

# **Report of the BFC Task Force on the Future of General Education in the Third Century of the Bloomington Campus**

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## Structure of the Task Force

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The Bloomington Faculty Council Executive Committee appointed four members to the Task Force steering committee and directed it to develop subcommittees to aid in its work. The steering committee and subcommittee membership is as follows:

### Steering Committee

John Arthos, English  
(COAS)

Clark Barwick, Communication,  
Professional & Computer Skills  
(Kelley School)

J Duncan, Informatics  
(Luddy School)

Micol Seigel, American Studies and History  
(COAS)

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### Subcommittees

A description of subcommittee charges is available [here](#).

#### LIAISON Subcommittee

- School of Education: Keith C. Barton, Chair
- Maurer School of Law: Steve Sanders
- Kelley School of Business: Chris Thomas
- Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering: J Duncan
- Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture, and Design: Mary Embry
- School of Nursing: Marsha Hughes-Gay
- School of Social Work: Carol Hostetter
- Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies: Marianne Kamp
- Media School: Galen Clavio
- College of Arts and Sciences: Paul Gutjahr
- School of Public Health: Margaret Melanie Lion
- Jacobs School of Music: Joey Tartell, Petar Jankovic
- O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs: Andrea Need, Susan Siena
- School of Medicine: Valerie O'Loughlin
- Libraries: Erin Ellis
- NTT caucus: Sofiya Asher

#### Subcommittee on COMPARABLE INSTITUTIONS

- Chris Thomas, Chair (Kelley)
- Chase McCoy (Luddy)

#### CLUSTERS MODEL Subcommittee

- Cathrine Reck, Chemistry (COAS)
- Lisa Jane Thomassen, Psychological and Brain Sciences (COAS)
- John Thomas Stone III, Economics (COAS)
- Justin Grossman (COAS)

#### ENDURING QUESTIONS MODEL Subcommittee

- Padraic Kenney, History and International Studies (COAS)
- Massimo Scalabrini, Italian (COAS)
- Diane Dallis-Comentale (Libraries)
- Chris DeSante, Political Science (COAS)
- Cooper Harriss, Religious Studies (COAS)
- David Kehoe, Biology (COAS)
- Joan Pong Linton, English (COAS)
- Kate Abramson, Philosophy (COAS)
- Phil Richerme, Physics (COAS)

#### POLICY Subcommittee

- Janine Drake, Chair, School Partnerships (OVPUAA), History (COAS)
  - Erin Ellis (Libraries)
  - Deborah Deliyannis, History (COAS)
  - Micol Seigel, American Studies (COAS)
  - Bradley Levinson (Education)
  - Colin Johnson (COAS, Gender Studies)
  - Maria Bucur (COAS, History)
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## I. Preface

A broad and rich general education is the very foundation of higher learning and a central part of the instructional mission of Indiana University, a feature that underpins our distinction as one of the nation's great public universities. The goals of such a program are not restricted to the common competencies (speaking, writing, numeracy) every young person needs to participate most fully in the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship, but also that specialized knowledge must be balanced by something else: the wisdom gained by cultivating a richness of perspectives, broad sympathies, reflective awareness, and openness to worlds beyond any one individual's immediate ken.

The relatively recent birth of our current university-wide Gen Ed program (2009) was a slow and complex process, because it was forged out of the intricate and varied interests of a sprawling modern university. As we now undertake, for the first time, to improve on that original draft, we embrace its admirable ambitions. We agree with the original Gen Ed framers that our general education curriculum should aspire to fulfill our highest purposes: it represents the university's most explicit attempt to ensure that the rich culture cultivated on our extraordinary campus is broadly shared across the student body as a hallmark of an undergraduate course of higher education. To this end, how does Indiana University's current Gen Ed program rate, and how could it be strengthened?

These two questions have broadly guided the Task Force on the Future of General Education at IU Bloomington created by the Faculty Council Executive Committee. After three years of study, consultations and conversations with the faculty, staff, administrators and students of Indiana University Bloomington and beyond, we offer this report as a planning guide and a historical document of record.

## II. General Education at Indiana University, Bloomington

### A. History

The value of a broad general education has been implicit in our academic mission throughout its history, as the archive of IU presidential addresses throughout the twentieth century confirms. Yet, its programmatic instantiation was slow and halting. A very basic one-page general education distribution plan was approved by the BFC in [1981](#). More robust versions of Gen Ed requirements were proposed starting in 1998 that included plans for a first-year experience. Efforts to find consensus around this more robust plan continued in fits and starts all through the early 2000s. [A 2000 memo](#) from the Vice President for Academic Affairs offers a snapshot of this process. The minutes of the April 4, 2006 BFC meeting record Professor William Wheeler's introduction of a draft proposal for the plan that would eventually be adopted:

We have been trying, as many of you know, over a period of maybe ten years in Bloomington, to structure a campus-level general education program. We have failed on

three or four notable occasions. And the Educational Policies Committee, however, has worked very hard on this and has produced a new proposal. It is a fairly general proposal. It is a discussion draft. It's meant to be an interim statement; it is not meant to be the final thing. ([minutes](#))

The basic formulation of our current program was finally approved by the BFC [in 2008](#) and implemented shortly thereafter.

