific General Education category by addressing the Course Criteria listed under each category.”

There is a General Education Committee that is drawn from the membership of the UCCC, whose responsibilities include periodic review of the General Education criteria, approved courses, assessment, and reporting of general education outcomes.



## Current Efforts of General Education Review

Dr. Dana Franz, former Chair of the University Committee on Courses and Curricula and current Director of Academic Quality in the Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness, was tasked with a comprehensive review of MSU’s General Education curriculum during her time as Intern in the Provost’s Office. As a result of that examination, she worked with the General Education Committee and representatives from the academic units connected with each of the General Education categories. She also explored national standards in General Education, including the Interstate Passport program to update and standardize the General Education learning outcomes in each of the existing categories and proposed adoption of revised outcomes that are in line with national standards. A revision of our current outcomes was proposed, presented, and adopted in November 2020. The recommendations that were adopted included the expectation that General Education is the educational preparation that takes place primarily in a student’s first 2 years of higher education and that these foundational inquiry-based general education course are supportive yet distinct from the outcomes of their major coursework.

Specific impacts of these recommended revisions to the General Education Learning Outcomes have informed many of the areas of examination by the General Education Task Force as well as the General Education Committee. Additional informative support for the revision of MSU’s General Education Learning Outcomes/ Curriculum has derived from an analysis and adoption of the Interstate Passport, a national program that “is based on four guiding principles: student focused; faculty driven; institutional autonomy; and quality assurance.” (Home - Interstate Passport (wiche.edu)). While IP is specifically focused on providing consistency that supports transfer credit across institutions, they also work with individual states and institutions to maintain a strong level of consistency in the learning outcomes across member institutions. Their representatives work with individual institutions to “crosswalk” the specific general education requirements and categories with the national best practices in general education. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate MSU’s alignment of General Education to the national best practices.

**Table 1: General Education and Major Coursework Goals and Functions.**

**By the time every MSU student completes their second year, they should have general knowledge in:**

- Natural sciences
- Social sciences
- Humanities and culture
- Fine arts and creativity
- Quantitative literacy
- English Composition
- Teamwork
- Oral Communication
- Critical thinking

**By the time students in this major graduate, they should be able to accomplish these discipline-specific tasks:**

1. Articulating major theories in the discipline
2. Communicating in the discipline
3. Application of theories
4. Other discipline-specific outcomes



**Table 2: Alignment of MSU’s current outcomes with the revised and approved outcomes.**

<b>Outcome Topic</b>	<b>Current Outcomes (Written in 1990s with no substantial revisions)</b>	<b>Revised Outcomes After their second year, students will:</b>
<b>English Composition</b>	Students will write clearly and effectively	develop and express their ideas in writing for given audiences in a particular rhetorical situation
<b>Fine arts &amp; creative expression</b>	Students will understand the formal elements of the fine art(s) and develop an awareness of both the values and functions of works within their historical and/or social contexts.	interpret artistic expression and engage with a creative process
<b>Humanities and culture</b>	Students will understand the diverse dimensions of human culture	examine the human condition in different cultures throughout history
<b>Quantitative literacy</b>	Students will understand and use the basic approaches and applications of mathematics and statistics for analysis and problem solving	reason and solve quantitative problems from a wide array of authentic contexts and everyday life situations
<b>Natural sciences</b>	Students will apply science to natural systems and understand its impact on society	apply the scientific method and theories to empirical evidence to support scientific models of the universe
<b>Social Sciences</b>		engage in scientific inquiry of human behavior in the context of value systems, institutions, economic structures, social groups, and/or environments
<b>Critical thinking</b>		evaluate issues, ideas, artifacts, and events through cross-disciplinary exploration before formulating an opinion or conclusion.
<b>Oral communication</b>		prepare and deliver purposeful presentations for given audiences in a particular rhetorical situation.
<b>Teamwork</b>		work cooperatively with others toward a common purpose through shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

The General Education Task Force did not seek to revisit the efforts of Dr. Franz or the General Education Committee, but to build on their foundation and continue to examine how Mississippi State University's General Education Curriculum could be reformed according to the Goals and Charge above. The Task Force did, however, confirm that an overarching and guiding recommendation that flows from the preceding work of the General Education Committee, is that General Education courses/curriculum must be understood as inquiry-based, not discipline-driven. The General Education Committee, as mentioned above, has worked toward the revision of the learning outcomes, and through consultation with representatives from the disciplines related to each General Education category, to review the existing approved General Education courses to ensure that they comply with this overarching understanding of the function and goals of General Education. Over time, there has been significant creep away from General Education as inquiry-based courses to introductory, discipline-specific courses. The General Education Task Force fully supports a curricular and pedagogical review of all approved General Education courses to build a true General Education selection of courses.



The work of the General Education Committee and efforts of Dr. Franz continued to move forward throughout the Summer. After extensive work with lead instructors of the service courses in the Department of Mathematics, the proposal to change the mathematics requirement to “At Mississippi State University competency in Quantitative Reasoning met by successful completion of one of the following: Introduction to Statistics (MA/ST 2113), Trigonometry (MA 1323), Business Calculus (MA 1613), Problem solving with Real Numbers (MA 1423) or Calculus 1 (MA1713)” will be implemented Fall 2023. All degree programs will have an opportunity to reduce their program by 3 hours, add 3 hours to electives, or add an oral communication course. Deans, Associate Academic Deans, Program Coordinators, and the UCCC enthusiastically endorsed this change.

