



December 6, 2019

Greetings,

At its meeting in Columbus on April 22, 2019, the General Education Steering Committee appointed in 2017 by the Ohio Department of Higher Education unanimously endorsed six ***Principles of Good Practice*** for general education in Ohio. In one sense, this action represents the capstone of a two-year consultative effort to identify principles that both reflect a consensus of practice and have the potential to prompt significant improvement. In another sense, this effort now begins in earnest, as you and your colleagues seize the opportunity to use these principles to enhance your commitment to more effective general education.

This communication first lists the principles. Then, in response to recommendations arising from both the April 2018 statewide discussion and the spring 2019 polling, it provides an explanatory gloss for each principle meant to offer guidance towards discussion and implementation.

Appendices (I) provide a useful interpretation of the principles as suggested by colleagues at Northwest State Community College, (II) document the original problem statement that has guided the work of the Steering Committee since 2017, (III) describe the advantages inherent in a statewide consensus, and (IV) outline the process that has been followed.

General Education in Ohio: Principles of Good Practice

April 22, 2019

The following principles have emerged from a statewide consultative discussion as priorities that reflect leading thinking and good practice throughout Ohio and that can therefore guide improvements in general education throughout the state.

- 1 Attentive to relevant HLC standards, each Ohio college and university will publish a straightforward, easily understood statement of institutional intent regarding the purposes, emphases, and structure of its general education program.
- 2 Committed to providing their students with knowledge and abilities *that may transcend the content of general education and of traditional disciplines*, Ohio colleges and universities will (a) confirm which knowledge areas their curriculum already addresses, (b) identify any gaps that may be significant in terms of the institution's mission and objectives, and (c) commit to addressing them.

- 3 Aware of documented expectations regarding proficiencies *beyond content knowledge* consistent with student success over the long term, Ohio colleges and universities will (a) confirm which capacities and characteristics their curriculum already addresses, (b) identify any significant gaps, and (c) commit to addressing them.
- 4 Focused on what students should learn rather than what should be taught, Ohio colleges and universities should consider pedagogical approaches not currently in use that might lead to significant gains in learning. They should implement those most consistent with their curricular objectives.
- 5 Acknowledging that effective advising is critical to student success, Ohio colleges and universities should enable and charge advisors (a) to undertake “intentional conversations” with all students concerning the ends and means of general education, (b) to guide students in “navigating” a curriculum that links general education and the major, and (c) to enable students to understand both the value and the usefulness of the general education learning they are pursuing.
- 6 Continuity between general education and the major should be made explicit through clear links between specific priorities of general education and specific expectations of major programs. Effective general education programs, offered in collaboration with majors, should prepare students for further study. Effective majors should affirm and build on the preparation general education provides.

General Education in Ohio: Principles of Good Practice **Explanatory Annotations: Suggested Prompts for Discussion**

These annotations are meant not to suggest requirements at the state level but to prompt discussion at the campus level.

- 1 Attentive to relevant HLC standards, each Ohio college and university will publish a straightforward, easily understood statement of institutional intent regarding the purposes, emphases, and structure of its general education program.

Although most Ohio institutions publish statements of objectives for their general education programs, many such statements repeat familiar generalizations. Questions worth considering are the following:

- *Does our statement describe general education in terms that students will understand and find appealing?*
- *Do our objectives as stated invite assessment of student performance?*
- *Do our objectives distinguish our institution’s general education program from others?*

Strong statements of institutional intent enumerate in terms of student performance explicit educational outcomes students will attain through general education and describe how the general education curriculum enables students to achieve these outcomes.

Institutions may find it useful to compare their outcomes statements with two standards that reflect an emerging consensus: the Essential Learning Outcomes published by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (<https://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes>) and the Degree Qualifications Profile published by Lumina Foundation (<http://degreeprofile.org/>). While these statements do not prescribe requisites for general education programs, institutional decisions to disregard one or more elements common to both may merit explanation.

*Participants in the April 2, 2018, discussion agreed that general education should offer not a buffet of survey courses to be “gotten out of the way” but **a coherent, sequential, cumulative curriculum** aimed at student accomplishment of specified learning outcomes. Hence, an institutional outline of its general education program should indicate how the **structure** of its program contributes to the assurance of student learning.*

- 2 Committed to providing their students with knowledge and abilities *that may transcend the content of general education and of traditional disciplines*, Ohio colleges and universities will (a) confirm which knowledge areas their curriculum already addresses, (b) identify any gaps that may be significant in terms of the institution’s mission and objectives, and (c) commit to addressing them.**

*Participants in the April 2 discussion recommended that students acquire content knowledge and abilities in areas such as information literacy, information technology, civic awareness, and knowledge of global and domestic diversity. Unlike principle 1, which recommends that institutions make public information relative to the priorities pursued by the general education curriculum, **this principle focuses on outcomes likely to be addressed through the curriculum as a whole**. As principle # 6 states explicitly, the general education curriculum by itself cannot achieve all learning outcomes. Indeed, some general learning outcomes may be accomplished only through curricular links between general education and the major.*

- 3 Aware of documented expectations regarding proficiencies beyond content knowledge *consistent with student success over the long term*, Ohio colleges and universities will (a) confirm which capacities and characteristics their curriculum already addresses, (b) identify any significant gaps, and (c) commit to addressing them.**

Although this principle may at first appear similar to the one immediately above, their respective emphases are quite different. The emphasis of #2 lies on “content knowledge and abilities” that are broadly acknowledged and clearly defined. The emphasis of this principle lies on capacities such as empathy, adaptability, resilience, aptitude for teamwork, and effectiveness in self-directed learning. While increasingly recognized as important to success, they tend to be related only tangentially to content knowledge and are thus more difficult to define and assess. However, both the ELOs and the DQP suggest ways of expressing expectations of these capacities in terms of learning outcomes.

