# MASON CORE CONVERSATIONS REPORT

J. Samaine Lockwood, Ph.D.
Mason Core Faculty Fellow, 2019-20

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## Mason Core Conversations Report

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# Section 1: Overview

Part of George Mason University's stated mission is to educate its students to be engaged citizens and well-rounded scholars who are prepared to act. The general education curriculum at Mason, known as the Mason Core, is central to accomplishing this goal, for it comprises the requirements all students must complete (with a few exceptions college to college). (See Appendix A.)

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the body responsible for accrediting Mason, requires that institutions of higher education have a general education program that is 1. coherent, 2. at least 30 credit hours, and 3. ensures breadth of knowledge. SACSCOC further specifies that the 30 credit hours dedicated to general education "include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics." (For the entire statement as well as rationale and notes, see Appendix B). The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), meanwhile, mandates that

> A high-quality college education must promote students' intellectual and personal growth in ways that equip them to succeed in work and life. Higher education seeks to impart learning that is broadly relevant, intellectual skills that are rigorous and widely adaptable, and dispositions and knowledge that contribute to a productive role in one's personal and social relations. To that end, a college education in Virginia—regardless of major or specialized field of study—ideally should emphasize broad learning; intellectual and practical skills that support evidence-based reasoning and innovation; integrative and adaptive learning; and personal and social responsibility. (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2017, July 18, p. 2).

Although SCHEV does not outline any specific general education requirements, it does issue policy about assessment and reporting. According to the "Policy on student learning assessment and quality in undergraduate education," "SCHEV, in collaboration with institutions, identified four main competency areas for institutions to measure: critical thinking, written communication, quantitative reasoning, and civic engagement. In addition, institutions are required to select two additional competency areas, to be tailored based on institutional mission and curriculum" (Policy on student learning assessment and quality in undergraduate education, Richmond, VA., p. 7. Retrieved from http://www.schev.edu/index/institutional/guidance-policies/academic-affairs-policy).

Mason's accreditation was affirmed in December 2011, and Mason is currently working to prepare for its next accreditation review, which will take place in 2022. Mindful of that fact, as well as of the fact that other public universities in Virginia have made recent, substantive changes to their general education curricula, the Mason Core Committee has spent academic year 2019-20 engaged in preliminary conversations about the effectiveness of the Mason Core.

To begin the review of the Mason Core, a team from Mason attended the 2019 Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA) run by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). This team included Dr. Bethany Usher, Associate Provost for

Undergraduate Education; Dr. Stephanie Foster, Associate Director for Undergraduate Education; Dr. Melissa Broeckelman-Post, Director of the Basic Communication Course and Chair of the Mason Core Committee; and Dr. Samaine Lockwood, Director of Undergraduate Studies for English and Mason Core Faculty Fellow for academic year 2019-20. Based on goals and approaches developed at IGEA, this academic year Lockwood led the initiative "Mason Core Conversations" whereby the IGEA team and Mason Core Committee sought to better understand what members of the Mason community think is most vital to a general education. As part of Mason Core Conversations, Lockwood conducted 17 focus groups and 3 workshops. These focus groups and workshops involved mostly instructional faculty as well as advisors, librarians, graduate teaching assistance, administrative faculty, and professional staff. Based, in part, on the data from the focus groups, a faculty survey was developed and open to Mason faculty for a 14-day period (February 23, 2020-March 6, 2020). Also based on the focus group data and in collaboration with Mason's student government, a student survey was distributed to Mason's student body for same 14-day period, February 23, 2020-March 6, 2020.

This report details the results of the Mason Core Conversations focus groups, the faculty survey, and the student survey. Key results include

- Members of the Mason community (faculty, staff, and students) identified acquisition of critical thinking skills as the most important outcome of a general education experience.
- Written communication skills were identified as the second most important outcome of a general education experience by faculty and staff.
- Students identified well-being (which was defined to include self-care, advocacy, and financial literacy) most often after critical thinking skills as an important outcome of a general education. Mason faculty and staff from focus groups also identified well-being as an important outcome. On the faculty survey, however, well-being was the outcome with the lowest mean importance rating from a list of 14 possible general education outcomes and their importance with a mean score of 5.85, 5 being of "moderate importance."
- Cultural competence figured prominently in the focus group data. It was mentioned third most often after critical thinking skills and written communication skills. In the student survey results it received the third highest percentage of "very important" or "extremely important" ratings in the survey.
- On the student survey, in 62% of the responses one or more specific courses were identified in answer to the question "What has the best experience you have had in a Mason Core class?" Twenty two percent of the responses were that the respondent had no positive experiences in Mason Core classes and 21% identified excellent teaching and teachers as central to respondents' most positive Core experience.
- The possible obstacles to curricular revision that faculty and staff mentioned often and rated as most important include
    o uneven levels of student preparedness for college-level work
    o lack of resources to support substantive curricular change
    o contingent faculty labor issues
    o the needs of transfer students
    o the current budget model, and
    o the lack of a central narrative articulating the value of the Mason Core

# Section 2: Methods

A two-stage process was used to collect data about the Mason community's values and attitudes regarding general education. The first stage involved focus groups with faculty and staff participants. The second stage involved the creation and distribution of two surveys—a faculty survey and a student survey. Some questions in these surveys reflected what was learned in the focus group stage.

Focus groups

Focus groups were the primary and initial mode used to learn what faculty and professional staff currently think about general education priorities. Between mid-September of 2019 and early February 2020, aided by OSCAR research assistant Madison Gaines, Lockwood conducted 17 focus groups of faculty (tenure-line, term, and adjunct), professional staff, and GTAs as well as 3 open workshops. (The first workshop was a pilot and so was slightly different in format than the subsequent focus groups and workshops, which were standardized, but all the same issues were covered.) The focus groups were by invitation and requested invitation; the workshops were open to any attendees. The same activities were completed by focus group and workshop participants. Four focus groups involved all advisors, two involved a range of professional staff members, including GTAs and advisors, and the majority of focus groups, 11 in total, involved faculty. Overall, 173 faculty and professional staff members participated in this first stage of Mason Core Conversations (of those, 2 emailed their ideas). Faculty participants were from across all of Mason's colleges and schools; each faculty focus group was intentionally constructed to involve faculty members from a range of colleges and schools.

In the focus groups, participants discussed three issues, and Lockwood took notes on large Post-Its, checking back with participants to make sure their ideas were properly represented. In the workshops, volunteers from the Mason Core Committee facilitated the discussions among the 6-8 faculty and staff per table who were completing the activities while Lockwood oversaw the whole workshop.

First, participants were asked what obstacles, if any, they saw as impeding the process of making revisions to the Mason Core. Second, participants were asked to write out on index cards—one idea per card—their answers to the guiding question "What should a Mason student know, be able to do, and have experienced upon completion of the general education curriculum?" Focus group participants then shared their priorities for general education with one another while Lockwood, again, took notes on large Post-Its. Participants worked to identify areas of overlap or coordination between answers. All index cards were collected, typed up, and later coded and counted. Last, focus group participants brainstormed ideas for how Mason might accomplish one or two of the priorities emphasized by the group in the second activity. In the 10-15 minutes of focused brainstorming that happened in each focus group session, no effort was made to be comprehensive in naming how to achieve each of the group's priority outcomes. Instead, each group focused on one outcome and brainstormed how to achieve just that outcome. If time allowed, a second or third outcome would be taken up.

Faculty survey
A faculty survey was developed based on the results from the focus group. The survey was administered to all instructional faculty on the Provost's faculty list. Faculty received a link to the online survey through email invitation. Responses to the survey were anonymous. Four hundred fifty seven people began the survey. Three hundred twenty five respondents identified themselves as instructional faculty, 101 as administrative faculty, and 12 as being in a non-faculty role.

The survey provided opportunities for open narrative reflection on the strengths of the current Core as well as on improvements faculty would like to see made to the Core. The first open narrative question—"What do you believe are the strengths of the current Mason Core curriculum?" received 211 responses, 206 of which were relevant. The second open narrative question—"What are some improvements you would like to see made to the Mason Core curriculum"—received 200 responses, 188 of which were relevant. Note that some respondents had more than one idea that they expressed in their narrative answers and so the numbers of responses on open-narrative questions does not add up to the exact number of relevant responses, nor do the percentages equal 100 in the tables presented in the results section.

The survey also presented faculty members with the 10 most often mentioned obstacles to curricular revision articulated in the focus group and asked for those to be rated in terms of importance using a scale from 0 to 10 with 1 being "not at all important," 3 being "slightly important," 5 being "moderately important," 7 being "very important," and 9 being "extremely important." Respondents were then asked "What other issues, if any, do you think must be considered in conversations about possible revision to the Mason Core curriculum?". One hundred and thirty eight respondents answered this follow-up question and 102 of those answers were relevant.

The survey then presented the 14 priority outcomes for general education named most often by focus group participants and asked survey-takers to rate the importance of inclusion of these goals in Mason's general education curriculum using the same scale outlined above. Respondents were asked the open narrative follow-up question: "What other knowledge, skills, or experiences not listed above do you believe are crucial to include in a general education curriculum?" One hundred and seven respondents answered this follow-up question and 96 answers were relevant.

Student survey
Based, in part, on the focus group data and in collaboration with Mason's student government, a student survey was distributed to Mason's student body through student government channels, University Life, and through a student newsletter from the Office of Undergraduate Education. Five hundred and fifty nine students responded to this survey. Here is an overview of the respondents based on their own identification of their class, college or school, and admit type. Over 65% of respondents were classified as juniors, seniors, and super seniors, so, in the aggregate, respondents had ample experience with the Core, especially given that 66% of them reported they were freshmen admits.