General Education working groups (Communications, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Science) continue to align the student learning outcomes with national standards. All groups will have rubrics for signature assignments and criteria for syllabus alignment by Fall 2023. Additionally, the following syllabus statement will now appear on all General Education syllabi:

*General education provides a platform for fostering proficiencies that span all fields of study (e.g., social and ethical responsibility, critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, communication, and problem solving) while also providing opportunities for hands-on experience with complex questions and problems. By facilitating students' exploration of issues and questions that bridge multiple fields of study, general education helps students build the broad and integrative knowledge they need for careers, while also preparing them directly for questions and issues they will confront as citizens in a globally engaged democracy. [Faculty will provide another sentence explaining how the specific course fits into general education.]*

*Source: AAC&U General Education Maps & Markers (p. 5) <https://aacu.org/gems>*

Discussions within the taskforce confirmed the need for a standard syllabi statement. Lead instructors of General Education course will be asked to ensure this statement is included on Spring 2023 courses.



## Basic Definitions and Expectations of General Education Courses

Because the General Education curriculum prepares students to be strong critical and creative thinkers; provides them with diverse methodologies for seeking; understanding, and analyzing information from multiple sources and disciplines; and broadly increases their level of inquiry from basic comprehension to higher orders of thinking, all approved General Education courses should be:

- a. 1000/2000 level courses. Higher level courses, by their nature, delve more deeply and more specifically into a particular area of study and are therefore not appropriate as General Education courses. This Task Force recommends a review of any existing 3000/4000 level courses currently approved for General Education and determine if they comply with the vision and function of General Education.
- b. Inquiry-based in broad content areas/categories. Existing General Education courses that are significantly discipline specific and are not taught with the goal of a broad examination of methods of inquiry in a general education category should be reviewed to determine if they fulfil the mission of General Education as defined in this report.
- c. Open to all students. It is not appropriate for General Education courses to have major restrictions or prerequisites that are not open to all students.
- d. Introduction to specific disciplines. General or Liberal Education courses generally should not be foundational courses for specific disciplines, but broad explorations of methods of inquiry and examinations of content that is broadly relevant to all students no matter their home discipline or major.
  - i. It is recognized that many current general education courses are used within majors as the introduction to their discipline while also counting for students as general education credit. This task force recommends these courses, if they remain on the General Education approved list, modify their content and pedagogy to serve all students more broadly, and be focused on general education learning outcomes.
  - ii. It is also recognized that many existing General Education courses are articulated from other institutions. We do not recommend the removal of these from the General Education list but focus instead on the transition of all MSU-offered General Education courses to comply with the philosophy, vision, and methodology of General/Liberal Education as defined in this report.



It is important to note that there are realistic challenges to even this level of revision. It should be noted that a thorough review of General Education courses and a removal of courses that may no longer serve the larger goals of General Education courses is not a new endeavor. These periodic reviews have occurred, though rather infrequently. It is also important to note that many challenges related to higher education have had an impact on how programs have built their curricula, for example, the restriction of undergraduate degrees to a maximum of 124 credit hours. When that restriction was instituted, many programs were faced with reducing their curricula by as many as 20 credit hours, and thus looked for ways to utilize general education courses as discipline courses to compensate for the loss of credit hours. The result was a creeping increase in discipline- or knowledge-based general education courses rather than broader idea and inquiry-based courses.

## Task Force Actions and Recommendations

The Task Force met bi-monthly from August through February, and through thorough discussion, debate, analysis, and comparative research, they identified five key areas of impact. Once identified, the Task Force broke into working groups to examine each area more closely and determined their preliminary recommendations for future action. The working groups include the following:

- Curricular Development
- Pedagogical Changes
- Professional Development and Recognitions for General Education faculty
- Structural Changes
- Marketing and Rebranding of General Education



# Curricular Development

Underlying the recommendations for General Education Curricular Development is the philosophy of what General Education must be in order to fulfil its mission. Mississippi State University is bound by the IHL General Education requirements, the needs of consistent articulation of common general education courses from 2- and 4-year institutions, and the constraints of our credit hour limits. Thus, the General Education Task Force recognizes the value of prioritizing the development of a robust selection of inquiry-based, culturally and socially relevant courses that will interest students in the broader questions and pursuits of continued examination of larger, complex issues. These courses should be focused less on specific content and more focused on providing students engaged-learning opportunities to pursue the questions of the course, more so than the gaining of specific and discrete knowledge. The Task Force believes this approach will add value and create greater interest for students who need to take general education courses while at MSU, allow and support departments with appropriate time and resources to address their introductory level courses, and accommodate students who bring transfer credit in from all current sources.



The primary focus of this recommendation is to establish a clear vision for new general education courses, one that is ***student-learning centered, embraces engaged learning strategies, and is built on the concept of teaching students to think, learn, and critically evaluate using the skills and strategies*** of the particular general education category. This can be described as a “non-major” approach, drawing on the well-known phrase of “science for non-science majors.” ***General education courses by their inherent nature are all “non-major” courses because their goals are not to provide discipline-specific introductory knowledge and skills, but rather to provide all students, no matter their major, with the tools for life-long learning through examination and application of the various methodologies for inquiry inherent to each category of the general education curriculum.***

It is certainly true that courses exist in our current general education curriculum that are designed in this manner and have sought to determine what are the specific learning outcomes that will serve non-major students ***engaging their world, transferring skills into other aspects of their education, and becoming successful life-long learners.*** These are the “appreciation” or “non-major” courses. Unfortunately, these courses are often considered to be less significant and even in some cases less valuable to the student. We have long heard the monikers of “baby bio” or “baby physics”, for example. It is vital for the success of our general education that we create the clear message that non-discipline-specific courses are no less rigorous than discipline-specific introductory courses. Their focus and purpose are essentially different. What we do believe is that when we focus not on the specific, but on the general, in terms of the vital value of an educational category, we will ***be arming students with more skills and more tools to engage their world; problematize what they see and hear; and become better prepared to analyze, examine, and understand the issues, challenges, and complexities of society today and into the future.***



