

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Spring 2021
Proposal to Add an Undergraduate General Education Requirement: Sustainability

Background: Periodic Reviews of General Education in CLAS

Around every four to six years, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences reviews the General Education CLAS Core, asking how the Core requirements support the UI and CLAS strategic plans and if the General Education (GE) requirements and courses can better serve undergraduate students.

Past reviews have resulted in key changes to these requirements, including the addition of the Diversity and Inclusion requirement in 2017. Besides this work by the ad hoc GE Review, recommendations from the [General Education Curriculum Committee](#) and the [Undergraduate Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee](#) (UEPCC) are central to any changes in GE requirements, policies, or procedures, with these faculty committees charged by the College with oversight of the CLAS Core.

All three committees have recommended the inclusion of a GE requirement in sustainability effective for students entering UI Summer 2022 and after.

Rationale

The recommendation made by the three committees has been deemed urgent, given the current pandemic and its relation to sustainability, with the topic also relevant to students, as was clear when the UI Student Government (UISG) and Graduate & Professional Student Government passed the following resolution in Fall 2019:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the University of Iowa Student Government and Graduate & Professional Student Government support the addition of “sustainability” as a core value of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, College of Education, College of Engineering, College of Nursing, College of Public Health, and the Tippie College of Business and encourage listed colleges to advocate for creating a sustainability or a “systems thinking” general education component within the college to keep the University of Iowa on the cutting-edge of sustainability education. . . .

Likewise, the UI Sustainability Charter Committee and the Office of Sustainability and the Environment have advocated for a GE sustainability requirement, stating that requirement “would foster a learning environment that:

- Builds sustainability literacy
- Engages creative problem solving, using critical thinking, collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches and democratic dialogues
- Encourages students to manage and analyze diverse data to produce useful and predictive information
- Ties the classroom experience to building a sustainable campus and community and encourages experiential learning within and outside of the University so that students gain experience with the practical application of sustainability principles.”

In Fall 2020, the GE Review Committee unanimously recommended the approval of a new GE CLAS Core requirement in sustainability. Further discussions within UEPCC and GECC led to the adoption of a systems-thinking approach to the requirement as suggested by experts on the committee and visitors to it, including undergraduate students.

The College now seeks a recommendation on the proposal from members of the Faculty Assembly.

Details Related to Implementation

Members of the CLAS Core Review committee understood that adding hours to the CLAS GE Core might create obstacles to graduation while curtailing students' exploration of other interests. Additional hours could also discourage students from completing a second major or a certificate.

In Fall 2020 and given the systems-thinking approach to the requirement, both UEPC and GECC recommended that the new requirement be interwoven with a second GE course in an additional GE area. The sustainability requirement could then be fulfilled along with the second GE requirement since the course would present this content as an interconnected system, with both of equal importance.

UEPC and GECC endorsed this systems-thinking approach since it would help students to learn how to integrate concepts and skills from across disciplines while modeling the importance of interdisciplinarity. Systems-thinking too is a critical tool for understanding contemporary complexities and solving today's problems, with the proposed GE requirement in sustainability helping students to apply this skill to relevant content.

Committee members noted that such courses would additionally encourage faculty to explore new research areas; likewise, team-teaching across disciplines would be enhanced by the requirement, generating exciting and creative classroom experiences.

Proposed Learning Outcomes for the GE Sustainability Requirement

GECC and UEPC have approved the following learning outcomes for the proposed GE area in sustainability:

Courses in this area use a systems-thinking approach, integrating content and learning outcomes from sustainability and one of these GE areas: Natural Sciences (with or without lab); Quantitative or Formal Reasoning; Social Sciences; Historical Perspectives; International and Global Issues; Literary, Visual and Performing Arts; and Values and Cultures.

Foundational Understanding

- Students identify foundational concepts and terminology associated with sustainability.

Systems Thinking

- Students investigate the interconnectedness of human and natural systems over place and time.
- Students apply system thinking and evidence-based approaches to critically evaluate sustainability issues.

Application to Everyday Life

- Students evaluate how their actions affect and are affected by society's ability to meet sustainability goals.

AND OUTCOMES 1 OR 2

1. *Culture, Diversity, and Institutions*
 - Students analyze how economic, institutional, and cultural processes, from the local to global scales, support or interfere with sustainability goals.

- Students describe how culture, diversity, and institutions are contextualized by time and place and impact sustainability goals.

OR

2. *Natural System Dynamics*

- Students analyze ecosystem services and the processes that lead to a changing climate (e.g., the concept of greenhouse gasses and, in general terms, how this leads to increasing temperature and to more varied and intense climatic events).

Additional Information

Current procedures for approving GE proposals would be used for the new requirement. Proposals are vetted first by GECC and then by UEPCC, with GE status approved only if the proposal shows that students have every opportunity of meeting the GE learning outcomes suggested the course syllabus and related readings, assignments, projects, and exams. Any department, school, or program may propose a GE course.

Other Details

- If implemented, students entering UI during Summer 2022 would be held to the new requirement.
- Continuing students who enter UI before Summer 2022 would not be required to complete the sustainability GE requirement.
- Transfer credits would be counted for the GE sustainability requirement, with guidelines for acceptable transfer courses provided by CLAS to Admissions.
- Exam credit (such as AP) will be applied to the requirement based on the review of the related exams by the CLAS Undergraduate Programs and Student Development Office, as is now the existing procedure for any GE status related to examinations.
- Any existing articulation agreements with the state of Iowa would be honored in relation to the completion of transfer credit and GE requirements.