## Figure 1. Classification of Respondents-Student Survey
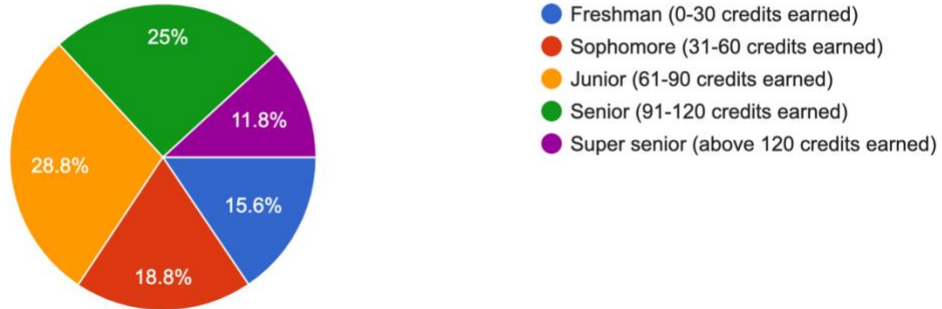
**What class are you in?**
559 responses



- Freshman (0-30 credits earned)
- Sophomore (31-60 credits earned)
- Junior (61-90 credits earned)
- Senior (91-120 credits earned)
- Super senior (above 120 credits earned)

## Figure 2. Admit Type of Respondents-Student Survey

**I started at Mason as a**
559 responses



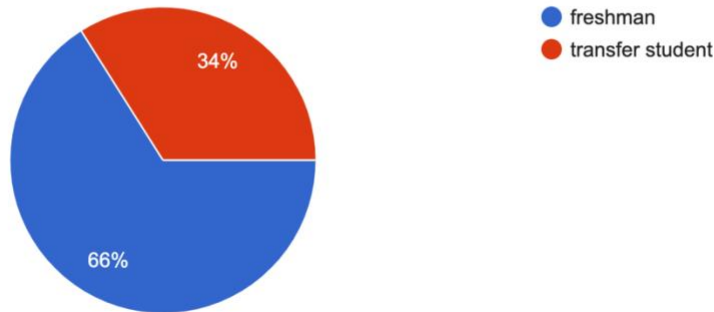- freshman
- transfer student

## Table 1. College/School of Respondents-Student Survey

| College/School | Percentage of respondents |
|---|---|
| College of Humanities and Social Sciences | 29.3% |
| Volgenau School of Engineering | 21.8% |
| College of Science | 11.4% |
| School of Business | 9.5% |
| College of Visual and Performing Arts | 8.2% |
| College of Health and Human Services | 6.6% |
| College of Education and Human Development | 5% |
| Schar School of Policy and Government | 3.8% |
| School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution | 2.5% |
| Exploratory | 1.8% |

The first open-ended narrative question—"What has been the best experience you have had in a Mason Core class? Please be specific in your answer."—received 470 responses, and of those 349 were relevant. The second open-ended narrative question—"What additions or changes would you like to see made to the Mason Core?—received 481 responses, 380 of which were relevant. Note that some student respondents had more than one idea that they expressed in their narrative answers and so the numbers of responses does not add up to the exact number of relevant responses, nor do the percentages equal 100 in the tables presented in the results section.

Part of the student survey was based on the data from the focus groups. On the student survey, the top six most frequently mentioned outcomes of a general education from the focus groups were listed for rating (as opposed to 14 on the faculty survey). Students were asked to rate the importance of these outcomes on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "not important", 2 being "slightly important," 3 being "moderately important," 4 being "very important," and 5 being "extremely important." On average, 552 students responded to these importance rating questions.

# Section 3: Results
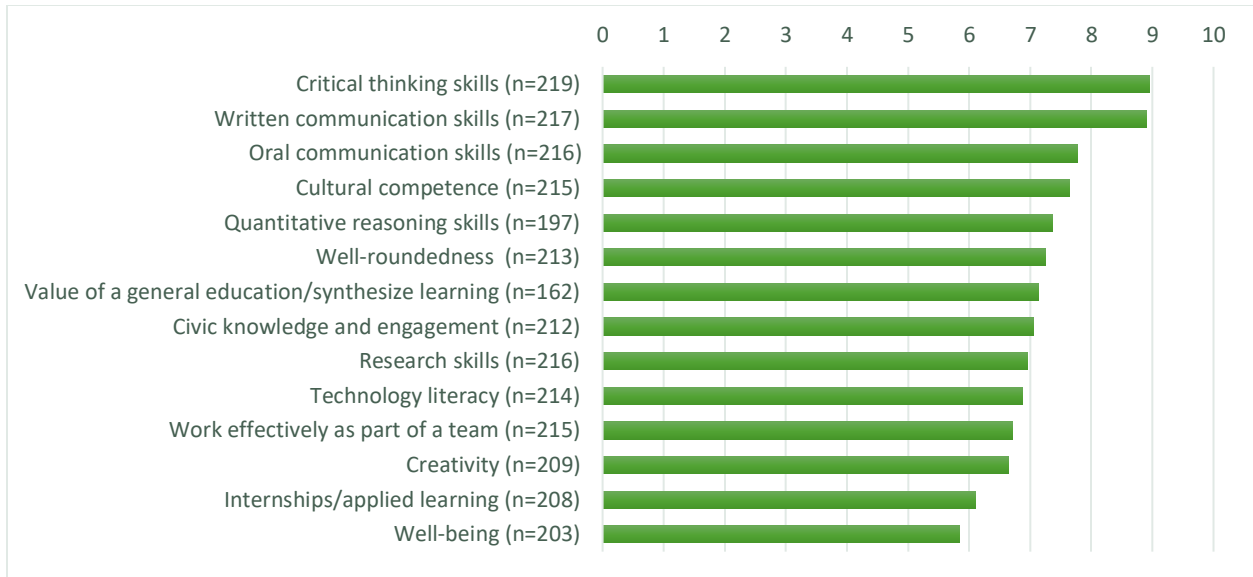
I. Priorities for general education curriculum at Mason

The following seven outcomes were named most often by focus group participants as priorities for general education. The total number of times a given priority was mentioned is noted in parentheses. Please note that critical reading and information literacy were folded into critical thinking skills. Cultural competence is defined as the ability to understand and work productively with people from diverse cultures. Well-being includes self-care, advocacy, and financial literacy. Well-roundedness is defined as having studied in a range of disciplines.

Figure 3. Mason Core Priorities-Focus Groups
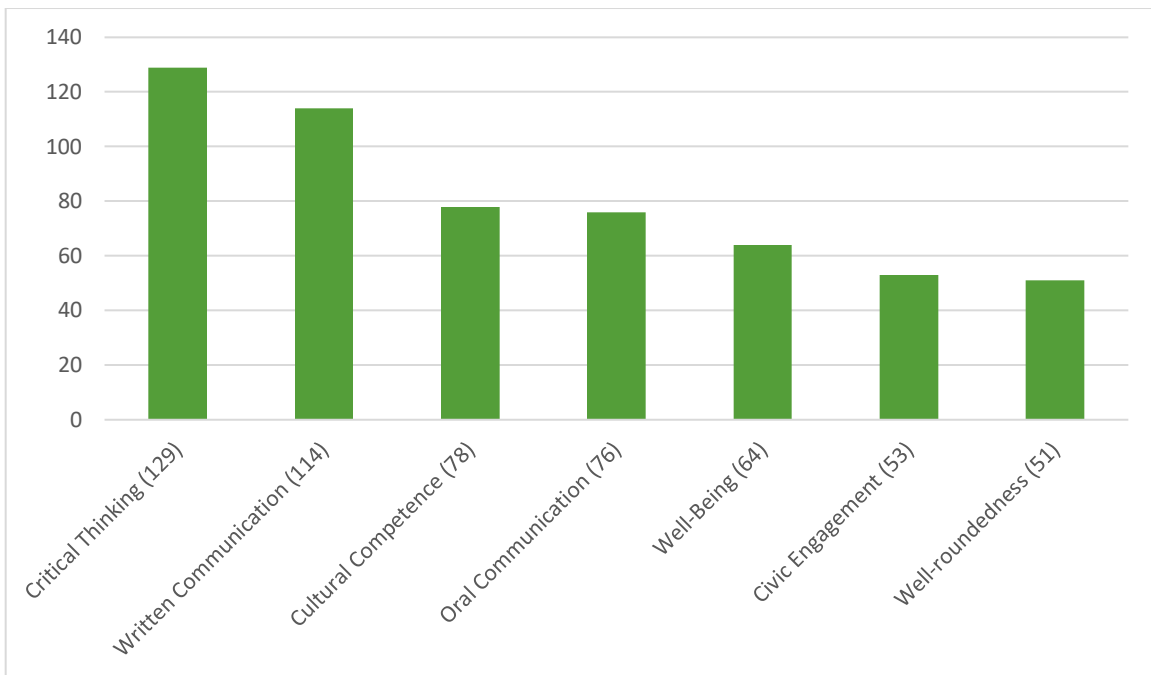
In the area of general education priorities, respondents on the faculty survey rated the importance of 14 possible goals for Mason's general education curriculum using a scale from 0 to 10 with 1 being "not at all important," 3 being "slightly important," 5 being "moderately important," 7 being "very important," and 9 being "extremely important."

Figure 4. Ranked Importance of General Education Priorities-Faculty Survey



When asked the follow-up question, "What other knowledge, skills, or experiences not listed above do you believe are crucial to include in a general education curriculum?" respondents mentioned a wide range of possibilities. Figure 3 represents the four most frequently mentioned. "None" indicates that the respondent either wrote "none" or said the list presented in the question before was comprehensive. Note that a fair number of faculty implied in this follow-up answer that even though critical thinking skills were presented to them as an outcome to rank, it was important to specifically add information literacy and critical reading in answer to this follow-up question.

