

# General Education Program

## GERC Faculty Survey: Results

Spring 2022

The General Education Requirements Committee (GERC) invited all ISU faculty to participate in a survey in April 2022, in preparation for the committee's AY 2022-2023 comprehensive review of the General Education program. GERC wishes to thank all faculty who participated in this survey.

This report discusses the results of the survey. Questions or concerns regarding this report should be directed to your GERC representative or to Joanne Togle, Chair, GERC.

### Introduction and Background

The General Education Requirements Committee (GERC) completed its review of all nine general education student learning objectives in Spring 2022. A comprehensive review of the General Education program will be conducted in academic year 2022-2023, as the conclusion to GERC's five-year assessment cycle. The review will consider the effectiveness of all objectives in meeting the overall goals for general education. Findings will be described in a Comprehensive General Education Report to be approved by University Curriculum Council (UCC) and filed with Academic Affairs. If changes in the current objectives are recommended, a more extensive campus-wide review will ensue.

Thirty credits are required in Objectives 1 through 6 by Idaho State Board of Education (SBOE) Policy III.N. The policy requires 36 credits of General Education for baccalaureate degrees, with the remaining six credits offered as institutionally designated credits. The institutionally designated credits at Idaho State University include Objective 7, Critical Thinking; Objective 8, Information Literacy; and Objective 9, Cultural Diversity. Students are required to complete the cultural diversity objective, and then choose between the critical thinking and information literacy objectives. Because Objectives 1-6 are state mandated, substantial changes can only be made to the institutionally designated objectives/credits. Courses on the SBOE Common Course list for general education cannot be used for other objectives or removed without permission of SBOE.

As part of the overall review process, GERC surveyed faculty in April 2022, to solicit their opinions on whether changes should be made in the General Education program, and on the value of the institutionally designated general education objectives in particular. The survey included both open-ended questions and questions that asked respondents to rate items on a Likert scale. The questions and responses are detailed in the appendix to this report.

Prior to the survey, faculty were contacted via email in November 2021 for general “questions, concerns, or opinions about the direction, focus or form” of ISU’s General Education program. A summary of their comments is included in the appendix. This preliminary feedback was used in designing the survey that was administered in April 2022.

Most of the questions focused on Objectives 7-9 (critical thinking, information literacy, and cultural diversity) for the reasons cited above. A few questions on general education assessment and demographic information were also included.

The Executive Summary reports key responses to questions and concerns of respondents for the Critical Thinking, Information Literacy, and Cultural Diversity objectives and for assessment, and provides sample information. The discussion section highlights faculty preferences, concerns, and their suggested solutions to various issues. The Appendix provides detailed information on the sample and on responses to individual questions.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Critical thinking, information literacy, and cultural diversity**

- Respondents indicated that critical thinking was a desirable and important skill, but were split on whether it should be a stand-alone objective. “All courses should teach critical thinking” was a recurring comment.
- Most faculty believed that critical thinking, information literacy, and cultural diversity all provided important skills and/or knowledge for students, and the percentage of those who agreed to some extent was between 70 and 73%.
- Most faculty did not try to influence students’ choice of Objective 7 (critical thinking) or 8 (information literacy) when advising them, although those who did encourage one objective over another tended to recommend Objective 7.
- Most faculty had no opinion, or neither agreed nor disagreed, as to whether students are confused by the choice between 7 and 8 or whether they mistakenly took both.

### **Concerns**

- Concerns varied widely, making categorization of comments difficult. Several respondents were satisfied with the current program and had no concerns, and a number didn’t know or had no opinion. Selected concerns include:
  - Lack of rigor
  - The number of courses
  - Desire to return to ISU’s previous model of general education
  - Potential challenges to Cultural Diversity as an objective
  - Process for approving the general education designation for courses

## **Assessment**

- About half of respondents reported broad sharing of assessment responsibilities in their academic units.
- About half of respondents believed that assessment leads to curricular improvement.
- Assessment was an issue for some faculty, including the process being too difficult or lack of cooperation within departments for implementing and supporting the process.

## **Discussion**

Concern for student achievement permeated the responses in this survey, but the details of the best way to support and promote student learning within the framework of ISU's General Education Program varied so much as to make identifying a consensus of changes to make or even what the problems are nearly impossible.

The survey questions, with results, are located in the appendix.

### **Preferences for critical thinking, information literacy, or cultural diversity**

Most faculty (about 70%) indicated that critical thinking, information literacy, and cultural diversity provided important skills and knowledge for students. However, given that only 6 credits of general education are required outside of Objectives 1-6, some respondents had distinct preferences as to which objectives should be included in the institutionally designated objectives.