## B. IUB Gen Ed Today

IU's [General Education program today](#) consists of three types of requirements. There are core competency requirements, distribution requirements, and specific content requirements. The core competency requirements are English composition and Math modeling. Distribution requirements encompass Arts and Humanities, Social and Historical Studies, and Natural and Mathematical Sciences. Specific content requirements consist of Diversity in the United States, Sustainability Literacy, Intensive Writing, Information Literacy, and Enriching Educational Experiences.

The three requirement sets are then split in two, between those that are the same for all students in Bloomington no matter their school or unit, and those that vary by school or unit. All students, for example, take the same English composition courses, whereas information literacy is satisfied in different ways by students in different units. **Courses common to students across campus are called “Common Ground,” and courses that vary by program are called “Shared Goals.”**

This Gen Ed Program was inaugurated in 2009 after a winding process that two of the authors described to the current Task Force as a set of pragmatic compromises. Since the implementation of this Gen Ed curriculum, state-wide system decisions in Indianapolis have reshaped the program, adding further constraints. These new requirements arise from the desire to allow students to transfer easily among institutions in the state system, a laudable goal of broadening access to higher education. A key statute passed in 2012 requires that all institutions offer interchangeable “competencies.” Not courses—the importance of faculty control of curriculum was respected—but “competencies,” so that courses can be designed by their instructors as long as they make progress towards the approved goals.

State guidance on the Common Core (available online [here](#)) includes these key paragraphs:

*4. Each Indiana public institution will be required to demonstrate that students transferring with the Indiana College Core have met the requirements of each competency by earning at least THREE credit hours in each of the six competencies, accounting for 18 credit hours.*

*5. Each Indiana public institution may determine the distribution of the additional 12 credit hours of the Indiana College Core in accordance with both the competencies of*

*the Indiana College Core and the curricular policies governing general education at the institution.*

These are the parameters within which Gen Ed at IU Bloomington must currently work. Neither IUB nor any other state institution can decide to require more or less than 30 Gen Ed credits. Given that bachelor's degrees must be kept to [120 credits total](#) and that Gen Ed must function so as to allow students to transfer from other Indiana institutions, this 30-credit limit represents a series of important restrictions.

### III. The BFC Gen Ed Task Force, 2019-2022

#### A. Charge

**The BFC Charge to the Task Force.** On April 3 2019, the Bloomington Faculty Council Executive Committee (hereafter BFC EC) commissioned a four-person "Task Force on the Future of General Education in the Third Century of the Bloomington Campus" steering committee and issued it the following [charge](#):

The principal objective of the task force is to assess and report on the future of general education on the Bloomington campus, making recommendations for evolutionary changes in its requirements and structure for adoption and implementation. It is expected that the task force will recommend revisions of BFC policies related to the scope, requirements, and implementation of this integral aspect of the undergraduate curriculum designed to build lifelong learning skills.

The steering committee and the subcommittees that it subsequently appointed have worked diligently for over three years (2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and currently in fall 2022) to respond to this charge and write this report.

#### B. Process and Methods

The Task Force's approach to its charge encompassed study of archival documents, consultation with creators of the original IU Gen Ed program, and intensive internal discussions as we gathered the institutional knowledge required to understand the history of the general education system at IUB and explored the available resources for future directions.

Recognizing its responsibility to the entire membership of university faculty, the steering committee began exploratory conversations with a variety of constituents and stakeholders, setting up its first faculty town hall on December 3, 2019. As specific questions emerged from that session and others, the steering committee sharpened and targeted its inquiries. It designed two large survey questionnaires, one for undergraduates, another for undergrad advisors ([here](#) and [here](#)). An [interim report](#) on components of possible revision to the program was delivered to the BFC in the spring of 2019.

Along with these campus conversations and in keeping with the BFC EC charge, the steering committee looked for guidance on the state of general education reform nationally. We consulted with the excellent leadership available, for example, from the American Association of Colleges, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Teagle Foundation, *The Journal of General Education*, *The Journal of Liberal Education*, and the 2018 *Chronicle of Higher Education Handbook on Gen Ed Reform*. We also benefited from helpful self reports from prominent university campuses such as Harvard, Virginia Tech, Depauw, Purdue, and IUPUI that had recently undertaken reforms.

Once the steering committee identified some of the most promising external resources, we organized a series of Zoom interviews with representatives from those campuses.

Ursinus College: On March 6, 2020, the steering committee interviewed Paul Stern, Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, and Mark Schneider, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College, Ursinus College (PA), to discuss Ursinus's [Open Questions Core](#) general educational model. The Open Questions Core frames its four-year gen ed curriculum around four fundamental questions: "What should matter to me?", "How should we live together?", "How can we understand the world?", and "What will I do?".

Concordia University: On March 23, 2020, we interviewed Scott Ashmon, Provost and Senior Vice President, Concordia University (Irvine, CA), to discuss Concordia's [Enduring Questions & Ideas](#) general education model. Enduring Q&I aims to engage students in dialogue "about some of life's enduring questions and ideas [through] the close reading of great works from around the globe and across time, critical and creative thinking, [and] effective writing." Concordia students take Q&I courses in small learning communities.