Figure 5. Additional Priorities for General Education-Faculty Survey
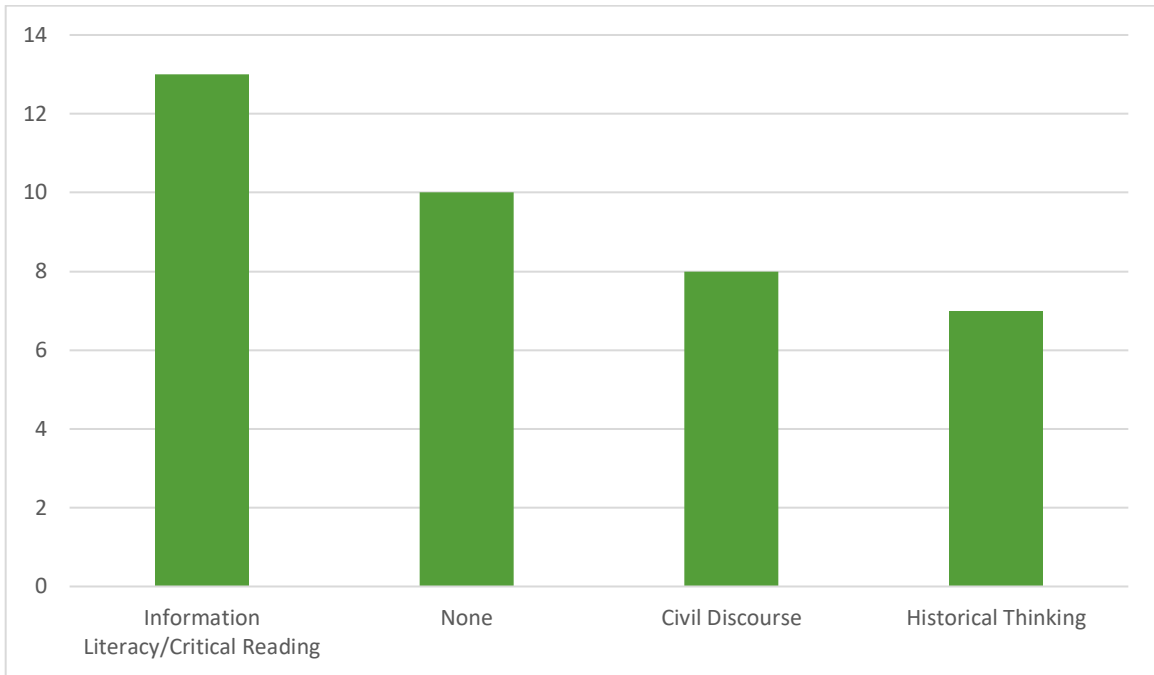


On average 552 students responded to the rating question about general education outcomes on the student survey. The following percentages of students described these outcomes as either very important or extremely important (4 or 5 on a 5 point scale):

Table 2. Possible Core Outcomes Importance Ratings—Student Survey

| Possible Core outcomes | Percentage of students ranking the outcome as very or extremely important |
|---|---|
| Critical thinking skills | 80.3% |
| Well-being (including self-care, advocacy, and financial literacy) | 74.2% |
| Cultural competence (the ability to understand and work productively with people from diverse cultures) | 72.7% |
| Written communication skills | 70.5% |
| Oral communication skills | 69.4% |
| Civic knowledge and engagement | 59.7% |

For a complete reporting of the results from the importance ratings on the student survey, see Appendix C.

II. Current Strengths of the Mason Core-Faculty and Student Perspectives

On both the faculty and student survey, respondents were asked to reflect on current strengths (faculty) or positive experiences (students) with the Core. These questions allow insight into what faculty and students believe is working well with the current curriculum.

In the faculty survey, respondents were first asked the open-narrative question, "What do you believe are the strengths of the current Mason Core curriculum?" Breadth was, by far, the most popular answer.

Figure 6. Strengths of the Mason Core Curriculum
Faculty Survey
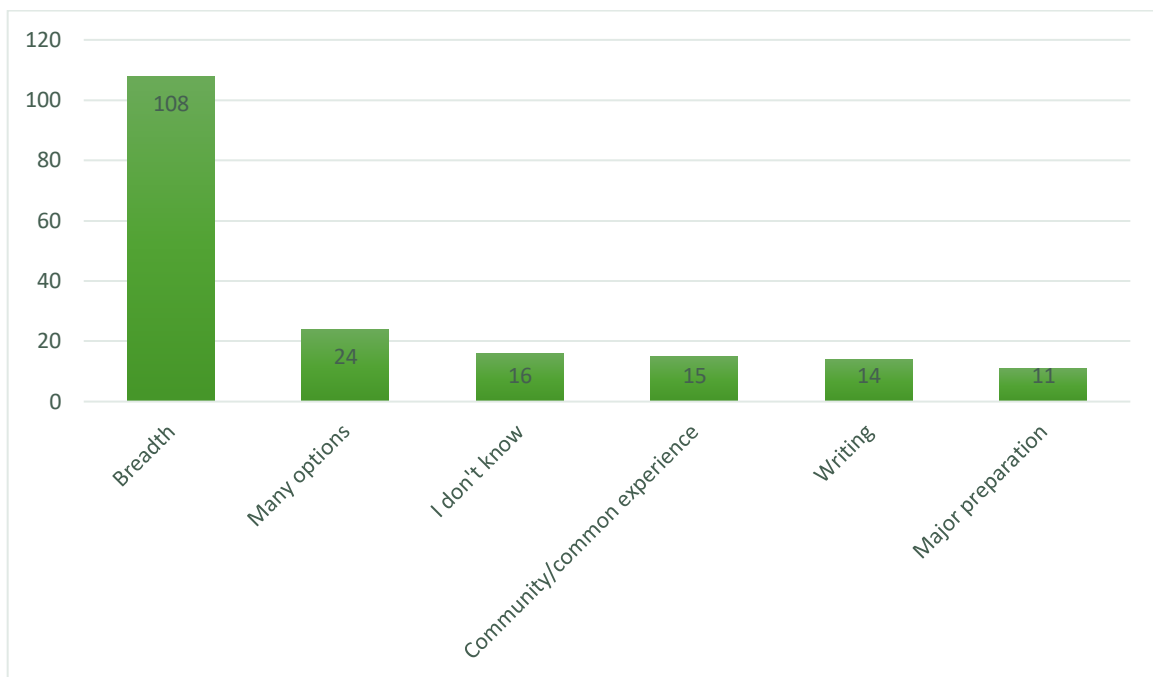


The student survey asked respondents to share their best Mason Core experience. Sixty two percent of responses mentioned a positive experience linked to a specific class or classes. Twenty two percent of respondents felt none of their Core experiences were positive and/or do not value the general education attained at Mason. Excellent teaching was the primary characteristic 21% of responses. Here are the top five most frequently invoked answers to the question

<center>Table 3. Best Experience in Mason Core-Student Survey</center>

| Answers to "What has been the best experience you have had in a Mason Core class?" | Number of answers out of 349 responses (% overall) |
| --- | --- |
| A specific class or classes | 218 (62%) |
| None of my experiences were good | 77 (22%) |
| High quality of teaching | 74 (21%) |
| Discussions with peers and diversity of class make up (in terms of culture, major, etc.) | 31 (9%) |
| Building community, meeting friends | 18 (5%) |
| Achievement of well-roundedness | 16 (5%) |

Answers to this "best experience" question in which students named specific courses/requirements provide suggestive views onto which Core requirements were valuable to respondents based on their experiences.

<center>Table 4. Breakdown of Requirements Mentioned as "Best Experiences"-Student Survey</center>

| Requirement | Number of answers out of 218 requirement-specific answers (%) |
| --- | --- |
| Arts | 46 (21%) |
| Literature | 27 (12%) |
| COMM 100/101 | 26 (12%) |
| Global Understanding | 23 (11%) |
| ENGH 302 | 20 (9%) |
| History | 20 (9%) |
| ENGH 100/101 | 18 (8%) |
| Social sciences | 14 (6%) |
| ENGH courses undifferentiated among LIT, ENGH 101, and 302 | 12 (6%) |
| Science | 11 (5%) |

Other Core requirements that were noted by some student respondents but received fewer than 10 mentions each include, in descending order, Religion/Philosophy, Quantitative Reasoning, Information Technology, capstone/synthesis, "writing" as an undifferentiated category, and PROV 300 courses.[1]

[1] Of the 4 mentions of the IT course as a best experience, 3 of the 4 students took/referenced HIST 390.

III. Improvements to the Core-Faculty and Student Perspectives

On both the faculty and student surveys, respondents were asked to reflect on what they perceived to be areas in need of improvement (faculty) or areas in need of change (students) within the Core. The answers to these questions allow preliminary insight into what faculty and students believe should be improved regarding the current curriculum.

Respondents on the faculty survey, when asked, "What are some improvements you would like to see made to the Mason Core curriculum," offered three primary answers out of the 188 relevant responses. Coherence, in figure 6, includes 1. A clearer, coherent vision for what the Core is meant to accomplish, 2. Professional development for faculty to learn about that vision, 3. Standardization of Core classes so that they more closely resemble one another in certain ways and 4. More effective sequencing of courses so that students take them in a way that supports coherence. "Enhance Writing" includes making writing instruction more rigorous, having ENGH 302 more coordinated with major programs, integrating more writing across non-writing-designated Core classes, etc.

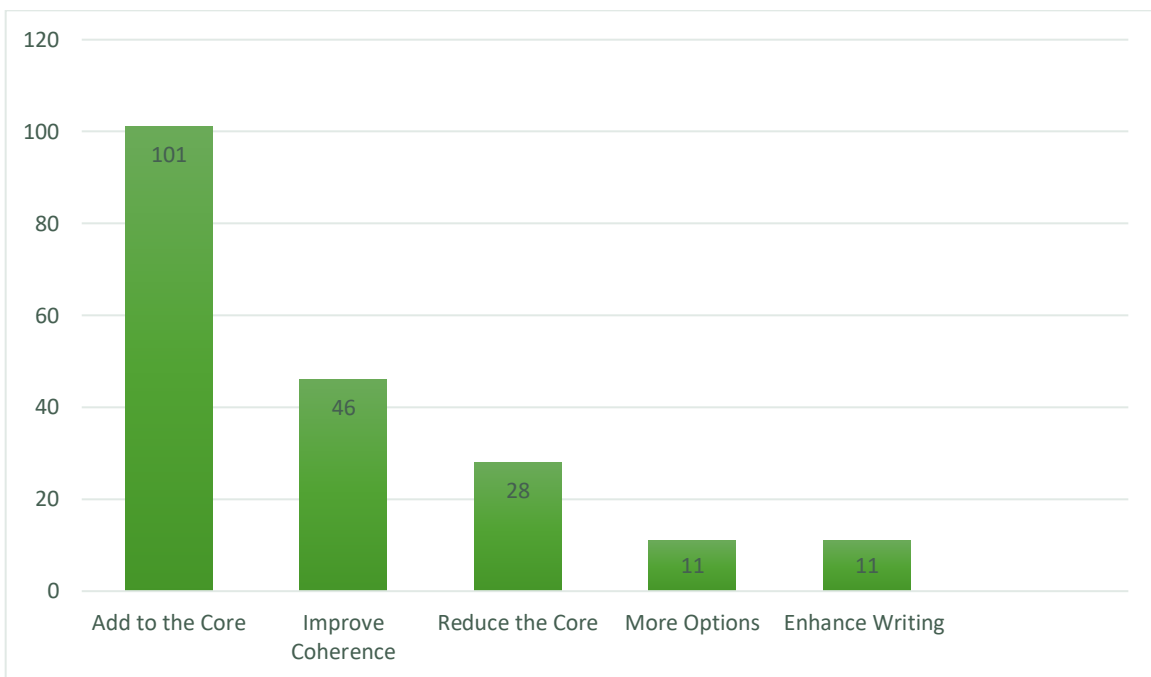Figure 7. Improvements to the Core-Faculty Survey



Table 5 expresses in detail what respondents to the faculty survey wanted added to the Core.

