

## General Education at Penn State

### What Values Should Shape Our Curriculum?



**G**eneral education impacts all aspects of the Penn State community, but views differ as to its value and the role it plays in a Penn State education.

Some understand General Education primarily as **an opportunity for students to explore new ideas and discover unknown interests**; others say General Education should **help students integrate knowledge from a variety of disciplines into a coherent worldview** that will enable them to

make informed decisions; a third view is that General Education should **give students the communication skills and qualifications they need** to succeed in a 21st century economy.

Each of the options below is designed to emphasize one of these values over the other.

**The question is:** What values should inform our General Education curriculum at Penn State?

#### OPTION 1: EXPLORATION

*25% theme, 50% exploration, 25% skills*

General Education is primarily about exploration. Students should be given the opportunity to explore various subjects and ideas in a wide and diverse set of fields. Breadth of knowledge is critical to the success of students in the 21st century.

#### OPTION 2: INTEGRATION

*50% theme, 25% exploration, 25% skills*

General Education is not simply about learning facts, but integrating knowledge from different perspectives into an integrated understanding of a particular theme or subject. In the 21st century, students will need to be able to draw on a diversity of perspectives and ways of knowing in order to make successful decisions relating to their careers, communities, and the wider world around them.

#### OPTION 3: SKILLS

*25% theme, 25% exploration, 50% skills*

General education should be about giving students the skills they need to thrive in a 21st century economy. Students need to learn how to read and write effectively, how to communicate in various digital and traditional modes and how to understand and process enormous amounts of data and information and apply that to concrete professional situations.

## OPTION 1: EXPLORATION

*25% theme, 50% exploration, 25% skills*

Option	What Might Be Done	Consequences & Tradeoffs
<p>General Education is primarily about exploration. Students should be given the opportunity to explore various subjects and ideas in a wide and diverse set of fields. Breadth of knowledge is critical to the success of students in the 21st century.</p> <p>Education is all too often viewed in instrumental terms and students are required to specialize early to give them a head start in their professional training.</p> <p>The General Education curriculum should counterbalance this prevailing tendency by maximizing opportunities for students to explore new ideas and directions of inquiry to give them a broader understanding of the world in which they live.</p> <p>This option would require students to take courses in domain areas and disciplines outside of their chosen major field and would ensure exposure to a variety of fields beyond their area of specialization.</p>	<p>Faculty could provide more opportunities for discovery of ideas outside of the mainstream by developing new courses connected to emerging research.</p> <p>Students could develop their own research plans and create learning paths tailored to their academic and professional goals, a skill that would be useful after college.</p> <p>Because the explorations curriculum would be more flexible, students could be given more time to decide on a major to enable them to experience different areas of study so they can make more mature and informed decisions.</p> <p>Colleges and Campuses could create exploration pathways to highlight their academic strengths and encourage students to pursue a wider diversity of fields and areas of study.</p>	<p>This option would create a less coherent and perhaps less rigorous experience for students and the wider Penn State community. It would be more difficult to develop university-wide co-curricular activities around General Education.</p> <p>Such a wide-ranging, disparate curriculum would be difficult to assess, because there would be a lack of coherent and unified learning objectives.</p> <p>Students would not develop as deep a level of knowledge in any one specific area outside of their major, nor would they be required to integrate a variety of disciplinary approaches in the study of a single theme across their undergraduate careers.</p> <p>It would be more difficult to market the value of such a diversified curriculum to potential employers.</p>

## OPTION 2: INTEGRATION

*50% theme, 25% exploration, 25% skills*

Option	What Might Be Done	Consequences & Tradeoffs
<p>General Education is not simply about learning facts, but primarily about integrating knowledge from different perspectives into an integrated understanding of a particular theme or subject. In the 21st century, students will need to be able to draw on a diversity of perspectives and ways of knowing in order to make successful decisions relating to their careers, communities and the wider world around them.</p> <p>The centerpiece of this approach to General Education is a single, integrated, interdisciplinary theme that will offer students an opportunity to investigate a focused topic from a multidisciplinary perspective over the course of their college careers.</p> <p>This scaffolded approach provides students with an integrated education in which they are able to understand and appreciate the insights and blindnesses multiple disciplines bring to a theme.</p> <p>The capstone experience is designed to give students the opportunity to synthesize what they have learned in the course of their study of the theme.</p>	<p>Faculty could collaborate to create new interdisciplinary courses and multidisciplinary themes that extend beyond the introductory level, thus giving greater depth to the general education experience.</p>	<p>If a 400-level capstone course is adopted, the university would need to find a way to offset costs.</p>
	<p>The University could create a unified set of learning outcomes for increased rigor and better assessment.</p>	<p>Without a reduction of overall General Education credits, this approach could extend student time to degree.</p>
	<p>Themes could focus on issues of deep and lasting social and political relevance.</p>	<p>The logistics of a heavily theme-based curriculum would be difficult to manage at scale and the result could be decreased flexibility for students as they work to complete their degrees.</p>
	<p>Students would learn how to bring different disciplinary perspectives to a specific topic or issue.</p>	<p>All Penn State students, including those at Campuses and the World Campus, might have difficulty completing themes that take up such a high percentage of the curriculum.</p>
	<p>Faculty research could be integrated into the General Education curriculum in a robust way with the theme capstone having a central research component.</p>	
	<p>A capstone experience could be developed to offer students the opportunity to synthesize the interdisciplinary knowledge they have gained in their study of the theme.</p>	