We also believe that this adjustment of focus will provide our programs and our faculty members the opportunity to develop ***innovative and interesting coursework from which both students and faculty can benefit and be excited to engage in.*** If, for example, students taking an introductory course to a discipline were all majors or students whose degrees require that course, without large numbers of non-majors taking the course to fulfil a category requirement, then the faculty member and students could potentially develop a deeper level of engagement and gain a higher degree of satisfaction in that discipline-specific course. Similarly, courses focused on broader thematic issues that impact our world could explore a range of factors related to that issue in a more exploratory way, drawing students from across multiple majors who are interested in those same issues. These courses could be highly popular, not as “easy A” courses, but as ***being relevant to our students’ lives and futures.***

The Task Force therefore recommends the exploration of the following related to Curriculum Development:

1. Identify approved General Education courses with course codes to help elevate the visibility of these courses within a student’s curriculum;
2. Prioritize the development of new, non-discipline-specific courses that are inquiry-based and broad in scope in areas that are societally and/or culturally relevant to our world and to our students’ futures;
3. Provide funding to support the necessary development of new General Education courses as well as to support the pedagogical re-imagining of existing General Education courses to align with these recommendations;
4. Encourage curricular and pedagogical exploration in innovative course structures, such as team-taught, multi-disciplinary courses that might have large lecture formats to accommodate numbers of students needing courses, but with small engaged-learning opportunities, through programmed small scale discussion sections, lab/studio/experiential learning activities, flipped or hybrid teaching techniques, etc.;
5. Consider broad thematic sequences that could recur on regular schedules;
6. Create an appropriate balance between small and large class sizes, to provide the necessary diversity of offerings while filling the scheduling needs for students to progress appropriately through their general education in a timely fashion;
7. Use these general education, non-major courses as a type of laboratory for student engagement strategies, innovative learning models, new uses of technology, flipped classes, etc.

# Pedagogical Changes

The core concept underlying all recommendations for this committee is that the approach to offering true general education curriculum is integral to the needs of the degree programs as a whole and should be seen as a distinct and significant part of every undergraduate degree. The Task Force discussed candidly how often faculty and students see general education courses as less desirable or “have to” courses, both to teach and to take. It is a major recommendation of this Task Force that efforts to change this perception be a priority if our goal of transforming MSU’s General Education curriculum is ever to be met. One way that this negative perception of the General Education can be addressed is by prioritizing through time, resources, and funding significant pedagogical support in the development of new general education courses as well as in incorporating pedagogical innovations in those existing discipline-specific introductory courses that must remain as General Education designations due to limitations of total hours in a degree. While the Task Force recognizes these limitations and the inability to completely transition the General Education offerings to the above-described non-discipline courses in the near-term, we do recommend that all courses with the General Education designation be required to be taught with a general education focus as described in the Curricular Development section above.

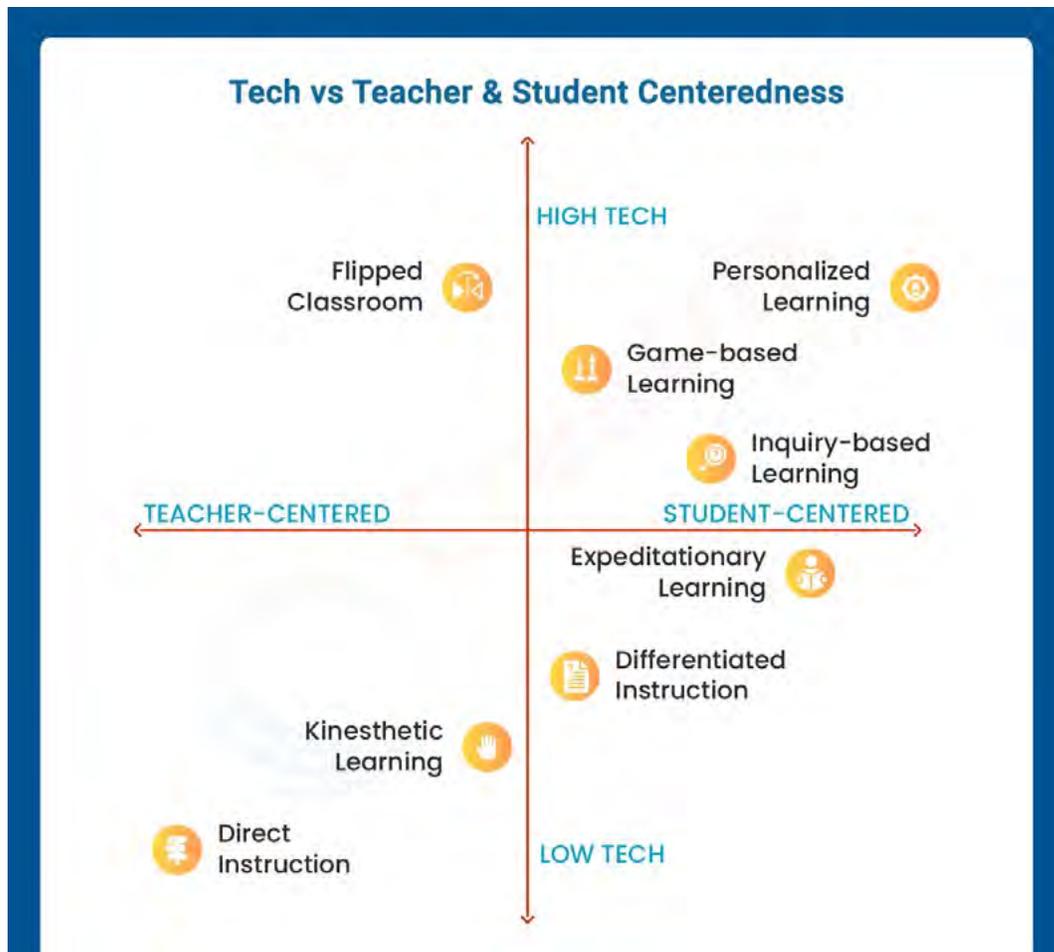
## Background

Revising the general education curriculum around learning outcomes and providing students a coherent path through that curriculum involves a critical examination of how these courses are being taught. Most university classrooms remain largely centered on the instructor despite the development of numerous instructional strategies in the past 30 years that center learning to varying degrees around the student (Figure 1, pg. 18).