## Table 5. Breakdown of "Add to the Core" Responses—Faculty Survey

| Specific addition mentioned | Number of mentions out of 101 |
| --- | --- |
| Critical thinking, including information literacy | 17 |
| Diversity and inclusion, including social justice | 12 |
| Civics and civic engagement | 10 |
| More interdisciplinarity | 10 |
| More computing and technology | 8 |
| More writing | 8 |
| More humanities | 7 |
| Ethics | 6 |
| More quantitative reasoning | 6 |
| Foreign language | 5 |
| Well-being | 5 |
| More communications | 3 |
| More science | 2 |
| More social science | 1 |
| More history | 1 |

## Table 6. Breakdown of "Reduce the Core" Responses—Faculty Survey

| Specific reduction mentioned | Number of mentions out of 28 (%) |
| --- | --- |
| Fewer requirements overall | 16 (57%) |
| Eliminate Western Civilization | 6 (21%) |
| Consolidate Core categories | 2 (7%) |
| Fewer humanities courses | 1 (3.5%) |
| Fewer social sciences courses | 1 (3.5%) |
| Fewer science courses | 1 (3.5%) |
| Fewer foreign language courses | 1 (3.5%) |

On the student survey, the open-ended narrative question, "What additions or changes would you like to see made to the Mason Core? Why?" yielded a fairly consistent set of answers.

## Table 7. Ideas for Changes to the Core-Student Survey

| Ideas for changes to the Core | Number of student respondents out of 380 (% overall) |
|---|---|
| Fewer requirements | 127 (33%) |
| Relate Core courses more clearly to major coursework | 67 (18%) |
| Remove the Core altogether | 50 (13%) |
| Offer more options in the Core | 44 (12%) |
| No changes needed | 28 (7%) |
| Make classes easier | 18 (5%) |
| Make the Core easier for transfer students (count more of their prior coursework) | 16 (4%) |
| Add requirements (e.g., more writing courses, a service learning course, conflict resolution, statistics, etc.) | 16 (4%) |
| Make it so it is not redundant with high school and other Core courses | 15 (4%) |
| Improve teaching in Core classes | 15 (4%) |
| Redesign courses to be more relevant, interesting, based in critical thinking | 13 (3%) |
| Add a personal finance course[2] | 13 (3%) |

IV. Possible Obstacles to Curricular Change-Faculty and Staff Perspectives

In the focus groups, faculty and staff were asked what issues or obstacles to changing the Mason Core they felt it was important to be mindful of as we move forward. The most frequently discussed issues across the focus groups included

- accreditation requirements, especially those of individual professional programs
- the budget model (pressure for enrollments)
- change fatigue among faculty members
- contingent faculty labor issues
- faculty preference for upper-division teaching
- lack of resources to support change
- lack of a central narrative articulating the value of the Mason Core
- the needs of transfer students
- student preparedness for college-level work
- time to undergraduate degree completion

These ten most frequently expressed and discussed issues were included in the faculty survey and respondents were asked to rate each's importance. On average, 207 respondents completed

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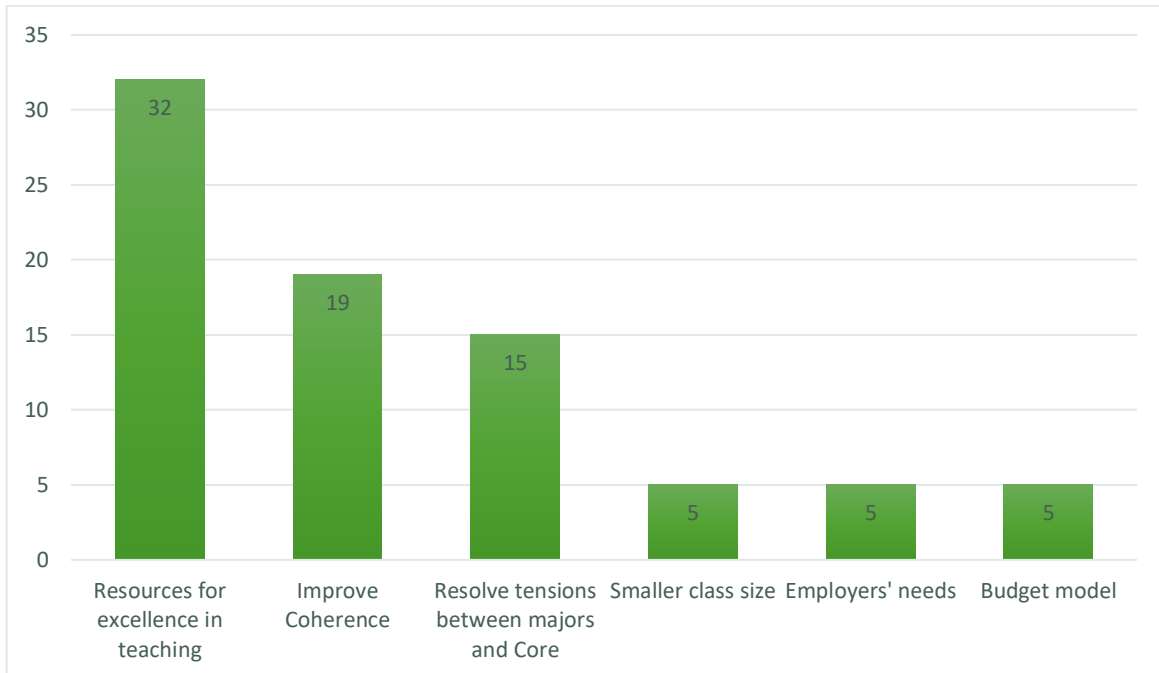[2] One student wrote this in the answer to question 1.

these importance ratings. In Table 8 we see the mean importance rating for each issue that was rated 5 (moderately important) and up to 6.96, the highest mean rating of any item on this question (close to 7, very important):

Table 8. Mean Importance Rating of Possible Obstacles to Curricular Revision Faculty Survey

| Possible obstacle to curricular revision | Mean importance rating (5 is moderately important; 7 is very important) |
|---|---|
| Student preparedness for college-level work | 6.96 |
| Lack of resources to support change | 6.93 |
| Contingent faculty labor | 6.91 |
| The needs of transfer students | 6.67 |
| The current budget model | 6.49 |
| The lack of a central narrative articulating the value of the Mason Core | 6.48 |
| Time to undergraduate degree completion | 6.14 |
| Change fatigue among faculty and professional staff | 5.98 |
| Accreditation requirements, especially those of individual professional programs | 5.84 |

Figure 8 expresses the results of the follow-up question "What other issues, if any, do you think must be considered in conversations about possible to the Mason Core curriculum?"

Figure 8. Other Issues to Consider in Curricular Revision-Faculty Survey

| Issue | Value |
|---|---|
| Resources for excellence in teaching | 32 |
| Improve Coherence | 19 |
| Resolve tensions between majors and Core | 15 |
| Smaller class size | 5 |
| Employers' needs | 5 |
| Budget model | 5 |

It is important to be mindful of perceived obstacles to efforts to evaluate and possibly revise the Mason Core so that we can engage the process in a clear-eyed and effective way. The issues mentioned in this section should be kept front and center in any recommendations the Mason Core Committee makes for future action. Doing so will strengthen our process and help us to develop a curriculum that best serves our community's values and our students' learning.

# Section 4. Discussion

I. Alignment with the Association of American Colleges & Universities Essential Learning Outcomes

According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) of a general education are as follows (see Appendix D for more details):[3]

1. Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world achieved through study in the sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and arts
2. Intellectual and practical skills, including
   a. Inquiry and analysis
   b. Critical and creative thinking
   c. Written and oral communication
   d. Quantitative literacy
   e. Information literacy
   f. Teamwork and problem solving
3. Personal and Social Responsibility, including
   a. Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
   b. Intercultural knowledge and competence
   c. Ethical reasoning and action
   d. Foundations and skills for lifelong learning
4. Integrative and Applied Learning, including
   a. Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

The results from the focus groups as well as the faculty survey demonstrate that Mason faculty and staff value many of these ELOs. A look at our current Mason Core (with its emphasis on foundations, exploration, and integrative learning) suggests that many of the ELOs are already included in the Mason Core.

1. *Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world achieved through study in the sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and arts.*
This learning outcome describes familiarity with a range of disciplines. Within the structure of the current Mason Core curriculum, the category "exploration" reflects an existing commitment to this outcome. On the faculty survey, "breadth" was by far the most frequently mentioned strength of the current Mason Core. In the focus groups, "well-roundedness," which also indicates familiarity with a range of fields, was 7th most often mentioned as a priority outcome for general education. In the faculty survey, the mean rating of importance for well-roundedness was just over 7 for importance ("very important"), making it the outcome with the 6th highest importance rating mean.

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[3] In the AAC&U publication, these ELOs are not numbered but bulleted. I have numbered them here only because it allows for greater ease in the discussion of them. These numbers are not meant to reflect any hierarchy.

## 2. *Intellectual and practical skills*

Mason's Core curriculum has written and oral communication skills well-integrated into the foundation category and written skills well-integrated into the integration category. Creative thinking may be part of the arts requirement learning outcomes, depending on the outcomes chosen for the course, and quantitative literacy matches up with the quantitative reasoning requirement. Capstone courses are required to involve critical thinking.

Less clear is where critical thinking comes into the Core early on. Similarly uncertain are where inquiry and analysis, information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving are accessed by students.[4] And yet these intellectual skills figured prominently in the focus groups and survey data:

- Critical thinking was most often mentioned in focus groups and rated of highest importance in the faculty and student surveys
- Information literacy was most often mentioned by respondents on the faculty survey in answer to the question "What other knowledge, skills, or experiences not listed above do you believe are crucial to include in a general education curriculum?" (i.e., outcomes beyond the 14 most frequently mentioned outcomes discussed in the results section above)
- Inquiry and analysis are key to many Core courses, including ones in the "exploration" category, but that fact is not necessarily visible to those viewing the Core from without who may not be well-versed in what learning takes place in discipline-specific courses.