Critical thinking (#7) was slightly preferred over information literacy (#8), but several respondents stated that critical thinking should be in every course, and having a separate objective for critical thinking makes it sound like courses outside of that objective don't include critical thinking. Some faculty preferred one objective over another because they taught a class in it or because a course from that objective was required for their program.

### **Suggested changes**

No consistent theme emerged regarding recommended changes. Some faculty want to keep critical thinking as an objective while others want to eliminate it; however, those in favor of eliminating critical thinking as an objective are not opposed to that skill (see above). The tally of responses revealed that the respondents were about equally split when selecting an objective to make changes to, and a number of them suggested changes not specific to one objective. Several suggested combining objectives or offering a different split among 7, 8, or 9, or allowing students to choose any two of the three objectives.

When asked what other models of general education they would recommend for ISU, the answers varied considerably. A couple of respondents wanted to return to the general education program ISU had in place prior to 2014 (which is not possible under SBOE policy); some made suggestions regarding online, dual enrollment, capstone, or upper division courses,

or using active learning models. Several respondents expressed satisfaction with ISU's current general education program. A few cited programs at other institutions as good models of general education (see appendix).

### **Concerns**

Like preferences for specific objectives and recommended changes, comments and concerns regarding ISU's general education program varied widely. Assessment issues and the review process for adding courses to the general education program were cited by several faculty. A couple of respondents stated that we offered too many courses in the program, while another thought those courses were too concentrated in a small number of departments. Two faculty members were concerned about the rigor of the classes, and the need for critical thinking across the curriculum resurfaced in this open-ended question.

Lack of faculty involvement in the design and instruction of general education courses was cited as a concern, but it wasn't clear from the responses at which level this was occurring—the university level, the college level, or the departmental level. With some seats on GERC unfilled, there is opportunity for more faculty to be involved should they wish to pursue it.

Suggestions and concerns or comments that are not feasible because of SBOE Policy III.N. are noted in the appendix.

### **Assessment**

ISU has made progress in developing a culture of assessment, but challenges remain. About half of respondents believed that assessment led to curricular improvement in their general education courses, and about half reported shared responsibility in their academic unit for assessment activities. A few stated that the assessment process itself was difficult ("complicated" or "confusing"), or that it was difficult to get other faculty to participate.

### **Conclusions**

No consensus emerged regarding deficiencies or issues in the General Education Program. While a number of suggestions or concerns were offered, for the most part faculty seem satisfied with the current organization, content, and structure of the program. Most respondents indicated support for critical thinking in the general education program, but faculty preference for incorporating it throughout the program versus having it remain a separate objective was mixed.

Approved by GERC: September 27, 2022  
Accepted by UCC: October 13, 2022  
Accepted by Faculty Senate: October 24, 2022  
Accepted by Academic Affairs: October 31, 2022

## APPENDIX

### Sample

- 90 faculty completed at least part of the survey. 74 completed the entire survey. The survey was sent to 1,068 email addresses, with an open rate of 68.4%, and a response rate of 8%.
- Most respondents (88%) were part of an academic unit that teaches a general education course.
- Most respondents (74%) have taught a general education course at ISU.
- Over half of respondents have not prepared nor submitted the GERC annual report form.
- About 20% of respondents have served on GERC.
- Over 70% of respondents were from the College of Arts and Letters or Science and Engineering; the Colleges of Technology, Business, and Health each had 8% of respondents; a few were from the Library or the College of Education. Note that the number of general education courses offered in these colleges varies.
- Only 4% of respondents had graduate students as their primary focus, with 96% having undergraduate students or both as their primary focus.

### Summary of closed-ended question responses

Question: Students sometimes get confused about the choice between Objective 7 and Objective 8. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	3	6	2	13	15	12	5	34
%	3.3	6.7	2.2	14.4	16.7	13.3	5.6	37.8

Summary: about half of the respondents were neutral (neither agreed nor disagreed) or did not have enough information for an opinion. About 35% agreed to some extent.

Question: Students sometimes fulfill both Objective 7 and Objective 8 because they don't realize that they need only one of the two. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	1	6	5	12	8	13	3	42
%	1.1	6.7	5.6	13.3	8.9	14.4	3.3	46.7

Summary: 60% of respondents were neutral or did not have enough information for an opinion. About 26% agreed to some extent.

Question: When advising students on Objectives 7 and 8, I encourage them to take one objective over the other. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	4	14	2	21	5	13	10	21
%	4.4	15.6	2.2	23.3	5.6	14.4	11.1	23.3

Summary: 46% of respondents were neutral or did not have enough information for an opinion. 31% agreed to some extent.