In a student-centered classroom, the teacher serves more as a facilitator allowing students to provide feedback to each other. Students learn to use the teacher as a resource when they encounter roadblocks (Varatta, April 14, 2017). This approach shifts the focus to student learning outcomes rather than typical instructor and university inputs (Office of Curriculum and Assessment, Northern Arizona University). Evidence suggests student-centered learning leads to positive education outcomes and might help close the achievement gap between low- and high-income students (Friedlaender et al, June 2014).



**Figure 1: Examples of varying degrees of student-centric pedagogies.**



Source: Creatrix Campus

## Needs and Other Challenges

Stakeholders must recognize that many current best practices in pedagogy are transformative and if implemented could radically change the way general education faculty typically deliver instruction. For example, moving from teacher-centered pedagogy to a learner-centered approach is likely unfamiliar terrain for most university faculty. Faculty are experts in specific content areas and doctoral training remains focused on research and mastery of that content area. Outside of the field of education, faculty have likely received very little formal training in how to teach. Many academics advanced through an apprenticeship model based on traditional teaching methods. Any substantial changes to pedagogy must be accompanied by institutional support that includes both administrative support as well as professional instructional development. This support will require the commitment of financial resources.

## Recommendations

1. Support and encourage the environment and elements needed for learning-centered pedagogy.
2. Consider the potential benefit of integration of an FYE (First Year Experience) course or even “launch” and “reflection” bookend courses that might incorporate such areas as information literacy, critical and design thinking skills, and other supportive areas that might be valuable as a starting “toolkit” of skills;
3. Identify and recognize General Education faculty members who specialize in learning-centered pedagogy who might serve as peer mentors or foundational members of a general education instructional community or support network;
4. Partner with faculty who may have research areas in the area of innovations in student-centered learning models, instructional design, problem-based learning, etc.;
5. Provide ongoing training/credentialing for all faculty teaching in general education courses—continuing education model for professional development;
6. Recognize innovative and exceptional teachers specific to the needs and values of the General Education;
7. Elevate the visibility and understanding of the role of the Director of Academic Quality as relates to the expectations and accountability in support of teaching in learning-centered pedagogy for general education courses;
8. Explore the possible benefits and challenges of integrating General Education into a University College model;

Learning-centered pedagogy focuses on the individual students and provides them with more responsibility for and ownership of their educational experience. Figure 1 provides examples of student-centered pedagogy in the righthand quadrants. Smaller class sizes typically facilitate more productive peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor interactions for enhanced learning. In addition, special classrooms and/or classroom technology may be needed to support learning-centered pedagogical techniques (e.g., tables instead of desks, whiteboards on all classroom walls, computers for individual students or teams of students, etc.). While there are many different flavors of learning-centered pedagogy, there are common best practices: First, there is transparency in teaching and learning. Students understand why they are learning the concepts, what they will be expected to do with the concepts, and how they will be assessed. This element is especially helpful in supporting our diverse student body and ensuring the success of all students regardless of their background. Secondly, students are encouraged to and challenged to engage at higher levels of learning (e.g., analyze, evaluate, and create in Bloom’s Taxonomy). This element supports the focus of general education courses as inquiry-based and outcome-focused.



Students need to understand why general education is important and how it will be relevant to their daily lives. They are more likely to become engaged if they can make connections and see the broader implications of general education knowledge. A launch course can address relevance, introduce students to basic information literacy, and tackle the importance of ethics and academic honesty. These cross-cutting themes will help prepare students for not only general education coursework, but the advanced coursework they will take in their chosen major. By ending with a time of reflection, students can identify the skills they have learned in their general education courses and consciously prepare to use those skills in their major courses, as well as life in general.

One strategy to support rapid, transformational change in how general education is taught would be to identify current faculty who specialize in learning centered pedagogy and deploy them in the general education curriculum if they are not already doing so. In partnership with the College of Education, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Center for Distance Education, the university could conduct a teaching audit that attempts to identify these faculty and what pedagogical strategies they use in the classroom. These faculty could form the start of a Train the Trainers program to assist other faculty in developing student-centered teaching strategies. A Train the Trainers program could leverage existing professional instructional development resources on campus and incentivize faculty to review best practices and explore innovative teaching techniques. To bolster these efforts, the university could initiate a cluster-hire of teaching faculty who are trained in learning centered pedagogy and experiential learning techniques and deploy them in the General Education curriculum. Several universities that have already engaged in a revision of their General Education curriculum, instruction, and overall structure have established Offices of General Education. Such an office could provide leadership to a General Education program that cuts across all university colleges, connect General Education faculty to one another and help them coordinate their efforts when appropriate, organize instructional development sessions most relevant to General Education faculty, and provide a landing space for new students who want to design an engaging path through the General Education curriculum.



# Professional Development and Faculty Recognitions

## Brief Description of Impact Area/Subgroup

This section of the task force report covers faculty professional development as relates to general education courses. In order to encourage pedagogical innovation and growth among general education faculty, appropriate professional development programs and resources must be in place. Incentivizing participation in such programs often requires recognizing faculty's contributions in a more systematic and formal way.