## 3. *Personal and social responsibility*

The one category of ELOs outlined by the AAC&U that is arguably not present in the current Mason Core is "personal and social responsibility." And yet faculty, staff, and students named a number of those outcomes as important to a successful general education program. Here is a summary of what participants said about the four outcomes AAC&U has listed under "personal and social responsibility":

<u>Civic knowledge</u> and engagement was mentioned consistently in the focus groups and nearly 60% of student respondents on the student survey ranked it as very important or extremely important to a general education curriculum.

<u>Cultural competence</u>, the ability to interact respectfully and productively with people from cultures other than one's own, was mentioned third most often as a priority for general education in the focus groups. In the faculty survey, cultural competence had a mean importance rating of 7.64 (very important), the third highest mean for importance of the 14 learning outcomes for general education. In the student survey results cultural competence received the third highest percentage of "very important" or "extremely important" ratings as well.

Currently, Mason does not have a completely clear requirement for cultural competence. It is possible that a course in the global understanding requirement could meet this outcome, but as it stands, the global understanding requirement is split across a demand for cultural competence,

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[4] According to focus group participants, a fair number of capstone courses also integrate problem-solving and teamwork.

which is a discrete skill, and knowledge of global society and globalization. It is worth looking at the learning outcomes for global understanding in this context: A minimum of three of the following four learning outcomes must be met:

1. Identify and articulate one's own values and how those values influence their interactions and relationships with others, both locally and globally.

2. Demonstrate understanding of how the patterns and processes of globalization make visible the interconnections and differences among and within contemporary global societies.

3. Demonstrate the development of intercultural competencies.

4. Explore individual and collective responsibilities within a global society through analytical, practical, or creative responses to problems or issues, using resources appropriate to the field.

Note that two of those outcome (2 and 4) are about globalization, global society, and global systems whereas two (1 and 3) are focused on developing cultural competence. The Mason Core Committee may want to consider the possibility of working cultural competence, a key priority of our community in terms of learning outcomes for general education, more clearly into the Core and clarifying the overarching mission of the global understanding requirement.

Ethical reasoning and action was mentioned by the 173 focus group participants a total of only 20 times. As the Mason Core Committee noticed in its examination of recent revisions to general education curricula at public institutions of higher education across the state of Virginia, ethics is often named as important, but is not always integrated in a specific course. Virginia Tech's new general education curriculum, "Pathways Curriculum" offers a useful example. All the required general education courses must integrate either 3 "Ethical Reasoning" outcomes or 3 "Intercultural and Global Awareness" outcomes.

Foundations and skills for lifelong learning could be aligned with what is referred to in this report as well-being. One thing that stood out in the focus groups was how often participants mentioned that Mason students appear to need training and support in learning how to be confident, self-advocating actors in the world who are also enthusiastic lifelong learners. The sense that our students need more support in navigating financial demands, professional environments, and self-care practices, was compiled under this phrase "well-being," and although it was not rated as being of high importance by respondents on the faculty survey, the attention it received in both the focus groups (which included advisors and professional staff, members of the Mason community who may have special access to how Mason students navigate issues of personal responsibility) and the attention it received in the student survey is worth the Committee's further, and serious, consideration.

4. *Integrative and applied learning*

Integrative learning is part of the Mason Core as indicated by one category of Mason Core courses being labeled "integration courses." Capstone courses, synthesis courses, advanced composition, and writing intensive work in the major are all to be integrative experiences. It is less clear how much of that learning is applied. Mason's commitment to undergraduate research in the form of RS courses as well as in the form of Mason Impact courses more generally may be one avenue by which applied learning is happening in the Mason Core curriculum.

In conclusion, while our current Mason Core curriculum aligns partially with the AAC&U essential learning outcomes, those outcomes could be more fully integrated into the curricular structure. This brings us to another significant take away from Mason Core Conversations: the need for the value of a general education to be more clearly articulated at Mason and for that value to be specifically expressed through curricular coherence. On the student survey, most responses to the question "What has been your best Mason Core experience?" either involved naming a valuable class/classes or excellent professor/s or asserting that no experience had been positive. What came across was a sense that students either appreciated that their general education had some value or they did not; there was not much gray space in between.

Focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the value of a general education and the need for a coherent narrative for the Core when discussing possible obstacles to curricular revision; participants felt that Mason students and many Mason faculty members do not have a clear sense of the value of general education. On the faculty survey, the mean importance rating for "value of a general education/synthesize learning" as an outcome of general education was just over 7 "very important." In the faculty survey, when respondents were asked what improvements they would like to see made to the Mason Core, 46 out of 188 responses were some version of "improve its coherence." And although "lack of a central narrative articulating the value of the Mason Core" was already an item on the list of obstacles to be rated on the faculty survey (its mean rating was 6.48), in the follow up question to that rating question, which asks if there are other issues that should be taken up in this process, 19 responses out of 102 were the need to articulate the value of education and the need to bring coherence to the Core. Faculty appear to be concerned about the Core's central narrative and whether it is a coherent one.

The issue of coherence touches on another issue—resources to support change and excellence in teaching. Many faculty survey respondents expressed a need for financial resources to be invested in the Core so that all faculty, not primarily contingent faculty, could deliver Core courses. Across Mason Core Conversations, a number of participants called for things such as a shared vocabulary for Core instructors across all courses to use and better training for new and existing faculty in what the Core is and what its value is to our students. In both the faculty survey and in focus groups a number of faculty expressed that they do not know what the Core is and would like to learn more. These faculty members, based on their self-identification in their answers, range from adjunct faculty to tenured faculty.

II. Innovative ideas from the focus groups

One benefit of the focus group format was that it allowed for a small group of colleagues from across schools and colleges to not only articulate what they believed to be important learning outcomes for general education but also begin brainstorming what curricular innovations might help Mason better serve its students in the Core. Here is a list of some of the concrete ideas that emerged from those brainstorming sessions:

- In order to cultivate a sense of curiosity in students and to make evident through concrete experience how a 4-year university experience is different from that encountered in high school or community college, offer first-year freshmen seminars taught by tenured research faculty who are known to be engaging, effective teachers. Each seminar should have a very low course cap and take up a particular type of issue (see italicized items below).

- Offer a transformative gateway experience for freshmen in the first year that is taught by 4 dynamic instructors from 4 different schools and colleges on a single subject or question. One goal would be to introduce students to how a range of different disciplines view and create knowledge. After the introductory, 1-week unit, each faculty member would teach a 3-week unit. Four sections of each 4-instructor course would be taught each term; the units would be interchangeable in terms of sequencing so that each faculty member would get the same FTE as for a regular course.

  *Examples of ways the above two suggestions could be organized include big questions (e.g., "How Did Life Begin?" and "What is a Good Life?"), dates (e.g., 1492, 1968), wicked problems (e.g., income disparity, environmental degradation), etc.*

- Transform UNIV 100 and UNIV 300 into 3-credit Core courses in well-being that address not only current UNIV goals but also financial planning, self-advocacy, etc.

- Build civic engagement across a selection of Mason Core courses, beginning with 101.

- Link ENGH 302 to a specific course in a given major, preferably an early major course so that students take the courses at the same time and the work of learning rhetorical strategies in the given discipline is coordinated with that introduction to the major field.

- Have a multidisciplinary, experiential course that focuses on solving a real-world problem required at the end of the general education experience (beginning of junior year for freshmen admits and a first experience for transfer students).

# Appendix A – Current Mason Core Requirements and Board of Visitors Exceptions by College

**The Mason Core**

The Mason Graduate is an Engaged Citizen and Well-Rounded Scholar who is Prepared to Act. The Mason Core is Mason's general education program that builds the foundation for The Mason Graduate. The Mason Core is a set of required courses that create the foundation of your undergraduate degree. All undergraduates seeking a baccalaureate degree must complete Mason Core requirements. The Mason Core provides a breadth of liberal education courses, complementing the depth of knowledge and skills you build in their majors and minors. The Mason Core helps you become a Mason Graduate: an engaged, well-rounded scholar who is prepared to act.

The Mason Core is divided into three sections: Foundation, Exploration, and Integration (formerly named Foundation, Core and Synthesis/Capstone).

Foundation courses strengthen your foundation in key knowledge and skills needed for academic success. Exploration courses provide a breadth of learning across the university. Integration courses include upper-division courses that are designed to integrate knowledge and skills learned from Foundation and Exploration courses into learning in the major. Courses in each category are guided by specific student learning outcomes that are assessed on a regular basis through the student academic experience.

For certain degrees or majors, specific courses are used to fulfill the Mason Core. Please see the Catalog and your academic advisor to understand the specific requirements for your academic program. See the table below for a list of course categories. Click on the category name to see approved courses for that category.

| MASON CORE SECTION | COURSE CATEGORIES |
| --- | --- |
| Foundation Courses | Written Communication--Lower Division (ENGH 101, 3 credits)<br>Oral Communication (3 credits)<br>Quantitative Reasoning (3 credits)<br>Information Technology and Computing (3 credits) |
| Exploration Courses | Arts (3 credits)<br>Global Understanding (3 credits)<br>Literature (3 credits)<br>Natural Science (7 credits)<br>Social and Behavioral Science (3 credits)<br>Western Civilization or World History (3 credits) |
| Integration Courses | Written Communication--Upper Division (ENGH 302, 3 credits)<br>Writing-Intensive (3 credits*)<br>Capstone or Synthesis (3 credits) |
| | Total: 40 credits |

**These are the Gen Ed Exemptions, by program, Approved by the Board of Visitors, November 2000:**

| Program | Exemption |
|---|---|
| I T & E, all 5 BS Degrees | Exempted from 1 class, Arts category (3cr) |
| Nursing, BS | Exempted from 1 class, Arts category (3cr) |
| Biol. Med Technology BS | Exempted from 1 class, Arts category (3cr) |
| Music, BM, 2 tracks | Exempted from 1 class, Natural Science Lab (4cr) |

**The following are special course approvals, not exemptions, authorized by the General Education Committee in Fall 2000:**

| Program | Special Courses Approved |
|---|---|
| Dance BFA: | Meets Oral Communication requirement by taking DANC 454 |

Music BM (Concentration in Performance): Meets Oral Communication requirement by taking: MUSI 251; and MUSI 351 or MUSI 352 or MUSI 353

Music BM (Concentration in Music Education): Meets Oral Communication requirement by taking MUSI 251 and MUSI 461 and MUSI 463 (Vocal/Choral Emphasis , Teaching Methods in Public Schools); OR by taking MUSI 251 and MUSI 464 and MUSI 466 (Instrumental Emphasis)

Health Fitness and Recreation (HFRR) BS Concentrations:
  Athletic Training Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking PHED 441 (3 cr)
        Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.
  Exercise Science Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking HEAL 490 (12 cr)
        Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.
  Health Promotion Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking HEAL 490 (12 cr)
        Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.
  Parks and Outdoor Recreation Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking PRLS 490 (12 cr);
        May take BIOL 213 and either BIOL 303 or 304 to meet Gen Ed Natural Sci. if
        doing the Environmental Management Certificate (instead of BIOL 103 and BIOL
        104); students doing the Gerontology Certificate may take BIOL 124 and 125 to
        meet Gen Ed. Natural Science.
  Therapeutic Recreation Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking PRLS 490 (12 cr)
        Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.
  Sport Management Concentration:
        Meets  Synthesis requirement by taking SPMT 490 (12 cr)
        May take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen Ed. Natural Science

Physical Education (PHED) B.S.Ed.:
 Must meet Synthesis requirement by taking PHED 415 (9).
 Must take BIOL 124 and 125 to meet Gen Ed. Natural Science.