## OPTION 3: SKILLS

25% theme, 25% exploration, 50% skills

Option	What Might Be Done	Consequences & Tradeoffs
<p>General education should be chiefly about giving students the skills they need to thrive in a 21st century economy. Students need to learn how to read and write effectively, how to communicate in various digital and traditional modes, and how to understand and process enormous amounts of data and information and apply that to concrete professional situations.</p> <p>In a new, more interconnected and increasingly dynamic economy, fewer and fewer students are learning the fundamental writing, speaking, and quantitative skills they need to succeed.</p> <p>The General Education curriculum should maximize the opportunities for students to learn how to write and communicate in a variety of different traditional and digital media.</p> <p>Further, information literacy and quantitative numeracy will be critical skills for students as they enter a world increasingly saturated by data, algorithms, and structured information.</p> <p>This option ensures that every Penn State student will enter the new economy with the skills necessary for success.</p>	<p>Emerging initiatives in digital humanities, social data analytics and business analytics could be integrated into the GenEd curriculum as students learn important analytical and quantitative reasoning skills.</p>	<p>The focus on skills in isolation from domain knowledge does not give students adequate opportunity to understand the wider implications of the skills they are learning and the impact these skills have on how we understand the wider world in which we live.</p>
	<p>Penn State could establish itself as a premier university for career recruitment by emphasizing that every student learns the writing, speaking and quantitative skills necessary for success in today's economy.</p>	<p>Currently most of our skills-based courses are taught by non-tenure line faculty and graduate students, so a heavy skills-based curriculum would likely continue that trend and shift the General Education curriculum further away from the tenure line faculty.</p>
	<p>The Faculty could develop innovative new hybrid/studio based courses in which faculty could work individually with students in studio or lab contexts while delivering some of the curriculum asynchronously on the web.</p>	<p>An emphasis on skills may encourage a more instrumental approach to education in which students focus more on checking off requirements rather than integrating their skills into a holistic worldview.</p>
	<p>Opportunities for internships could be easily integrated into a skills-based general education program.</p>	

## Framing the GenEd Discussion

*Deliberation facilitators should read this statement to frame the deliberation activity.*

The General Education Task Force (GETF) has been charged with revising the current general education curriculum and has decided that a theme-based approach will best fulfill that charge. But the specific shape this curriculum takes will depend on a shared vision of General Education. In order to facilitate a thoughtful exchange of ideas about the shape of General Education at Penn State, the GETF has adopted the Kettering model of public deliberation that has been widely used in their National Issues Forums ([www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org)).

Ultimately, the faculty will decide upon the shape of General Education at Penn State, but those decisions and the work of the Task Force, ought to be supported and shaped by collective deliberation.

The GenEd Deliberation Guide is designed to stimulate public deliberation on the values that should inform decisions about general education at Penn State. We make sound judgements by weighing the likely consequences of various options for action against the values we hold dear.

The GenEd Deliberation Guide articulates three General Education options, each weighted in a slightly different way to emphasize one of three approaches to General Education. For deliberative purposes, we ask people to advocate for each option and to recognize the opportunities they provide and the drawbacks they bring. We will ask participants to vote before the deliberation begins and then again afterwards. These options are crafted to foster deliberative discussion, not as examples of the final curriculum that will be proposed.

The Guide identifies what is most valuable in each option. It also presents the tensions between options that arise because different people value different things. The Kettering framework is designed to enable people to work through these tensions in order to identify a common set of values capable of guiding decisions and action.

### Here are the steps we will follow:

1. Review all three options.
2. Vote to establish a baseline.
3. Ask participants to develop the best argument for Option 1.
4. Discuss the arguments developed.
5. Repeat for Options 2 and 3.
6. Facilitate a general discussion of the themes that emerged from the previous arguments.
7. Vote to see if the views of the group have shifted.
8. Share your insights and pictures with us at: [sites.psu.edu/GenEdatPSU](http://sites.psu.edu/GenEdatPSU) and [@PSUGenEd](https://twitter.com/PSUGenEd).