In what follows, we will discuss approaches to faculty development that incorporate recognition of teaching excellence within the general education core and support faculty as they discover and try out pedagogical innovations in the general education curriculum.

## Background/History of Impact Area

We looked at several universities that have more systematic and centralized initiatives for faculty development, recognition, and pedagogical training. Rather than summarizing each individually, we have organized them by the generic structure of the program into three different models:



### Model #1: Faculty Fellowship Programs

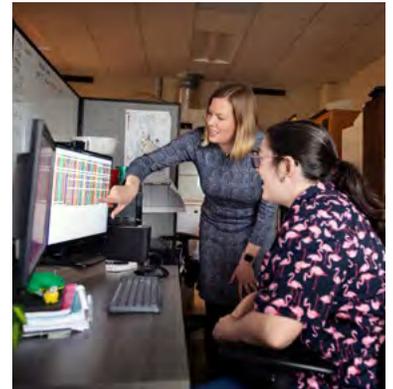
Exemplar: [Indiana University's Mosaic Initiative](#)

Faculty fellowship programs focus primarily on training faculty in best practices and pedagogical approaches that may be new to them. These types of programs tend to be competitively selected opportunities for a small cohort of faculty that spend an academic year or more meeting regularly to participate in sessions led by experts on campus or outside the university. These sessions tend to take place on a biweekly or monthly basis, and they are organized around a standard curriculum that offers in-depth training in one or more pedagogical practices and regular cohort meetings in which the faculty fellows can discuss individual challenges and concerns with their peers. Faculty fellowship programs often provide professional development funds and honorary titles or designations as an incentive to participate and compensation for these efforts. Upon completion of the programs, faculty fellows are typically required to serve as a resource or mentor for other faculty on campus and to participate in training future fellows in the program.

### Model #2: Faculty Seed Funding Programs

Exemplar: [Penn State University's General Education Faculty Scholars Program](#)

Faculty seed funding programs focus primarily on funding faculty members' individual initiatives to improve their teaching abilities and materials. These function like traditional internal grant opportunities to competitively award faculty members the funds and/or time needed to pursue an innovation in their general education classes. Faculty propose a project relevant to the general education core that they want to work on as a participant in the program, and the seed funding pays for either the materials they need in the classroom or the time they need to buy out in order to plan and implement the initiatives. Often, the proposals are evaluated based on how well they meet two criteria: impact on the faculty member's teaching in the general education core, and future impact as a resource to colleagues across campus. Faculty seed funding programs tend not to use a cohort model, directing resources instead to independent projects faculty undertake on their own.



### Model #3: Faculty Learning Communities

Exemplar: [University of Maryland's Undergraduate Studies Faculty Fellows Program](#)

Faculty learning communities focus primarily on developing university resources and capacity by assembling a team of faculty members who research a topic together and create a product for widespread use. Faculty members may apply to take part in a community organized around a specific theme or topic if one is determined in advance. Alternately, they may be selected to participate in the learning community and then together decide on the topic to research collaboratively. The learning community meets on a regular basis across a semester, summer, or academic year to read about and discuss a theme relevant to general education. The learning community works to develop an expertise in the topic so that they may ultimately create a university resource that the campus can use to design, assess, or improve general education teaching and curriculum.



Variations exist on each of these models, and MSU may find that combining different features of each best fits our institution's needs and goals. We note several common features that these models share that may be essential to any program's success: First, faculty are compensated for their participation in terms of funding provided or buyouts of their teaching obligations. Making pedagogical changes or developing new approaches takes time, and these efforts should be supported with increased compensation and resources. Second, the programs generally confer a title or designation to faculty who complete it, making participation in the program more attractive for promotion and advancement purposes. Finally, these programs are relatively long-term commitments rather than one-off programming. They provide opportunities for faculty to immerse themselves for a semester, summer, or academic year, which may facilitate more meaningful faculty development.



## Current State or Needs related to Impact Area

Mississippi State University currently supports faculty development in pedagogical training in several ways, some relevant to the general education core and some that reach broadly to all types of teaching on campus. The [MSU Center for Teaching and Learning](#) offers a wide range of pedagogical training and development opportunities to all teachers on campus. CTL hosts regular workshops and luncheons organized around a particular topic of interest and led by faculty with demonstrated teaching excellence. Their staff and affiliated faculty provide classroom observations and teaching consultations with faculty to assess the efficacy of their current pedagogical approaches. The annual New Faculty Teaching Academy introduces new faculty to classroom policies specific to MSU and general teaching strategies. Beyond the CTL, the university's Faculty Development Task Force is also working to assess and improve the ways the university recognizes faculty accomplishments in teaching.

In addition to these university-wide initiatives, efforts by colleges and departments also work to improve pedagogical capacity of faculty. The College of Arts & Sciences has a new faculty mentorship program that pairs incoming faculty with senior mentors, and pedagogical development is one of the primary topics in the program curriculum. The Department of Communication has a Communication Pedagogy Roundtable that convenes faculty to read and discuss pedagogical research specific to the discipline, with the aim of improving teaching in major classes.

However, there currently is a need for faculty development initiatives that go beyond our present offerings. Specifically, MSU lacks faculty development and recognition programs that are primarily focused on general education course design and teaching strategies; that offer in-depth, ongoing learning in general education pedagogy; that are connected across individual units to form a coherent community of general education faculty; and that are designed to address the different challenges that faculty face in various disciplines and across all ranks. Teaching general education courses requires different approaches than teaching courses in the major. Moreover, different pedagogical approaches may be better suited to certain disciplines than to others, and teachers at different points in their careers may need different types of development and training opportunities. MSU's pedagogical development initiatives cannot currently address all the nuances of these distinctions.