Boston College: On April 27, 2020, we interviewed Brian Gareau, Associate Dean for the Core and Associate Professor in Sociology, Boston College, to discuss BC's [Core Curriculum](#), which emphasizes interdisciplinary inquiry and discovery in order for students to "explore new ways of knowing and being, helping them discern who they want to be [and] how they want to live— and why."

As a result of this early consultation work, a number of Gen Ed reform models or components of models began to surface as promising and possibly appropriate elements of IUB Gen Ed reform. Some of these possibilities fell away quickly, others more slowly, as the task force studied external examples, floated the models to faculty and administrators, and considered closely their application to the IUB system.

An example of a promising reform that fell away involved various versions of what are called "clusters" or "linked courses," which have been recognized as a splendid means of fostering student and faculty excitement around interdisciplinary learning while also enhancing student appreciation for Gen Ed. Such models have been very successful elsewhere, although usually

in smaller colleges. The well-known Pennsylvania liberal arts institution, Bryn Mawr College, for example, hosts a [signature series](#) of these. What the task force discovered in pursuing this idea, both through the history of similar pilot experiments at IU and in our own study of the logistics of application to the IUB Gen Ed program, is that it would not be logistically manageable to scale up, but that even at a smaller scale, it would be unlikely to improve student experiences or perceptions of Gen Ed.

At the end of the second year of its process, the Task Force steering committee set up subcommittees with specific charges related to the principal questions that had emerged from our previous study and conversation. Two of the subcommittees were asked to consider specific Gen Ed reform components that had surfaced as feasible possibilities for IUB: “clusters” of required courses, and courses focused on grand “enduring questions.” One subcommittee was charged to investigate recent Gen Ed reforms at comparable institutions, which for this exercise were targeted mainly within the Big Ten. Another subcommittee was asked to develop two-way conversations with the main academic units on campus so that the Task Force could more systematically collect feedback from faculty. Finally, a policy subcommittee was formed to look closely into some of the more technical aspects of gen ed such as credit retrieval and RCM. All of these subcommittees reported back to the steering committee within the year. The first three subcommittees entered into a second round of questions from the steering committee. The last two remained as active bodies until this report was finalized.

The subcommittee results were fundamental to the ultimate direction the Task Force took in shaping its final package of proposals. Major reform options with great promise were accepted or rejected based on subcommittee recommendations. An example of a major reform option with great promise that was eventually set aside on the advice of a subcommittee was the linked-course model commonly known as “clusters,” “pathways,” or “themes.” Many universities have adopted this approach (e.g., [UCLA](#), [OSU](#), [Clemson](#), [CSU](#), [UVA](#)). Students select a path or track through the common courses as something not unlike a college minor. The subcommittee [reported](#) that the benefits of the approach would be outweighed by the liabilities, including the fact that it would lock students with changing interests into one path, and would likely prevent many students from graduating in four years.

In the latter part of the second year and beginning of the third, the steering committee ran two major Qualtrix surveys, one to all current sophomore and junior students at the university, and one to all undergraduate advisors. Designed, implemented, and interpreted in consultation with university experts in questionnaire and survey design ([Linda Shepherd](#), [John Kennedy](#), [George Rehrey](#), and [Emily Meanwell](#)), we sought to determine how students understood their gen ed experience through quantitative ratings, qualitative remarks, and advisor observations. The survey questions focused on the first two reform criteria guiding our task force, legibility and meaningfulness to students. Both surveys had healthy sample coverage and response rates. (Survey data can be found [here](#) and [here](#)).

With, then, ample consultation with internal and external experts in gen ed reform, extensive feedback from its targeted subcommittees, and data from the questionnaires, the steering

committee began collating its results in preparation for a last push toward recommendations to the BFC. By finding, floating, discarding, or preserving the most promising available reform options, the steering committee eventually settled on a constellation of reform components. At the beginning of the third year of its work (fall 2021), the steering committee met with the new BFC EC for a Q&A, and at EC's request, gave a [presentation](#) at a [full meeting](#) of the Bloomington Faculty Council with an update on its progress (December 7, 2021).

Over the summer and early fall of 2022, the steering committee took the emerging reform recommendations through a final testing process, soliciting feedback from additional institutional players and reflecting on how the overall package would work in concert, and began writing its final report. In mid-fall the steering committee began screening drafts of the report with reviewers in preparation for a final draft.

## IV. Reforming Gen Ed

### A. Analysis and Critique of Current Program

The compromises that created IUB's current Gen Ed program at best represent an ingenious solution to a very complicated set of institutional exigencies and constraints, and at worst, a patchwork of unevenly aligned incentives, interest group pressures, and [extra-campus imperatives](#). As feedback offered from nearly every campus unit to the Liaison Subcommittee (see the [collation](#) of this feedback) amply demonstrates, our Gen Ed program comes in for considerable critique, much of it fair. Even the faculty who shaped the original model now have serious concerns about its current state (see [memo](#) from Bill Wheeler). The problematic dynamics include:

1. **Competition for Gen Ed credits:** The combination of an RCM financing system and a thematically organized distribution model for Gen Ed has encouraged territorialism rather than collaboration based on strengths and areas of expertise. A generous appreciation for the strengths of colleagues has been sacrificed on the altar of RCM, with Gen Ed perhaps the leading arena for the scramble.

As one faculty member of the [Liaison Subcommittee](#) noted, "RCM encourages duplication and motivates every school/college to invent its own Gen Ed courses for purposes of competition, in order to capture those student enrollments."

