General education programs should be closely connected to the underlying educational principles of an institution. Students and other stakeholders should be able to clearly see the link between institutional values/mission and the goals of the general education program. Among religious universities, for example, general education programs are steeped in core denominational values and those values are incorporated into all aspects of the core curricula.

These programs increasingly consider the development of skills that will be needed after graduation in the workforce. More and more, institutions are aligning general education programs with competencies that employers highly value, such as critical thinking and communication. Often, this means expanding from rigid disciplinary requirements to an emphasis on 21st century skills that are incorporated at various points in the general education plan.

It is important to explicitly state and communicate the general education program's specific student learning goals. This can include proficiency thresholds, opportunities for self-direction or experiential learning, and assessment expectations. However, outcomes always need to be clear and accessible, developed by the faculty, shared across the institution, and openly discussed with students. Most institutions develop around 18 skill and knowledge area goals, which most frequently include writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning skills.

Although general education programs are often foundational, it is crucial for institutions to connect the curriculum with student interests where possible. Often, this can include balancing general education requirements and specialized major work - in this way, general education programs should be distinguished by their emphasis on the relation between the material students are studying and things they will be doing for the rest of their lives. Most institutions accomplish this through a distribution model where students can select from a discrete array of pre-defined coursework.

Experiential, first-year, and senior-year elements of general education programs are usually cited as beneficial to students. Experiential learning opportunities allow students to apply core university values to real-world settings, and are followed by dedicated reflection that can go on their transcripts. First- and senior-year seminars offer students the chance to experience the general education program over their entire undergraduate experience. First-year seminars provide the opportunity to introduce students to both the institution and the general education expectations; meanwhile, senior capstones help students reflect and prepare for entry to the workforce or graduate school.

Implementing a new or revised general education program requires more than a reorganization of courses. Indeed, resources need to be devoted to curriculum planning and course development so that courses in the core program align with the program's new goals. This includes considering all campus constituencies, and especially teachers, as well as developing a road map for implementation. At this stage, institutions should also develop assessment procedures to evaluate both student learning and institutional practice in regular cycles.

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First-Year Seminars and Experiences
Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research.

Common Intellectual Experiences
The older idea of a "core" curriculum has evolved into a variety of modern forms, such as a set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community. These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students.

Learning Communities

The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with "big questions" that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link "liberal arts" and "professional courses"; others feature service learning.

Writing-Intensive Courses

These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice "across the curriculum" has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and, on some campuses, ethical inquiry.

Collaborative Assignments and Projects

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Undergraduate Research

Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines. Undergraduate research, however, has been most prominently used in science disciplines. With strong support from the National Science Foundation and the research community, scientists are reshaping their courses to connect key concepts and questions with students' early and active involvement in systematic investigation and research. The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

Diversity/Global Learning

Many colleges and universities now emphasize courses and programs that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own. These studies—which may address U.S. diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore "difficult differences" such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power. Frequently, intercultural studies are augmented by experiential learning in the community and/or by study abroad.

Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

In these programs, field-based "experiential learning" with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Internships

Internships are another increasingly common form of experiential learning. The idea is to provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and to give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for course credit, students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

Capstone Courses and Projects

Whether they're called "senior capstones" or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they've learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of "best work", or an exhibit of artwork. Capstones are offered both in departmental programs and, increasingly, in general education as well.