We have identified several specific needs that make developing pedagogical capacity in general education faculty more challenging. First, funding is needed to support faculty development and recognition. This funding could support targeted programming that addresses general education-specific topics as identified above. Funding is also needed for providing release time to participants in general education pedagogical development, and for securing resources like course materials and technologies without which faculty cannot pursue more innovative approaches to their general education courses. Second, the university needs a central location (online or physical) in which to house faculty development resources related to general education. This central resource could archive the products of faculty fellows or learning communities so that the broader campus community can access and use them. It could coordinate collaborations across departments by providing a directory or matching service to connect faculty with partners across campus interested in designing interdisciplinary general education courses or projects. The central resource could host and disseminate programming related to general education development and solicit applications for eventual general education faculty development programs. With the creation of the Director of Academic Quality accomplished, many of these efforts could be overseen and coordinated through that office.



## Recommendations to Improve Impact Area

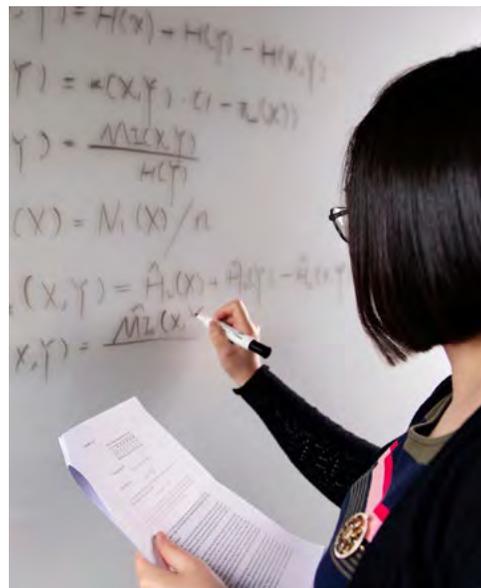
The following recommendations offer ideas for improving professional development opportunities for faculty and incentivizing their participation in them.

### **Recommendation: Lessen the reliance on contingent faculty to teach the general education core.**

Achieving the types of pedagogical changes outlined in the previous recommendations requires substantial buy-in from faculty and units. These are not superficial or easy changes to implement on the fly in general education courses. The best and most long-lasting improvements in general education teaching will occur if faculty commit to a cycle of continuous improvement by making changes in their courses, assessing the effectiveness of those changes, making improvements based on that assessment, and then continuing the cycle. For this reason, we recommend that the university rethink its approach to staffing the courses that count on the university core. Faculty development efforts at present will be directed at those without the job security, authority, or responsibility to improve general education teaching at MSU. The faculty ranks that are charged with and recognized for their pedagogical growth are the permanent faculty (tenure track and instructor, professor of practice, teaching, clinical, and extension non-tenure track). Investing in general education faculty development requires first investing in general education faculty.

### **Recommendation: Coordinate general education faculty development through the Director of Academic Quality.**

Pedagogical development and faculty recognition initiatives will be most effective if they are organized centrally and overseen by someone with research and teaching qualifications to make effective choices about programming priorities. Such initiatives should be coordinated so they cohere with each other, do not duplicate efforts, and can make the best use of limited resources for improving the general education faculty's development and recognition. Centrally organized initiatives also allow for more effective tracking and assessment of faculty development efforts. Because the general education core is taught across colleges, this effort should not be the sole responsibility or purview of any single college or division on campus. Rather, there needs to be a university-level position charged with coordinating the general education faculty

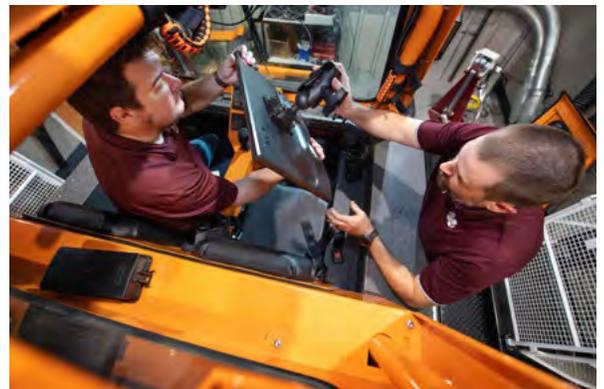


development. This model is common at other institutions: for example, at the [University of Arizona](#), an Executive Director of General Education leads the university's efforts to expand and improve the general education curriculum and teaching through instructional support, technology assistance, course assessment, online resources, and regular programming. The Director of Academic Quality's general education assessment and supervisory responsibilities align well with the proposed professional development initiatives for faculty.

**Recommendation: Ground general education faculty development design in the following research-based principles.**

First, faculty development and pedagogical training should focus on students (Meacham & Ludwig 2001, 176). Faculty already have the content and disciplinary expertise they need to teach in their fields; what they may lack is an understanding of the student population that is grounded in current research and attentive to emergent needs and challenges that may not have existed for previous student cohorts. Faculty development efforts cannot focus solely on the content and mechanics of teaching; it also must help faculty understand who their students are and how their experiences, values, and educational preparation may differ from those of the faculty.

Second, training for faculty should emphasize the creation of a specific pedagogical product (Meacham & Ludwig 2001, 178). For the purpose of enhancing general education teaching capacity, open-ended or overly flexible faculty development courses may be less productive than those that require a specific outcome to be produced by the participants. Faculty may also be less likely to follow through on what is learned in the faculty development program if the sole product is relatively intangible (personal reflection, discussion) rather than a specific outcome (syllabus, lesson plans, course materials, etc.).



Third, faculty development efforts should be interlinked and ongoing, rather than disconnected programming or one-off opportunities. Instead, as Meacham and Ludwig (2001, 179) argue, faculty development efforts work best when they are “a continual, visible, and expected component of academic life.” Regular, ongoing faculty development builds communities of pedagogical experts and reserves of shared knowledge that are continuously expanding and improving.