There is no reason to cast blame on any particular institutional players for this; it is an unanticipated feature of the system itself. One of the perverse incentives of this system is to create customized "Common Ground" courses *within* programs that reinforce specialization. This, of course, works directly against a commonly-articulated goal in Gen Ed: to have students exposed to concepts and structures from outside of their major, to ensure that a broad-based education in Arts and Sciences accompanies the development of particular and vocational skills.



2. **Student confusion:** The haphazard feel of the “check the boxes” model leaves students without a good sense of the overall purpose of Gen Ed. Over 50% of students in the 2021 Gen Ed survey indicated they did not understand the value of Gen Ed courses. Likewise, [the advisors survey](#) shows 80% of advisors estimate that less than 50% of students “understand the educational goals of our Gen Ed program.” Other aspects of the program exacerbate the problem, such as the delegation of the “Shared Goals” requirements (diversity, sustainability, information literacy, enrichment, etc.) to units and schools, which adds layers of opacity from students’ points of view. (See [Report for the 2021 Gen Ed Student Survey](#)).

3. **Student rejection:** The complexity and diffuse nature of the current model has resulted not only in students’ lack of understanding but in failure to appreciate the purpose and value of a general education. The narrowest of majorities—52% of students in the [Gen Ed survey](#)—disagreed with the statement that Gen Ed courses “are a total waste of my time.” [The advisors survey](#) shows that 85% of advisors believe less than half of their students think non-major Gen Ed Courses “are meaningful for their educational goals,” and 61% of advisors think less than half of their students find these courses “meaningful to their lives.” Combined with the frustration over how hard it can be for many students to fit the courses into their schedules – not enough sections of Finite, say, or too many requirements overall – this generates great resentment, making students in Gen Ed classrooms angry, recalcitrant, and resistant. Some students strongly resist cooperating with their own learning in courses they feel compelled to take, compromising learning and making it truly unpleasant for faculty to teach those courses.

This is not a fault of our institution in any specific way, but simply a problem of the overall approach. An endemic problem of the distribution model is that in sampling a wide variety of ways of knowing, the student learning experience feels diffused and random (see [Kenneth Boning’s national overview, “Coherence in General Education: A Historical Look”](#)). In addition, for many students, selection of courses may be guided by expediency (highest density of gen ed credits), convenience (what fits into their schedule), or ease (a reputation for ‘easy’ credits in otherwise ‘hard’ areas). All of these work against creating a cohesive and meaningful student experience.

4. **Faculty confusion:** As feedback to the Liaison Subcommittee made clear, many faculty feel confused by and disaffected with the current program. Some instructors are unaware that a course they are teaching fulfills a Gen Ed requirement. The review process for certifying new courses to count for Gen Ed categories is frustratingly opaque to many, as is the assessment process.

5. **Substantive weakness of the distribution method.** A checklist of courses can fail to cohere. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni ([ACTA](#)) explains the weakness of a “distribution model” [thus](#):

Distribution requirements—a system in which students select one or more courses from broad academic areas like “Humanities,” “Quantitative Reasoning,” or “Arts and

Culture”—may seem like an appealing idea on paper. Distribution requirements appear to combine the virtues of a core while giving students more room for choice, but in practice they usually allow students to graduate with only a thin and patchy education. Within each subject area, it is not uncommon for students to have dozens or even hundreds of courses from which to choose—many of them narrow or niche.

6. **Simultaneously insufficient *and* excessive oversight:** Assessment of the Gen Ed program is [a shared responsibility](#) of the various teaching and administrating parties. The [General Education Committee](#) oversees the entrance of courses into the Shared Goals curriculum. In recent years, it has also taken on the responsibility of spot-checking the adherence of “variable title” courses to their Shared Goals responsibilities in a process known as currency review. Shared Goals course instructors are systematically asked to complete a learning outcomes self-assessment (LOA) by showing how their course fulfilled one of its stated learning objectives, in a report that is collected by the General Education Monitoring Subcommittee, GEMS. [Units are tasked to report](#) to GEMS periodically on the effectiveness of their contribution to both Common Ground and Shared Goals curriculum. There are several other oversight responsibilities at the university level to ensure that the Gen Ed program as a whole is being adequately implemented and financed.

Throughout the three years of our task force a number of faculty have regularly complained to us, both in informal conversation and in the town halls (a) that this assessment structure is too top-down, (b) that the course acceptance process into the system is arbitrary and inflexible, and (c) that there is no meaningful assessment feedback at the level of individual course work. Faculty confusion and resentment of the assessment process was expressed clearly to the Liaison Subcommittee:

“The assessment expectations can seem like a bureaucratic waste of time, meant mainly to be able to claim that our campus is ‘doing assessment.’”

“It seems like a waste of time and effort for faculty in the College to have to seek approval for Gen Ed credit for those courses that already have CASE credit.”

“th[e] assessment piece of General Education does not work well or work at all (except for matters of institutional accreditation).”

In addition, the task force has heard consistent complaints that the LOA process does not provide a substantive opportunity for discussion or feedback about learning goals or outcomes.