Nursing (NURS) BS:
 Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.

Health Science (HSCI) BS:
 Must take BIOL 124 and BIOL 125 to meet Gen. Ed. Natural Sci.

No other degree programs are currently authorized to use BIOL 124 and 125 to meet University general education requirements, nor are other degree programs currently authorized to use the other special courses (see: synthesis courses above) unless approved by the Gen. Ed. Committee in the future as courses for all GMU students or for other specific programs.

# Appendix B – From SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation

**9.3** **The institution requires the successful completion of a general education component at the undergraduate level that:**

(a) **is based on a coherent rationale.**

(b) **is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree program. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent.**

(c) **ensures breadth of knowledge. These credit hours include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics. These courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession.** *(General education requirements)* [**CR**]

## Rationale and Notes

General education is an integral component of an undergraduate degree program through which students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge. This Core Requirement establishes four key principles regarding the general education component of undergraduate degree programs:

- The General education component is based on a coherent rationale.

- General education courses are college level.

- In order to promote intellectual inquiry, general education courses present a breadth of knowledge, not focusing on skills, techniques, and procedures specific to the student's occupation or profession, and are drawn from specific academic areas.

- The general education component constitutes a minimum number of semester hours, or its equivalent, and comprises a substantial component of each undergraduate degree.

It is essential to understand the general education component of the degree program within the context of the institution's mission and within the expectations of a college-level institution. Through general education, students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge: humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. Courses in each of these areas introduce a breadth of knowledge and reinforce cognitive skills and effective learning opportunities for each student. Such courses may also include interdisciplinary studies. It is important, however, that courses selected by students as "general education" do not focus on skills, techniques, and procedures specific to that student's occupation or profession.

The SACSCOC Executive Council adopted the following interpretation in February 2010:

Courses in basic composition that do not contain a literature component, courses in oral communication, and introductory foreign language courses are skill courses and not pure humanities courses. Therefore, for purposes of meeting this standard, none of the above may be the one course designated to fulfill the humanities/fine arts requirement in [this standard].

Note that this interpretation does not preclude the mentioned courses from being part of general education requirements beyond the required courses in the three specifically mentioned areas; while they are "skill courses," these are not skills specific to a particular occupation or profession. Courses that would not be acceptable as meeting this standard are courses such as "dosage calculations" (specific to occupations) or most upper-level courses with multiple prerequisites (lack breadth of knowledge).

The rationale undergirding the courses that meet general education requirements is often published in institutional documents such as the catalog. It is important that institutions have criteria for evaluating courses for inclusion in the core curriculum, both to maintain adherence to the underlying rationale and to ensure the expected breadth of knowledge.

*NOTES*

*In its publications, an institution is obligated to clearly designate the specific general education courses included in the three areas of knowledge: humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. Publications should clearly indicate or direct students in their options for selecting general education courses and, in particular, those considered pure humanities/fine arts that are in accord with the interpretation above. Finally, the institution should indicate how it ensures that all students follow the pathway for selecting general education courses as described in its publications.*

*In its assessment of institutions, the SACSCOC review committee will specifically evaluate whether each of the three subparts in the standard have been addressed. This review should specifically determine (with narrative supporting) its findings under part (c), whether credit hours that constitute the general education program at an institution are (1) drawn from and include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/ behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics; (2) are consistent with the Executive Council's interpretation cited above; and (3) include courses that do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a student's particular occupation or profession.*

## Questions to Consider

- Does the institution have a formal guideline or policy that establishes a rationale for its general education requirements?

- How does the institution ensure that the student's breadth of knowledge acquired through the general education component of the degree program is sufficient and appropriate to its mission?

- What measures does the institution use to ensure that general education represents a substantial component of the undergraduate degree program?

- What process is used to ensure that courses students may take to fulfill general requirements support the goals of the general education component of the degree program?

- What criteria does the institution use to ensure that the desired general education outcomes meet college-level standards?

- Even if there is some variation in general education requirements across some majors, do all undergraduate degree programs include at least one course from the three required areas of study, as well as the requisite total hours?

- Does the institution designate in its publications those general education courses that are considered pure humanities/fine arts in accord with the interpretation above? How has the institution validated that the courses that the institution designates are in accord with the standard?

- Are printed materials describing general education requirements clear as to how a student can meet the requirements?

- How does the institution ensure that all students follow the pathway for selecting general education courses as described in its publications?

- How does the general education program apply to transfer students, distance and correspondence education programs, or competency-based programs?

## Sample Documentation

- Description of and rationale for general education, including expected student learning outcomes.

- Publications that consistently describe the general education requirements.

- Explanation of the process used to review or change how students meet general education requirements.

- If requirements vary by major or degree, documentation that the standard is met for all degree-seeking students.

- Specific information as to how general education requirements are met for transfer students as well as students in competency-based, direct assessment programs.

- An explanation (and examples) of how completion of general education requirements is tracked and verified.

# Appendix C – Detailed Reports of Student Ratings of General Education Priorities

## Critical thinking skills
553 responses
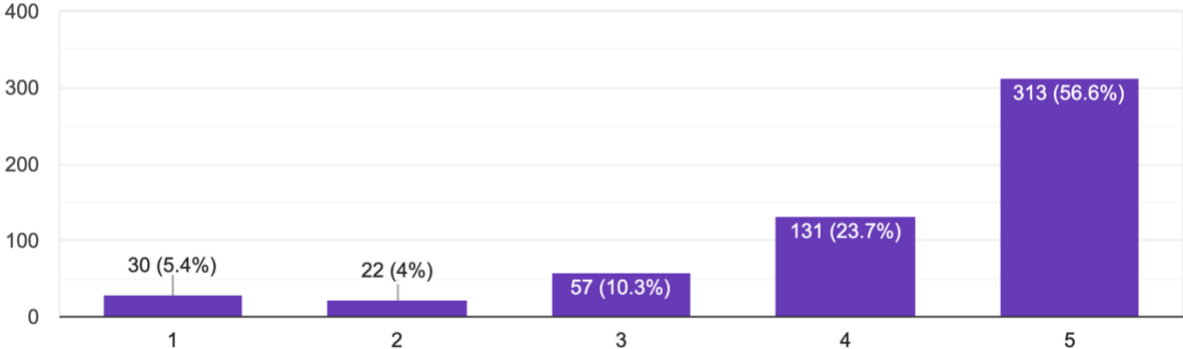


## Well-being (including self-care, advocacy, and financial literacy)
552 responses
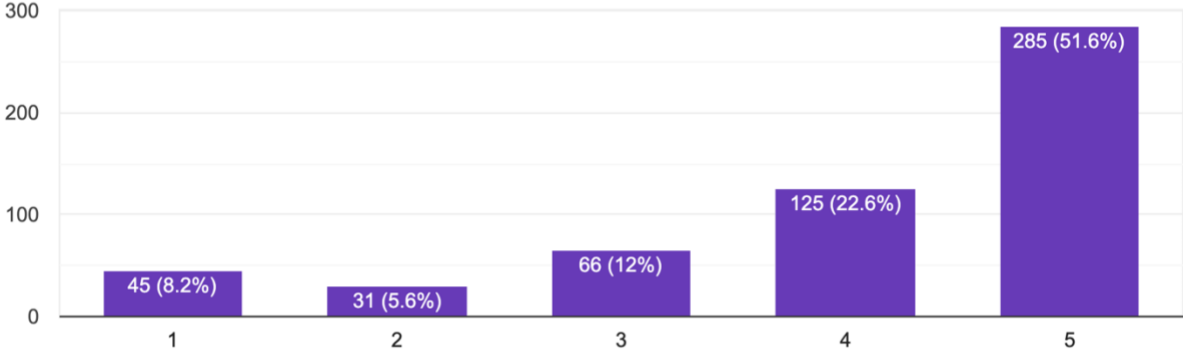
## Cultural competence (the ability to understand and work productively with people from diverse cultures)