Question: Objective 7, Critical Thinking, provides important skills and/or knowledge for our students. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	4	2	2	8	4	18	43	9
%	4.4	2.2	2.2	8.9	4.4	.2	47.8	10

Summary: 72% agreed to some extent with this statement; 19% were neutral or had no opinion.

Question: Objective 8, Information Literacy, provides important skills and/or knowledge for our students. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	1	2	8	7	10	20	33	9
%	1.1	2.2	8.9	7.8	11.1	22.2	36.7	10

Summary: 70% agreed to some extent with this statement; 18% were neutral or had no opinion.

Question: Objective 9, Cultural Diversity, provides important skills and/or knowledge for our students. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	3	0	7	8	5	16	45	6
%	3.3	0	7.8	8.9	5.6	17.8	50	6.7

Summary: 73% agreed to some extent with this statement; 16% were neutral or had no opinion.

Question: Faculty in my department share responsibility for general education assessment. (n=90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	3	12	15	9	15	23	8	5
%	3.3	13.3	16.7	10	16.7	25.6	8.9	5.6

Summary: 51% agreed to some extent; 33% disagreed to some extent; 16% were neutral or had no opinion.

Question: The assessment of general education courses in my department leads to curricular improvement. (n = 90)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not enough info for opinion
Count	3	11	8	17	15	19	11	6
%	3.3	12.2	8.9	18.9	16.7	21.1	12.2	6.7

Summary: 50% agreed to some extent; 33% disagreed to some extent; 16% were neutral or had no opinion.

Question: Does your department regularly teach a course that fulfills a general education requirement? (n=74)

	No	Yes	I don't know
Count	9	65	0
%	12.2	87.8	0

Have you taught a general education course at ISU? (n= 74)

	No	Yes	I don't know
Count	19	55	0
%	25.7	74.3	0

Have you ever prepared and submitted the GERC annual report form yourself? (n=74)

	No	Yes	I don't know
Count	41	32	1
%	55.4	43.2	1.4

Have you ever served on GERC? (n=72)

	No	Yes	I don't know
Count	57	15	0
%	79.2	20.8	0



Your unit or college (n=74) \*

College	Count	%
Arts and Letters	32	43.2
Business	6	8.1
Education	2	2.7
Health	6	8.1
Pharmacy	0	0
Science and Engineering	21	28.4
Technology	6	8.1
Library	1	1.4

\*To put this in context, 61% of general educations are from CAL courses; 9% are from COB; 25% from COSE; 3% from COH; and 1% each from COE, COT, and LLIB.

Primary student focus (n=74)

	Count	%
Graduate students	3	4.0
Undergraduate students	47	63.5
Both equally	24	32.4

### Summary of open-ended question responses

For suggested changes that conflict with SBOE Policy III.N., an explanation is given at the end of the question.

#### When advising students on Objectives 7 and 8, which do you recommend and why?

Tally of responses:

- 21 left the decision to the student, depending on major or career aspirations
- 18 advised students to take Objective 7
- 10 advised students to take Objective 8
- 16 didn't know or had no opinion

Reasons varied for recommending one objective over the other. Faculty who preferred Objective 7 cited reasons such as critical thinking is more important than information literacy, requires more reinforcement to master than information literacy, and is harder to learn outside of college. Several respondents stated that Objective 7 has more options that are relevant for their particular discipline. Some faculty prefer Objective 7 because they or their department teach courses in it, or require an Objective 7 course in their program.

Faculty who preferred Objective 8 cited similar reasons, as well as Objective 8 skills being important for students' future careers. In addition, several respondents stated that critical thinking should be in all college courses, not just courses in a particular category of general education.

**If you could change anything about the six institutionally designated credits of general education, what changes would you make?**

Tally of responses:

- 19 would make changes not specific to one objective
- 10 would make changes to Objective 7
- 8 would make changes to Objective 8
- 8 would make changes to Objective 9
- 24 didn't know or had no opinion

Opinions varied enough that no consistent theme emerged. Some faculty think critical thinking should be eliminated as an objective, as it should be in all college courses, and others would retain it and eliminate something else (typically Objective 8). A few suggested that courses in Objectives 7 and 8 should be merged into one broader objective, and include courses that focus on skills for dealing with "real, practical problems." One faculty member suggested that personal finance (in Objective 8) should be required of all college students, like COMM 1101.

A few comments centered on Objective 9. Suggestions included more course options for this objective; all courses should incorporate diversity; keep 9, eliminate 7 and 8, and allow for a general education elective. A couple of suggestions conflict with SBOE Policy III.N. (see below).

Some faculty thought that all three objectives (7-9) were important and should be required of all students, or allow students to select courses in two of the three objectives. While some faculty thought students needed more choice within some objectives, others thought there were too many courses. A couple of respondents felt the current structure worked well and wouldn't change it. One respondent wanted more online options with more transfer acceptance, while another wanted more face-to-face and on campus offerings, with more high school access via dual enrollment.