Finally, promotion criteria and institutional reward structures need to incorporate faculty development in a meaningful way (Meacham & Ludwig 2001, 180). There needs to be specific language in tenure and promotion guidelines that values and rewards general education teaching and faculty development. Smaller-scale incentives are also useful for immediate participation in faculty development programming (e.g., microgrants, stipends, awards, etc.). But ultimately, until and unless such work is recognized as an important and valued achievement for tenure and/or promotion purposes, it will remain counterproductive for many faculty to pursue excellence in general education teaching.

# Structural Changes

## Brief Description of Structural Changes Needed

At Mississippi State University, course modifications and additions must go through a curriculum review process starting with the faculty in the major; however, general education is not a major but is a part of every undergraduate major. The courses originate from a department, but they may fit within multiple degree programs outside of that department. Therefore, structure is needed to designate the review process for general education courses.

## Existing Structure of the General Education Committee

The General Education Committee is a subcommittee of the University Committee on Courses and Curricula (UCCC). According to the UCCC bylaws:

The UCCC Chair shall serve as Chair of the General Education Committee and appoint one representative from each college to serve on the General Education Committee. The committee is responsible for oversight of the assessment of the general education curriculum. The committee also selects the courses to be assessed, reviews the annual general education assessment report and provides recommendations for strengthening the general education curriculum.



## Proposed Structure of General Education Course Review

The proposed structure separates the course content and its assessment from the course review and approval process. Two review bodies will be needed to facilitate general education review: (1) an assessment and content review body (i.e., General Education Assessment Committee) and (2) a university curriculum review committee that ensures the courses follow the institution's curriculum policies. Both committees have shared responsibility for approving general education courses.

The responsibilities of these committees break down as follows:

1. General Education Assessment Committee:

Composition: Chaired by the Director of Academic Quality, members are representatives from the faculty who have teaching or curricular responsibilities in general education courses, as well as the Chair of UCCC.

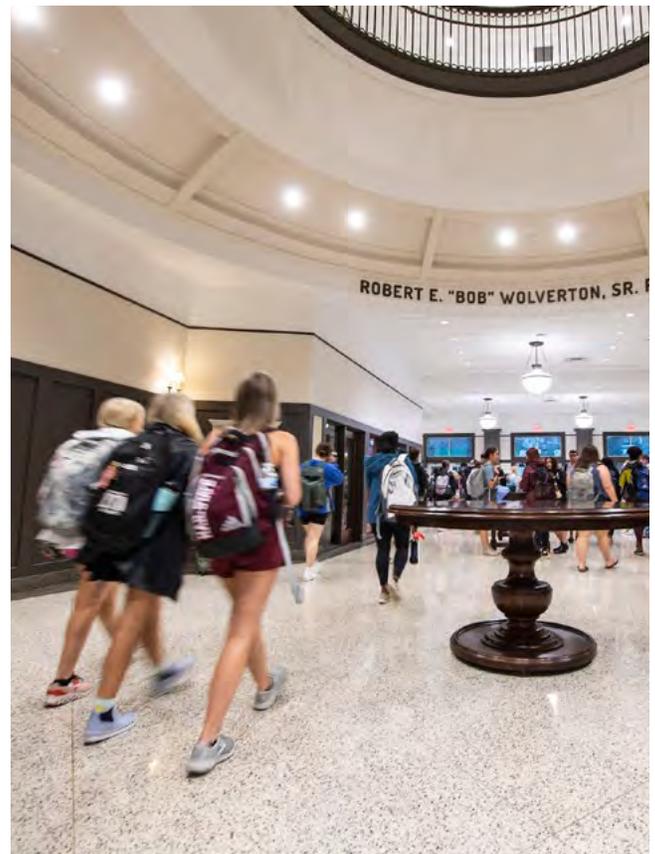
- a. Ensure syllabus alignment with general education outcomes
- b. Assures signature assignment can be measured by committee-built assessment rubric
- c. Collects & reviews assessment data on an annual basis

2. UCCC as a whole:

Composition: Chaired by the Chair of UCCC, members include the elected representatives from every academic college, as well as ex officio members from Academic Affairs including the Director of Academic Quality.

- c. Verify contact hours matching credit hours
- d. Ensure applicability within university mission and existing degree programs
- e. Check for duplication
- f. Uphold all curriculum policy rules

This task force subcommittee defines applicability as determining what content counts as general education. The spirit of the review process is to establish common general education learning outcomes and then evaluate the extent to which the coursework advances knowledge toward those ends. Any course that meets the criteria of the outcomes and associated rubrics can be considered for that core curriculum category in accordance with IHL Policy 512. Furthermore, the courses must follow the university's curriculum policies and procedures, upheld through UCCC.



## General Education Core vs. Major Core

Currently, MSU's general education core is mixed with the foundational courses of the major core. These foundational courses also satisfy a student's general core courses. This task force proposes untangling major-specific content from general education. To delineate the difference, the following definitions are suggested:

- General education core = intellectual skills needed in postsecondary education such as communication, social and natural sciences, humanities and fine arts, and critical thinking.
- Foundational courses = introduce the terminology, tools, and technology needed for the major or the field of study.

To accomplish this disentanglement, degree programs need to examine critically their course sequencing to determine if the current foundational courses are serving as necessary pre-requisites for upper-level courses, and if a transition to an inquiry-based general education course would have a significant impact on a student's ability to progress in their major course of study.

We recommend considering creating distinct General Education course codes for approved General Education courses. This will not only support the distinction between General Education courses and Foundational or Introductory courses of a discipline, but it will also designate General Education courses for easy visibility and underscore their specific role in students' curricula.