7. **“Leakage.”** The commitment to access which allows the Gen Ed core to be portable has consequences far beyond the implications for transfer students. It has created a system in which IU students can and frequently do save tuition dollars by completing Gen Ed requirements at an Ivy Tech or an ISU (see [Reddit discussion](#)). This draws away resources that the university counted upon when it admitted those students, compromises the rigor of

an IUB education with a tier of courses that may not meet R-1 standards, and eats away at students' on-campus experience. On the other hand, [as Bill Wheeler reminded the task force](#), “full portability was THE challenge in the development of the present Gen Ed program. Any changes . . . that do not preserve portability would return Exploratory students to the chaos that prevailed before the unity of the present Gen Ed program was achieved.” As IUB has navigated the ICHE/ICC landscape, it has developed a fine-grained appreciation for its hard stops and points of possibility. There is wiggle room if IUB faculty and administrators are willing to plot the course.

**8. The possible side-lining of the optional “Shared Goals.”** Of the five shared goals (diversity, sustainability, intensive writing, information literacy, educational enrichment), the first two are required, and the last three are optional. This required/optional distinction already embeds an important institutional judgment with significant ramifications, and we want to think carefully about these ramifications. Making a goal required is, by the very fact, a judgment that it is more essential as a general education goal.

A strength of the optional designation is that any unit can operationalize the learning experience in a more controlled and focused way. For example, Informatics has built the “Information Literacy” goal as an integral and important part of its curriculum. It carefully oversees and assesses this goal for its majors, and its *optional* designation can mitigate the unfortunate tendency of learning goals to be reduced to a check-the-box demand.

A weakness of the optional designation is that, by definition, that learning goal can be side-lined. Let us stipulate that the ongoing process of curricular governance at the university level involved discretionary judgments about what should be required or optional, and that these judgments reflected the historical, cultural, institutional, and pedagogical values that were salient in 2009. Recent campus conversations about the urgency of diversity and sustainability instruction have reinforced the “required” designation for those two shared goals. What we can say in this report is that the “optional” designation for the last three shared goals should not be regarded as fixed or permanent. Any one of them could rise to the surface as an imperative that requires us to think seriously about its status privilege.

An overall problem of the Shared Goals is that the narrative descriptions under the category headings are characterized by a variable complexity, breadth, or vagary that run the risk of rendering these goals meaningless in execution. Units that decide they do not want to take these goals seriously can sweep them under the carpet.

**9. The particular vulnerability of the sustainability requirement.** Allowing each unit to determine the ways in which its students will fulfill the sustainability requirement, established just last year, and to evaluate whether its courses fulfill the mandate for the requirement seems like an invitation to ignore the principled commitment to the survival of the planet that motivated this innovation. Like the creep of the meaning of the term “diversity,” sustainability might veer away from a focus on climate change, especially if the political winds push against

instruction on the topic. Given the novelty of this requirement, we withhold judgment here, simply noting the concern.

**10. Precarity of the College's ability to support General Education.** The College of Arts and Sciences plays a unique role in the support of general education. To recognize this is not to diminish the roles of the other schools and units. There is a tremendous variety of career and civic values embodied in the professional schools and a splendidly wide spectrum of utilitarian, humanitarian, civic, technical, scientific, and creative orientations. This capacious breadth of mission is one of our university's great strengths. We should indeed be justly proud of the richness of interdisciplinary, philanthropic, civic-minded, culturally variegated, intellectually diverse values that our many program units offer. But as host to the oldest core of Arts and Sciences, the College is the vital heart of a liberal arts education on this campus, and as such, it is one of the great strengths of the university community. Failure to recognize the College's role in Gen Ed accelerates the problematic dynamic of Gen Ed becoming more a site of competition for curricular real estate rather than a common good nurtured in a spirit of collaboration and accommodation.

In the most recent review of IU Bloomington's financial structure, the deans of all the IUB schools and budget-focused administrators wrote that the College is the center of the campus's "rich core liberal arts education." This 2017 report from the Review Committee of the University Office of Finance, Administration & Budget, a portion of which is linked [here](#), is worth quoting at some length. It explains beautifully IU's dedication to the liberal arts:

Indiana University has a long tradition of commitment to a liberal arts education, which includes the sciences. IU is dedicated to developing the habits of mind that enable students to question critically, think logically, communicate clearly, act creatively, and live ethically. These foundational skills are not only those that employers indicate they value highly, but they are critical for life success in a world of complexity, uncertainty, and change.

The report recognizes the ways liberal arts teaching have been constrained in recent years, including by the 2009 Gen Ed program:

The liberal arts are, nonetheless, under threat despite their intrinsic and instrumental value. Specifically, multiple national trends including the expansion of dual credit programs in high schools, transfer credits from community colleges, the increasing real cost of college that yields return-on-investment focus for students and their parents, and the rising relative representation of out-of-state and international students who tend to have a professional focus, have led to a decline in the number of credit hours taken in the liberal arts. These external factors, when combined with internal factors such as the 2010 general education reform that resulted in students taking a greater proportion of courses inside the school that houses their degree, have led to IU students graduating with a smaller proportion of their courses located in the liberal arts tradition.

The report goes on to examine the funding structure and how it might be adjusted to insure the healthy “support of liberal arts and sciences.” In other words, the university at the highest level has understood the central value of the College’s contribution to a liberal education and the increasing structural strains placed on the service to that mission.