554 responses
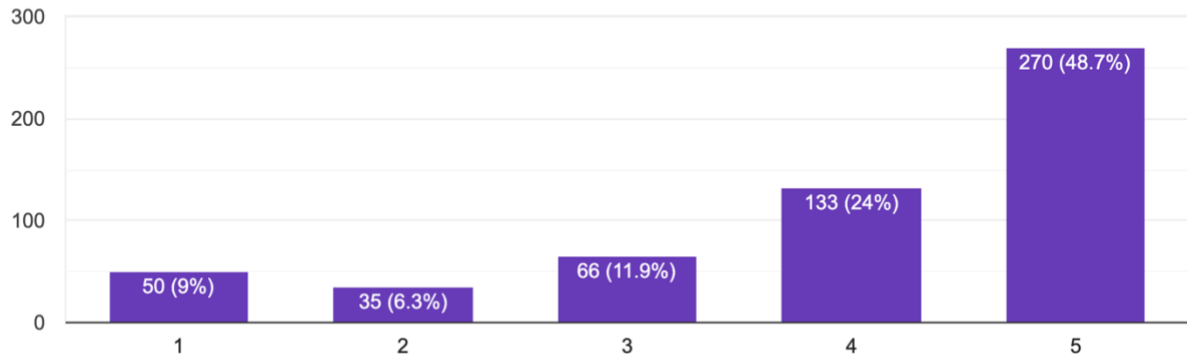


## Written communication skills

553 responses
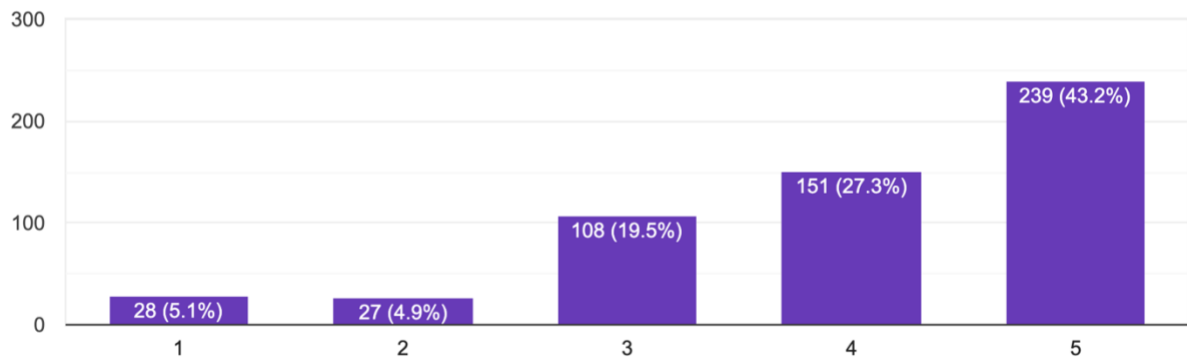
## Oral communication skills

552 responses



| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | 37 (6.7%) |
| 2 | 29 (5.3%) |
| 3 | 103 (18.7%) |
| 4 | 153 (27.7%) |
| 5 | 230 (41.7%) |
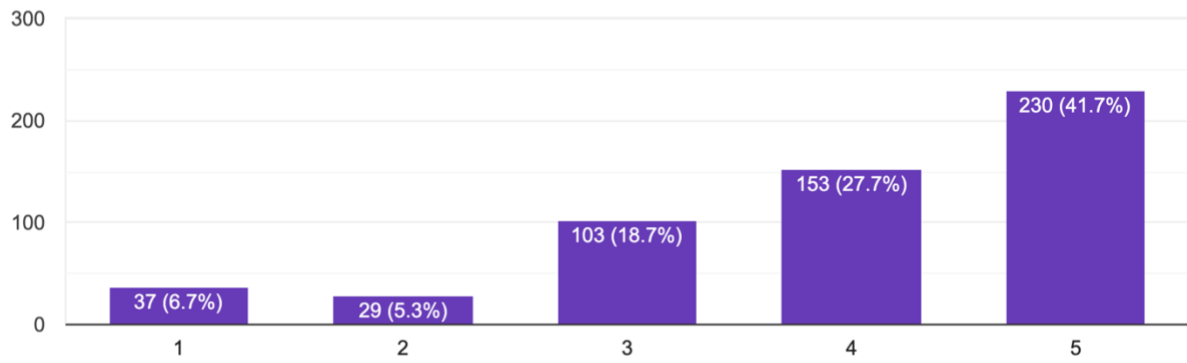
## Civic knowledge and engagement

551 responses



| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | 49 (8.9%) |
| 2 | 48 (8.7%) |
| 3 | 125 (22.7%) |
| 4 | 172 (31.2%) |
| 5 | 157 (28.5%) |
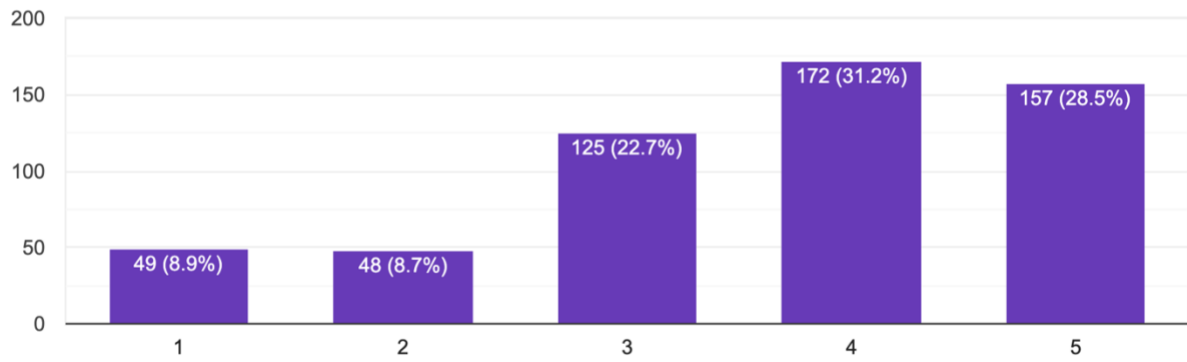
Appendix D – AAC&U "Introduction to LEAP: Liberal Education and America's Promise"

# LEAP

# An Introduction to LEAP

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Liberal Education & America's Promise

EXCELLENCE FOR EVERYONE AS A NATION GOES TO COLLEGE

Association of American Colleges and Universities

# An Introduction to LEAP

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## About LEAP

Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individual student success and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.

The LEAP vision for college-level learning described in this booklet provides the intellectual framework for high-quality college learning. Through LEAP, we seek to **Make Excellence Inclusive** by providing

- **Essential Learning Outcomes**—the learning outcomes essential for success in life, civil society, and work in the twenty-first century (see page 4).
- **High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)**—engaging and challenging students through first-year programs, intensive writing, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, learning communities, diversity experiences, and major projects that help students achieve Essential Learning Outcomes.
- **Authentic Assessments**—using students' own work and faculty-validated rubrics, probing whether individual students have developed essential capacities and can apply their learning to complex problems and real-world challenges.

LEAP leaders also work to engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college and to connect employers and educators as they build new partnerships and make the case for the importance of liberal education in the global economy and in our diverse democracy.

The LEAP vision guides all aspects of AAC&U's educational work with colleges, universities, community colleges, and state systems.

## Explore LEAP Resources and Publications

Through LEAP, AAC&U has developed a suite of online and print resources valuable for campus curricular change projects and for both external and internal communications and advocacy for liberal education.

To download or order print publications, see **www.aacu.org/leap/publications**. See other online resources, including *The LEAP Challenge Blog* at **www.aacu.org/leap**.

# *The LEAP Initiative Provides:*

⭐ **National, State, and Institutional Leadership**

The LEAP **National Leadership Council** includes educational, business, community, and policy leaders who exercise strong advocacy for liberal education nationally and in their own spheres of influence.

The **Presidents' Trust** includes leaders from all sectors of higher education who are committed to advocating for the vision, values, and practices that connect liberal education with the needs of the twenty-first century.

⭐ **Campus-Based Reform and Funded Campus and State System Initiatives**

The **Campus Action Network** (CAN) provides support for LEAP efforts at individual institutions. Through the CAN, institutions work to ensure that all their students achieve the Essential Learning Outcomes, to expand their use of high-impact educational practices, and to use authentic assessments to track student progress.

In the **LEAP States Initiative**, state system leaders, institutional administrators, and faculty from two-year and four-year campuses are collaborating within and across states to raise levels of inclusion and success for all students. They are working on issues of quality and student success through campus action and curricular and systemic reform.

⭐ **Research and Resources on Documenting Student Achievement**

**LEAP** provides reports and research on such topics as student achievement of key learning outcomes, making the case for liberal education, high-impact educational practices, and assessment of learning outcomes.

The **VALUE** (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) initiative is an approach to learning assessment that privileges authentic assessment of student work and shared understanding of student learning outcomes on campus. A set of sixteen VALUE rubrics—available for use at any institution—keyed to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes has been developed collaboratively by teams of faculty and academic professionals.

⭐ **Research on the Economic Value of Liberal Education Outcomes**

Through LEAP, AAC&U has commissioned several studies of the learning students need in a fast-changing economy. National surveys of employers show that, across many fields and sectors of the economy, employers seek college graduates who have achieved a broad set of liberal education outcomes.
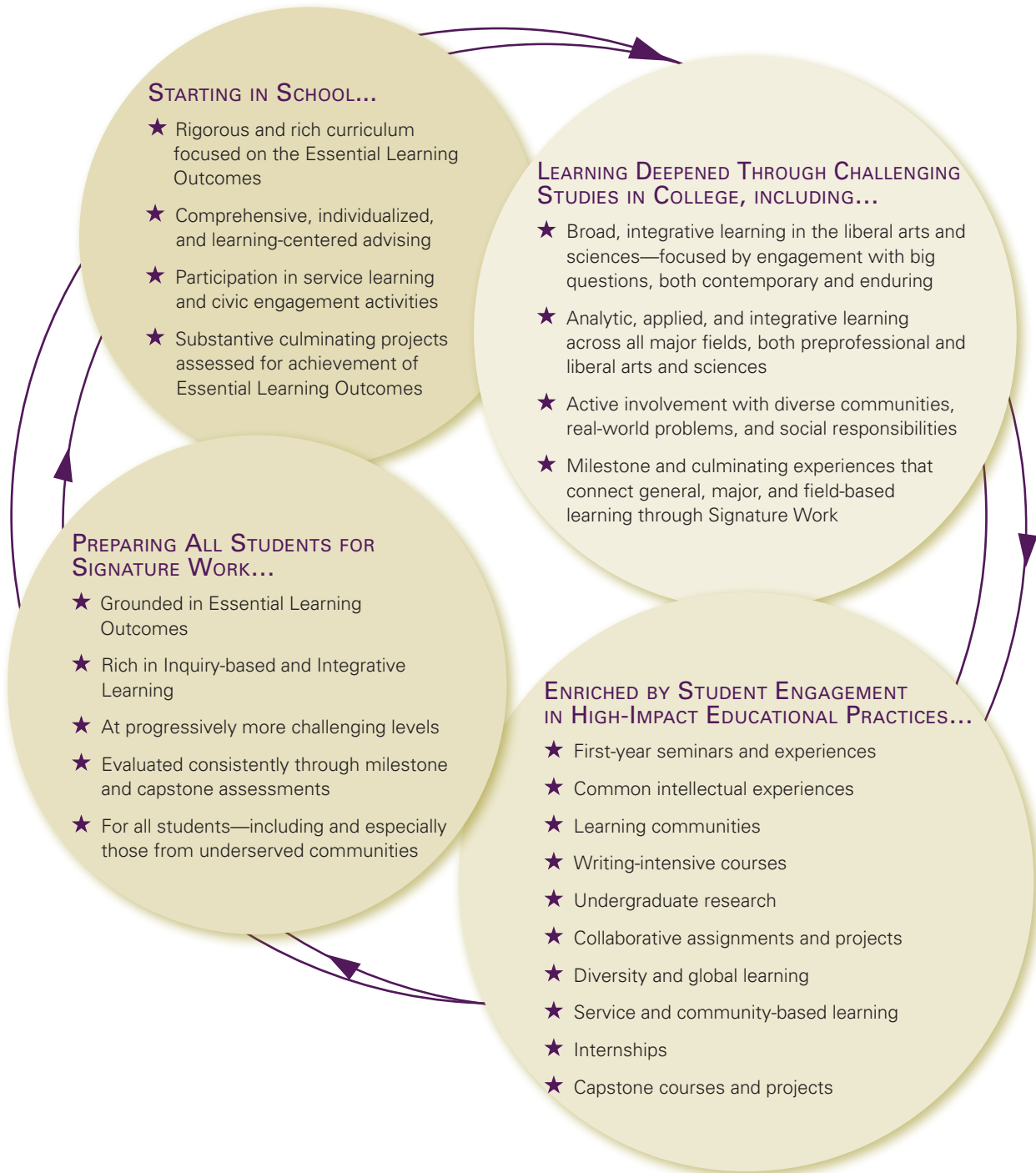
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**LEAP**