We also recommend that departments choosing to offer General Education courses be responsible and accountable for general education assessments that align with the needs of our SACSCOC accreditation.

## University College

While there was not universal support in the Task Force of recommending the exploration of a University College model that could connect to the General Education curriculum in some way, it is worth noting as a potential area for future exploration and examination. The concept of University College is that it serves students in their first 2 years of education, when they are typically undertaking the General Education coursework of their degree. This might provide the needed visibility of the General Education curriculum to underscore its relevance to students' programs of study. It could also have the additional value of being a central location for the fundamental services that support student success. It could be the home for the other recommendations, such as the General Education Fellows program, a General Education Teaching Community/ Professional Development site, FYE coordination, General Education Assessment Committee, and other key offices/services associated with students in their initial transition to college, such as the Office of Student Success, Supplemental Instruction coordination, Undergraduate Advising, Student Success Coordinators Hub, The Learning Center, Disability Resource Center, etc.



# Marketing and Re-branding of General Education

One of the largest obstacles of the General Education curriculum is the lack of interest that many students, faculty, and advisors have for these critical courses. There are popular ideas expressed commonly through social media outlets like TikTok that reinforce the concept that non-major courses are a waste of time and money for students who see college as career preparation for their specific field. We must address the relevance of general education courses by directly addressing these types of ideas.

For faculty, general education assignments are often viewed as less desirable than upper division discipline-specific courses. For students, general education courses are often seen as separate from their major, and therefore simply required of them. Because they do not see the relevance of general education courses to their major, their future career, or their life in general, they may put less effort into these courses. For advisors, because all students must take specific hours in each general education category, and those courses are in high demand due to that fact, they often do not seek to align a student's interest in a particular course of the General Education curriculum, but simply to check the required boxes. The overarching message that many students receive is “just pick one from the list, it does not matter which one. You just have to take one.”

We must rebrand the General Education curriculum across the university, to all stakeholders in order to elevate the importance, the value, and the critical role General Education plays in our students overall intellectual development. General Education must tell its story, be proud of its impact on our students' educational goals and be recognized for its fundamental role in creating life-long learners who are able to examine information critically on multiple, diverse levels. Due to the need to greatly elevate the visibility and relevance of the General Education curriculum to all stakeholders requires professional efforts, perhaps as a part of a multi-tiered marketing project for the university.





The General Education curriculum must also be visible to our university community. It needs a home, perhaps physical as well as virtual, and it needs a face that is fully dedicated to its purpose, its vision, and its goals. Whether this is structurally housed in a University College concept or an Office of General Education, or under the Office of Academic Quality, a visible and approachable home central to the undergraduate mission of the university will help elevate and expand the relevance of General Education as a fundamental part of each student's undergraduate curriculum. Additionally, this home could also be a location for a General Education teaching community, such as a Fellows program, mentorship, and other professional development activities.

A key aspect of increasing the visibility of the General Education curriculum is making it clear that a course is a part of the General Education curriculum. Currently, there is no designation on courses that make it clear to students, faculty, or advisors that a course fulfills a general education requirement other than the listing in the catalog. We recommend that approved General Education courses have some form of designation added, so that there is no confusion as to whether a course is a general education course, or what kind of general education area it supports. This might be done by adjusting the code of a course or by adding language into the course description, or perhaps both. Currently, all but one of the General Education approved courses have 3-letter course codes. It might be possible to add a G to the end of these codes so that it is clearly visible in the master class schedule what courses are general education, and if a brief phrase could be added to the course description indicating the general education area, there would be greater clarity for all stakeholders.

Part of the marketing must be focused on students, illuminating the educational value and relevance of general education to their chosen disciplines. The marketing plan would need to address not only the global picture of the value of general education, but also connect the value down to specific disciplines across campus. Using the voices from a broad variety of stakeholders, including fellow students, recent alumni speaking to the value they've seen for these courses as well as more established alumni and industry partners who see the value of a strong general education curriculum in their hires. Marketing must include broad advertisement and targeted marketing to students about the innovative new courses as well as more established courses using engaging student-centered pedagogies will help students seek and select general education courses because of interest rather than simply choosing from a list.

There must also be an educational campaign across campus underscoring the role and relevance of the General Education curriculum to Mississippi State's overall goals of creating an educated citizenry, and a future filled with lifelong learners. The campaign must be multi-tiered, focused not only on the relevance of general education, but also the variety of innovative and engaging course options, the dynamic and exceptional faculty, the potential but perhaps less obvious value to their discipline studies and future careers, etc.

We believe that significant marketing is necessary to elevate the General Education in the minds of all stakeholders, not simply our students, but their families, our faculty, our advisors, our administration, and our alumni and broader community outside the university including potential employers. While developing new and innovative courses and embracing student-centric learning methodologies and pedagogies is vital, we must also market these innovations to the broader community. We must believe that General Education is vital to MSU, and we must show it. This can be done through education and professional development for department heads, program coordinators, admissions professionals, advisors, and faculty. It must also include a visual presence on MSU's website as well as embedded into every college, every department, every office supporting our students from their entry through their graduation.



# Final Thoughts

The overarching recommendations of the General Education Task Force are linked in a greater desire to reinforce for our students, faculty, and stakeholders the relevance and vital value of investing in the development and maintenance of a robust liberal arts education program that will provide our students with the essential critical and creative thinking skills necessary to navigate the world throughout their lives. A liberal arts education is founded on the ideals of learning as a life-long activity that engages curiosity and deep thinking in broad and complex areas of inquiry. Our recommendations are submitted with the goal of building on existing strengths, emphasizing a new mindset, investing time and resources to support a new approach to our general education curriculum, and inspiring innovative content and pedagogy to excite the passion for learning in our students.