- 4 Focused on what students should learn rather than what should be taught, Ohio colleges and universities should consider pedagogical approaches not currently in use that might lead to significant gains in learning. They should implement those most consistent with their curricular objectives.

Many Ohio institutions offer a variety of “high impact practices” such as freshman interest groups and other learning communities, undergraduate research opportunities, capstone courses, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments, service learning, and internships. A brief overview of HIPs is available at <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>. Research has shown that students who experience one or more HIPs during their college experience are more likely to succeed.

- 5 Acknowledging that effective advising is critical to student success, Ohio colleges and universities should enable and charge advisors (a) to undertake “intentional conversations” with all students concerning the ends and means of general education, (b) to guide students in “navigating” a curriculum that links general education and the major, and (c) to enable students to understand both the value and the pragmatic usefulness of the general education learning they are pursuing.

Effective advising should enable students to understand “How are these courses preparing me for my future education and a career?” Discussion of advising during the Task Force deliberations acknowledged concerns regarding advisor “loads” and resource limitations. Because this initiative must rely in part on expertise that only student affairs leaders and advisors can offer, it provides an opportunity to engage these professionals in the strengthening of general education.

- 6 Continuity between general education and the major should be made explicit through clear links between specific priorities of general education and specific expectations of major programs. Effective general education programs, offered in collaboration with majors, should prepare students for further study. Effective majors should affirm and build on the preparation general education provides.

There are many strategies worth considering. For instance, “Curricular mapping” may be used to identify points in the curriculum (including both general education and the major) at which students should accomplish particular institutional learning outcomes, to determine whether there are outcomes not explicitly addressed through the curriculum, and to suggest whether curricular modifications may be necessary to improve students’ experience of coherence and continuity. A Curricular Mapping Toolkit, developed by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), is available at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/curriculum_mapping_toolkit.html



Thank you for supporting this discussion through the participation of your colleagues and through your responses to the poll distributed in January. Chief academic officers have perhaps the most significant role to play in the further strengthening of Ohio's commitment to more effective general education.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Davidson
Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs
Ohio Department of Higher Education

Appendix I: The Principles Reinterpreted

Thanks to Sherry Howard and Allen Berres of Northwest State Community College for this succinct and positive statement of the principles. They observe that moving the principles to a level “that transcends the institution” may be particularly useful for further discussions of the Ohio Transfer Module.

An effective general education program is one that

- clearly communicates its purposes, emphases, and structure,
- develops students' essential academic knowledge and abilities that may transcend traditional disciplines,
- develops students' capacities and characteristics to promote their success over the long term.
- employs effective and innovative pedagogical approaches,
- guides students through intentional advising, and
- creates continuity between the general education curriculum and the curricula of majors.

Appendix II: The Problem Statement

The intent behind this effort was found in indicators that describe a dilemma:

- Far too many students take too long to earn their degree. The default statistic for measuring institutional performance (USDE, 2014) is the *six-year* graduation rate for students who earn the baccalaureate.
- Employer surveys (e.g., that by Hart Research Associates, 2013) have demonstrated that students who *do* earn a degree may find themselves poorly prepared for the demands of the workplace.
- Far too many students *do not* earn a degree. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that “the United States now has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world” (Symonds, William, Robert B. Schwartz, and Ronald Ferguson. 2011. *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.) What’s even worse? Many of these students are disadvantaged.

Students who do not experience general education that has explicit learning goals clearly and closely aligned with their own goals may be less likely to remain motivated, to strive for excellence, and to make a compelling case for themselves to potential employers. The determination to get a course or a curriculum “out of the way” is hardly a motivation calculated to inspire hard work and persistence. And the frequent lack of clear pathways through the curricular cafeteria may lead to careless choices that extend the student’s time in college or become so demoralizing that the student withdraws.

Appendix III: The Benefits of Consensus

An enterprising, student-centered, ably led institution might meet many of the principles that have been articulated. But the clarification and dissemination of a consensus—both in theory and in practice—offers potential opportunities that go beyond particular institutional advantages.

- Statewide commitment to broad principles concerning general education should support high school faculty members and guidance counselors seeking to provide their college-bound students with accurate and motivational information.
- Similarly, such an agreement, acknowledging the reality of mobile students, would enable an enhanced platform for institutional cooperation and coordination that would benefit such students.
- Public understanding of (and, one hopes, appreciation for) Ohio higher education would be enhanced by a clearer statement of what public higher education in Ohio seeks to accomplish *for* its students *through* the general education offerings at its various institutions.
- A clear consensus on principles would support institutional efforts to create distinctive statements of programmatic or degree-level learning outcomes.

Appendix IV: The Process Leading to Consensus

Ohio’s commitment to identify principles of good practice in general education throughout the state, to elicit a consensus around such principles, and to advance that consensus as a guide for statewide performance has relied throughout on consultation. The stages of that consultation, shown in the flow chart below, attest to a systematic process of listening, analysis, and suggestion. Following each stage, preliminary results have been compiled, widely shared for consideration and comment, and refined accordingly.



The problem has not been a lack of quality among general education programs in Ohio. The problem is that the rich diversity of intent and practice evident in these programs has complicated any effort to summarize the principles they share—and thus hampered any effort to explain the value and usefulness of general education. We should be far better able to explain the objectives of general education to students and other stakeholders. And we should be in a far better position to realize the competitive advantages that effective general education programs can offer to students, to institutions, and to Ohio.