In concluding this section, we note that this partial list of problematic dynamics in our current Gen Ed is a strong indication that revisiting the program now is warranted. Although Gen Ed has evolved in ways the originators had not anticipated, the “common/shared” framework they conceived for it was a pragmatic organizing logic for a university as large and diverse as ours. In fact, this twin logic embodies something essential about the still-relevant ideal of a general education in an era of expertise and disciplinarity. Once past the few required courses deemed to be the necessary, “basic” tools for post-secondary learning (writing, speaking, calculating), the *generality* of a general education lives in tension with the inescapable specificity of modern knowledge. The fundamental structuring ideas of society, those that in distant eras might have approached something closer to a universal sense (e.g., health, justice, culture, reason, truth, etc.), are now radically dispersed across ever-multiplying disciplinary perspectives. The idea of “shared” learning attempts to give students an appreciation for the contemporary diversity that constitutes a cultivated sense of the plenitude and elasticity of multiple “ways of knowing.” We judge that our students need the capacity to grasp this complexity. As Hamlet admonished his loyal friend, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Gen Ed’s cultivated competence is precisely what so many employers tell us they most prize in well-rounded employees. Many of our students will eventually appreciate that this flexibility is one of the very best “instruments for living.”

The **common/shared** logic of our Gen Ed program is not a specious or spurious compromise; it follows reasonably from the competing demands of a complex system. Nevertheless, for such a model to meet its general education aspirations, it has to be done well, and there are plenty of signs that our 2009 program is suffering some growing pains, has developed some distorting effects, and is not well understood or appreciated by students.

## B. Criteria Guiding Reform

Over the course of the steering committee’s discussions in the first year, criteria for Gen Ed reform began to emerge from our deliberations and conversations. Important nuances about these goals remained in tension, but we found consensus on the main criteria:

- #1. The program should be comprehensible to students.
- #2. The program should feel meaningful and legitimate to students.
- #3. The faculty should believe and be invested in the reform proposals.
- #4. The program should align value and feasibility for the campus.

The first criterion requires a commitment to simplicity wherever possible, though not at the expense of other goals.

The wording of the second criterion changed slightly over time. Elsewhere, some prominent efforts at gen ed reform have used the word “inspiring” as a goal, so we had used this word initially, but the Task Force came to think that that descriptor may not align with all the pedagogical aims of our gen ed.

One tension that has remained with us throughout has to do with the fourth criterion. We have struggled to know whether we should approach our task as setting out an ideal to which we might aspire or to put forward something immediately practicable that would take fully into account IUB’s real-world constraints (cost, vested interests, etc.). This tension was inherent in the original charge. As written, the Executive Committee’s charge to the Task Force said explicitly that we should make “recommendations for *evolutionary* changes,” but in our inaugural meeting, the Executive Committee pressed us not to weigh our imagination down with administrative or budgetary limitations, and to treat this process as a “visioning exercise.” All through our deliberations, we have tried to find the right balance between these two imperatives. We did not want to aim low, but we also realize that reform ideas are not proposed in a vacuum. Where this tension remained particularly high, we reflect it in the report recommendations.

These tensions are particularly relevant to the question of how to implement high-quality versions of the three traditionally required “skills” courses that comprise the base or foundation of general education: speaking, writing, and math (each have various proprietary names on different campuses). Two of these requirements are in place at the university level at IUB (English Composition and Mathematical Modeling). It will always be a challenge in our changing educational environment to create, administer, and staff courses that fulfill these most basic foundational competencies, so we urge the administration and the relevant program leaders and curriculum experts to continue working together in order to provide the best course experiences possible for students. As a general statement of principle, the Task Force (1) affirms the critical role of the foundational courses as essential competencies of human citizenship, (2) urges that the university respect faculty expertise over these curricula, and (3) encourages administration and faculty to work collaboratively to insure these classes fulfill their crucial role in the Gen Ed mission.

### C. Significant Gen Ed Reform Components

**Four Categories of Reform Proposals.** The BFC EC charged the Task Force to make “recommendations for evolutionary change” to the requirements and structure of general education. The distance between ideal solutions to problems identified in Gen Ed and pragmatic institutional limitations has been a constant tension throughout our process; we resolved this tension by establishing a vision or regulative ideal alongside a flexible, graduated set of options for change that will move us toward this ideal. In practical terms, the Task Force developed four categories of recommendation:

- a full four-year general education *framework* (first-year experience, reformed distribution approach, senior capstone) as a vision for a robust third-century general education program;
- a concrete plan to refigure the distributed Common Ground courses (an “Enduring & Urgent Questions” approach) immediately;
- the strengthening of an existing themed requirement (social justice);
- practical administrative changes for the smoother functioning of the current system: i.e. *de minimis* concrete steps for fixing flaws in the current program.

The first two categories are contained in items #1-#3 immediately below. Reform to the diversity requirement is described in item #4. Recommended program adjustments and improvements are given their own separate sections (headings **D** and **E**) below.