**In 2015, AAC&U launched the next decade of LEAP with the LEAP Challenge**

The LEAP Challenge invites colleges and universities to make Signature Work a goal for all students—and the expected standard of quality learning in college. See page 6 for more information about the LEAP Challenge.

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# LEAP Vision for Inclusive Excellence

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### Guided Learning Pathways, Essential Learning Outcomes, High Student Achievement

## STARTING IN SCHOOL...

★ Rigorous and rich curriculum focused on the Essential Learning Outcomes

★ Comprehensive, individualized, and learning-centered advising

★ Participation in service learning and civic engagement activities

★ Substantive culminating projects assessed for achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes

## LEARNING DEEPENED THROUGH CHALLENGING STUDIES IN COLLEGE, INCLUDING...

★ Broad, integrative learning in the liberal arts and sciences—focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

★ Analytic, applied, and integrative learning across all major fields, both preprofessional and liberal arts and sciences

★ Active involvement with diverse communities, real-world problems, and social responsibilities

★ Milestone and culminating experiences that connect general, major, and field-based learning through Signature Work

## PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR SIGNATURE WORK...

★ Grounded in Essential Learning Outcomes

★ Rich in Inquiry-based and Integrative Learning

★ At progressively more challenging levels

★ Evaluated consistently through milestone and capstone assessments

★ For all students—including and especially those from underserved communities

## ENRICHED BY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES...

★ First-year seminars and experiences

★ Common intellectual experiences

★ Learning communities

★ Writing-intensive courses

★ Undergraduate research

★ Collaborative assignments and projects

★ Diversity and global learning

★ Service and community-based learning

★ Internships

★ Capstone courses and projects

# *The Essential Learning Outcomes*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students can prepare for both responsible citizenship and a global economy by achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs).

## ✴ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

*Focused* by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

---

## ✴ Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

*Practiced extensively*, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

---

## ✴ Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

*Anchored* through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

---

## ✴ Integrative and Applied Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

*Demonstrated* through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

**Note:** This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007) and *The LEAP Vision for Learning* (2011). For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap.

**LEAP**

# *The Principles of Excellence*

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*The Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible guidance for an era of educational reform and renewal. These Principles can be used to guide change in any college, university, or community college. They are intended to influence practice across the disciplines as well as in general education programs.*

★ ## Principle One

### Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive

Make the Essential Learning Outcomes a Framework for the Entire Educational Experience, Connecting School, College, Work, and Life

★ ## Principle Two

### Give Students a Compass

Focus Each Student's Plan of Study on Achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes—and Assess Progress

★ ## Principle Three

### Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation

Immerse All Students in Analysis, Discovery, Problem Solving, and Communication, Beginning in School and Advancing in College

★ ## Principle Four

### Engage the Big Questions

Teach through the Curriculum to Far-Reaching Issues—Contemporary and Enduring—in Science and Society, Cultures and Values, Global Interdependence, the Changing Economy, and Human Dignity and Freedom

★ ## Principle Five

### Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action

Prepare Students for Citizenship and Work through Engaged and Guided Learning on "Real-World" Problems

★ ## Principle Six

### Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning

Emphasize Personal and Social Responsibility, in Every Field of Study

★ ## Principle Seven

### Assess Students' Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems

Use Assessment to Deepen Learning and Establish a Culture of Shared Purpose and Continuous Improvement

**LEAP**

# *The LEAP Challenge: Signature Work for All Students*

The LEAP Challenge invites colleges and universities to make Signature Work a goal for all students—and the expected standard of quality learning in college.

## What Is Signature Work?

In Signature Work, a student uses his or her cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem she or he defines. In the project conducted throughout at least one semester, the student takes the lead and produces work that expresses insights and learning gained from the inquiry and demonstrates the skills and integrative knowledge that characterize a twenty-first-century liberal education. Faculty and mentors provide support and guidance.
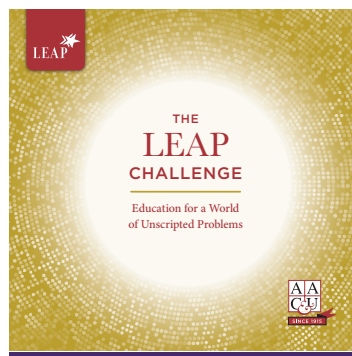
Signature Work might be pursued in a capstone course or in research conducted across thematically linked courses, or in another field-based activity or internship. It might include practicums, community service, or other experiential learning. It always should include substantial writing, multiple kinds of reflection on learning, and visible results. Many students may choose to use e-portfolios to display their Signature Work products and learning outcomes.

The entire college experience should prepare students to produce high-quality Signature Work.

## Why Is Signature Work So Important?

A twenty-first-century education prepares students to work with unscripted problems. Today's graduates will participate in an economy fueled by successful innovation—and engage with diverse communities that urgently need solutions to intractable problems. Our graduates will have to secure environmental sustainability, find ways to maintain human dignity and equity in an increasingly polarized nation, and manage a world rife with conflict. They will need to balance family and career in a climate that increasingly devalues personal privacy and presents obstacles to flourishing.
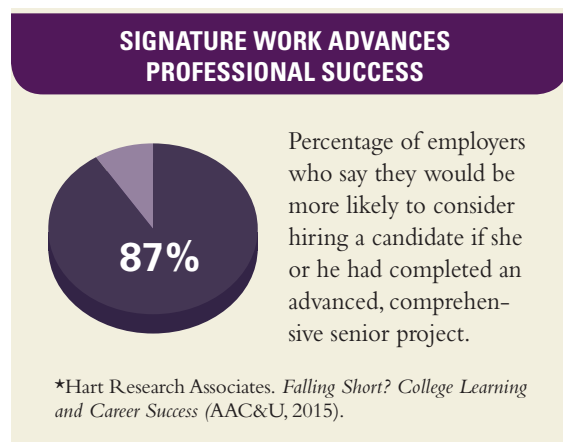
Negotiating this world demands an education that explores issues from multiple perspectives and across disciplines—and that helps students apply what they learn to complex problems and questions. Signature Work is a powerful way to help students integrate various elements of their education and apply their learning in meaningful ways.

### SIGNATURE WORK ADVANCES PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

**87%**

Percentage of employers who say they would be more likely to consider hiring a candidate if she or he had completed an advanced, comprehensive senior project.

*Hart Research Associates. *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (AAC&U, 2015).

# How to Get Involved

### Campus Action Network

The best way for individual campuses to get involved in LEAP is through the Campus Action Network (CAN). CAN institutions are provided opportunities to engage with AAC&U and each other around their work to improve student achievement in college. LEAP resources are provided to CAN members as they become available. Any AAC&U member institution is welcome to join the Campus Action Network.

### Presidents' Trust

The Presidents' Trust includes presidents from all sectors of the higher education community who have made a significant commitment to providing local, regional, and national leadership for liberal education. Membership in the Trust includes a financial commitment. Any AAC&U member president may join the Trust.

### LEAP States Initiative

The LEAP States Initiative brings AAC&U, state systems, and campus networks into intentional work together to advance systemic change. LEAP States supports public advocacy for liberal education and frameworks to advance Essential Learning Outcomes in general education and across the curriculum and cocurriculum. Inclusion in the LEAP States Initiative is developed through a collaborative process involving state system representatives, institutional leaders, and AAC&U.

### LEAP Online and Print Resources

#### • Original Publications and Blogs

LEAP publishes many reports and monographs on liberal education, assessment, the Essential Learning Outcomes, high-impact educational practices, campus-based models of integrative liberal education, and ways to educate students and the public about liberal education. AAC&U also publishes *The LEAP Challenge Blog,* with postings from AAC&U staff and experts in the field (www.aacu.org/blog), and a weekly Liberal Education News Watch.

#### • LEAP Online Resource Hubs

Online, interactive resource hubs for campus practitioners and other educators to access concise, useful research narratives, examples of campus work, tools for campus change, and assessment instruments.

#### • Speeches and Articles on Liberal Education

The LEAP Liberal Education News Watch includes links to articles and speeches through which people from many backgrounds are effectively making the case for liberal education.

#### • Data and PowerPoint Presentations

LEAP-based PowerPoint slides present data that educational practitioners and leaders can use to make the case for liberal education more effectively.

#### • Employer Surveys and Public Opinion Research

AAC&U regularly commissions surveys of employers that explore the value of liberal education outcomes in today's workplace. All survey findings and PowerPoint slides for use in presentations are available on the LEAP website.

### For more information or to find resources, visit aacu.org/leap or contact:

LEAP Coordinating Director, Bethany Zecher Sutton (sutton@aacu.org)

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**www.aacu.org/leap**

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