Suggestions that conflict with SBOE Policy III.N.:

- Include statistics in Objective 8. Statistics is already in Objective 3 as a common-indexed course and cannot be moved to another objective.
- Languages shouldn't be in both Objective 4 and 9. The 1100-level language courses in Objective 4 are common-indexed courses and cannot be removed from that objective. Having 2200-level languages in Objective 9, however, is under the purview of ISU.

## What other models of general education are you familiar with that you would recommend for ISU's general education program?

Tally of responses:

- 7 respondents suggested specific programs
- 47 respondents didn't know or had no opinion
- 18 respondents offered other suggestions

Responses varied enough that they were hard to categorize. Several faculty members were satisfied with the current program.

Programs of other institutions recommended by respondents include the following:

- The Ohio State University
- Oregon State University
- University of Montana
- Columbia University
- University of Chicago
- University of Texas-Austin
- University of Idaho
- California's pathways

Two respondents suggested using the WICHE Interstate Passport model. Two said ours is deficient and anywhere else is better, but didn't say where it's better.

Two faculty members thought we should return to something closer to our previous model (goals). Some offered suggestions such as "students should take more history and humanities courses," "mix STEM and humanities across the objectives," "pair or cluster courses that are related to each other and satisfy multiple objectives like a year-long course," or "don't force students to select classes from different categories in Objective 4."

Other faculty made comments about the level of general education courses, e.g., "no upper-division courses. Do all majors have a departmental capstone course?" and "institutional commitment to have gen ed goals at all levels and in most courses." Another suggested, "model where some core skills like critical thinking or information literacy can reside in a wide variety of courses across other objectives rather than in specific courses designated for them alone."

Suggestions that conflict with SBOE Policy III.N.:

- Return to the previous model of General Education at ISU. Objectives 1-6, 30 credits, must include the competencies and common-indexed courses specified in Policy III.N. That leaves 6 credits to the discretion of the institution.

## **How do the members of your department share responsibilities for assessment?**

Tally of responses:

- 17 indicated that all members of the department, or all instructors who teach general education courses, participate
- 10 reported that assessment is a committee responsibility
- 7 indicated that one or two faculty are responsible
- 5 indicated that responsibility is not shared
- 2 indicated that faculty take turns
- 1 said it varies by course
- 8 didn't know or had no opinion

## **Do you have comments or concerns regarding the General Education program?**

Tally of responses:

- 7 reported issues with assessment
- 5 thought our general education requirements were good and didn't recommend changes
- 2 were concerned about the process for approving courses for the General Education program
- 2 were concerned about state challenges to Objective 9, Cultural Diversity
- 2 were concerned about rigor in the classes
- 2 wanted to return to the previous structure (goals) or at least include more humanities
- 26 didn't know or had no opinion

Faculty responded with a wide variety of concerns and comments. In addition to those listed in the tally above, a few of note include:

- Lack of faculty involvement. More faculty should be involved in the design and instruction of general education courses; adjuncts who teach these classes should be included.
- Too many classes are offered, and too many are in the high schools.
- General education courses are concentrated in too few departments.
- Ensure that faculty follow the curriculum, and provide them with clear and consistent guidelines.
- All courses should include critical thinking.
- General Education certificates would help with transferability.

Suggestions that conflict with SBOE Policy III.N.:

- Language classes should not be in Objective 4. Introductory language courses are part of the common-indexed courses and cannot be removed from Objective 4.

- Get rid of general education requirements completely. SBOE Policy III.N. requires 36 credits of general education.
- Too many general education classes in the high school. Offering general education courses in secondary schools is a priority of SBOE to make higher education more accessible and affordable.

### **Faculty Feedback received in November 2021**

GERC sent an email to faculty in November 2021 which asked for general “questions, concerns, or opinions about the direction, focus or form” of ISU’s General Education program. Their comments are paraphrased below.

- Institutional credits need review and revision. Having an option of Objective 7 or 8 is confusing to students; it would be better to have just one objective with clearly defined competencies and a variety of courses. Objective 9 is important, but do its courses actually support the stated competencies?
- More variety in the humanities and fine arts is needed.
- The General Education program is fine, but it pits departments against each other to capture enrollment. Objective 4 needs review, as it isn’t clear whether foreign language course meet the competencies. Two other comments addressed whether languages should be included in Objective 4.
- Objectives 7, 8, and 9 should function more like Objective 4, where students take two courses from any two of the three categories.
- Objectives 7 and 8 should be dropped. Critical thinking and information literacy are redundant to most courses offered in every major.