## **An Enduring & Urgent Questions Approach Within a New Bookend Framework**

### **1. First-Year Experience**

In the three years we have been listening to faculty, there has not been a more regular, fervent appeal to the task force than to consider some type of “first-year experience” as a way to underpin a first-class general education program. There was a strong push from [1998](#) to 2001 to make a first-year experience a centerpiece of our general education. Faculty and administrators who have directly or indirectly experienced this model at other institutions report on its unique value in providing a shared academic experience for incoming students that builds a sense of community and shared purpose. The way it anchors undergraduate education in a broadly shared social experience creates a common ground in material and memory, a base on which specialization can build and a framework for all that follows, leaving an indelible and positive impression on students. It also deeply affects how they understand and appreciate general education through the rest of the program.

It is because of this plea from respected, experienced educators that we returned again and again to the possibility of a common first-year experience, asking how such a component might be organized. There are several exciting ways to do it—a great books model; an integrated year-long, writing-speaking-mediated communication course, etc.—several of which would easily satisfy the state-level (ICC) requirements, ensuring that overall credit-hour requirements do not increase. Members of the task force steering committee participated in a series of [Cornerstone](#) workshops to learn how a successful first year common experience was instituted in a near-by state university, and asked a variety of stakeholders to help us imagine how such a program could be instituted on this campus.

The range of programmatic options for a first year experience is quite wide, and would change dramatically depending on other Gen Ed reforms (see D.1 RCM/Finance below)—anything from a six-credit two-semester writing/speaking/digital literacy course similar to [Penn State’s](#) now-famous [first-year sequence](#), “Rhetoric & Civic Life,” which is both very popular with students and

a great branding opportunity for the institution, to a credit/no-credit [“first year experience seminar”](#) that focuses on transition to college life competencies. This could also be the place in gen ed where students explore [the profound and increasing importance of new literacies](#) in society through active learning projects. The other obvious thing to determine is how such a requirement would integrate with the various paths to graduation (transfer students, etc.) that we now have.

## 2. “Enduring & Urgent Questions”: Using “Big Ideas” to Organize Distributed Common Ground Courses

While our recommendation for a first-year experience is not yet specific, we propose a clear and immediately practical reform of the Common Ground curriculum that we are calling “Enduring & Urgent Questions” (hereafter EUQ). Of all the major revisions considered by the task force, EUQ promises the least distance between degree of improvement and feasibility of implementation. It would, on the one hand, require no major structural changes to the current Gen Ed system, and on the other, satisfy the four criteria for successful reform. The basic idea behind this reform is that general education courses would not be organized primarily around categories of learning goals, but instead around animating (enduring, urgent) questions. The EUQ reform does not change course content. It looks at the subject of the course from a slightly different angle, one that relates more directly to our Gen Ed mission, and one that students—because it is framed as a great human question—might find more approachable, and perhaps even inspiring.

EUQ is the task force’s version of an approach to general education reform that has been introduced as the guiding principle of gen ed program revision at many institutions across the country. Two versions of it were featured in the 2018 [Chronicle of Higher Education special issue](#) on general education reform (Concordia College Irvine, Ursinus College–Pennsylvania), which the task force steering committee interviewed for this report. Ursinus developed a variation of Immanuel Kant’s famous version of the great questions (*What is man? What may I hope? What can I know? What ought I to do?*) for its reimagining of distribution courses.

The special value of an EUQ-like model was most succinctly expressed in an observation made by the Associate Provost at Concordia in the *Chronicle* handbook: [“Learning outcomes don’t motivate students. Questions do”](#) (11). As [the Enduring Questions subcommittee](#) pointed out in its consideration of this approach, distribution area or theme approaches to general education topics tend to get reduced to checklist accomplishments, whereas the open-ended nature of a great question challenges students to face the implications of their learning, understand the open nature of learning itself, and take agency for their own exploration of the curriculum. There is some evidence that this is in fact what has happened: “The National Survey of Student Engagement now ranks Concordia freshmen in the top 10 percent in engaging with diverse perspectives, collaborative learning, analytic thinking, and reflective integrative learning. Beforehand, according to the Associate Provost, they were in the middle of the pack” ([Chronicle of Higher Education special issue](#), 11).



When President Whitten was asked [in an August 2022 WFIU interview](#) what she thinks should guide our work at Indiana University, she responded that we have to strengthen our focus on “how everything we do impacts the student.” Framing General Education courses in terms of the enduring and urgent questions that students face in life is a way to give real focus to the value and meaning of their college studies. Course learning goals and outcomes are obviously important methods for structuring curriculum and pedagogy, but they do not necessarily give students such a clear sense of what is directly and deeply meaningful about what they are studying. An EUQ orientation highlights the existential, ethical, and social import of learning, something that many undergraduate students crave at this time in their lives. Moreover, what is enduring and urgent about a course topic is posed to the student as a *question*, which supports our belief as an academic community in open inquiry. Such a framing cultivates openness as a habit of mind, and gives agency to students to seek out answers for themselves. The focus that enduring and urgent questions brings to Common Ground courses could also ensure that topics such as sustainability and diversity receive the exigent weight and direction that students and faculty have called for with increasing insistence.

Perhaps the most important reason to consider EUQ as a reform option is that it would help focus the Common Ground curriculum more squarely on the core mission of Gen Ed, which is to ready our students for productive membership in society. It can at times be difficult to justify the significant investment of credit hours in general education coursework to increasingly career-oriented students and parents, but amidst the genuinely frightening breakdown of the cultural and political touchstones and norms that bind us to each other, it should no longer be difficult to see the value of this work. EUQ points Common Ground courses directly at that high goal, clarifying the stakes for the many students who see the gen ed requirement as a pointless checklist.

The implementation of EUQ reform we have suggested asks faculty who teach a common course in the distribution to do exactly what the Enduring Questions Subcommittee did: reimagine a class around one or more of the enduring/urgent questions. This might seem at first blush like a big ask, but the surprising thing the task force found in testing this idea out is how smoothly and easily already-existing Common Ground courses can adapt to such a framing. Faculty in both the steering committee and the subcommittee who tried this reimagining exercise reported without exception that this was not particularly difficult or problematic. This is because, again, the course content doesn’t fundamentally change; *it just looks at the material from a different angle, one that relates more directly to our Gen Ed mission, and one that students have an easier time assimilating.*

### **Enduring Questions Subcommittee**

The task force commissioned a dedicated subcommittee to consider an enduring questions approach as a possible component of Common Ground reform. This subcommittee met during the late summer and fall of 2021 and produced [a report](#) in the spring of 2022. The subcommittee was given the following charge:

Could Gen Ed distribution courses be reconfigured to respond to one or more enduring question(s)? (e.g., *What should matter to me? How should we live together? How can we understand the world? What will I do?*). Theoretically this approach would not require any change to the administrative apparatus, the distributions, or anything other than how the instructor asks students to approach the course theme. Can you conceive of an EUQ that would work for IUB?

In response to these questions, the subcommittee took on the task of imagining how such a revision might look and outlining a hypothetical version of “Enduring Questions” for IUB. After developing a possible set of questions, the subcommittee interrogated them for weaknesses, gaps, overall merit and viability:

Would an enduring questions approach be a substantial improvement, as a substantive matter, to our GenEd, from the faculty perspective? (Is it worth the candle?)

Do you think an enduring questions approach would inspire students more than our current distribution model, or at least improve their belief in its legitimacy?

After receiving the internal report from the subcommittee, the task force steering committee slightly amended the EUQ title: “Enduring and Urgent Questions” (EUQ) in response to a discussion and comments from faculty during the BFC interim report. The steering committee concluded that an “enduring and urgent questions” approach to the common courses would give us the flexibility to put a spot-light on the questions that faculty and students feel are most pressing in our society now, but also respond to the abiding value of our curriculum in tackling evergreen questions of the human condition.

## Results

EUQ has the unique advantage that it holds the promise of responding to all of the task force’s four primary goals for gen ed reform as articulated above (see IV.B).

### **#1. The program should be comprehensible to students.**

Discussions with faculty at other institutions using this approach, along with the public-facing communications at their universities, suggest that it is quite legible to students and lends itself to effective messaging to students, parents, and the wider community.

### **#2. The program should feel legitimate and meaningful to students.**

As colleges and universities that have implemented versions of this approach have testified, students respond to great questions as more meaningful than learning goals.

### **#3. The faculty should believe and be invested in the reform proposals.**

The Enduring Questions subcommittee developed genuine enthusiasm for the model in the year-long process of consideration and practice, and this endorsement matches the judgment of the steering committee. Although these responses do not assure the same reaction of the faculty as a whole, they suggest the model merits strong consideration.

#### **#4. The program should align value and feasibility for the campus.**

The Enduring Questions subcommittee concluded with a high degree of certainty that enduring questions could “map onto the current Breadth of Inquiry requirements, both in distribution and in credit hours.” Because this approach would not involve fundamental structural change to the current distribution model, its financial viability is as strong as its pedagogical value.

### **An Appeal to Faculty to Give Thoughtful Consideration to this Reform Approach**

The striking number of negative responses to our students’ and advisors’ survey questionnaires about the clarity and value of our current Common Ground curricula inspire a clear call to action.

When half of our students do not feel their Gen Ed courses are working for them, it is incumbent on us to find some way to address this perception. In tandem with the assessment reform detailed in sub-section 3 below, the task force believes EUQ holds promise to reinvigorate these courses as relevant and meaningful to student needs and desires. Although there is no guaranteed solution to address this exigency, EUQ (a) is designed precisely to address this problem, (b) comes highly recommended by institutions that have tried it, (c) would not change the structure of the current system or create major administrative problems, and (d) has proven workable and attractive to those of us who have given it a preliminary test.

In sum, an enduring/urgent questions approach to Common Ground coursework will give unambiguous focus, for both students and faculty, to the critical exigencies of a general education in Indiana University’s third century. EUQ does not disturb either the established curricular categories of Common Ground courses or the existing learning goals of individual classes. Rather, it spotlights for reflective awareness and life application the enormous stakes that animate our desire to become better educated members of a complex and diverse democratic society.

### **Testing Out EUQ at Scale**

To adopt this approach, the Enduring Questions Subcommittee [designed six practical steps](#). A trial prior to taking these commitments might help develop a practical and efficient EUQ reform. Three initiatives could be carried out simultaneously over the course of a trial semester.

1. A small sample of volunteers could be enlisted to revise their syllabi with a focus on an enduring or urgent question, teach the course, and report back to the faculty. If this were

successful, the BFC would decide whether it would ask all Common Ground faculty to adopt the approach, or use an invitational, or graduated method for adoption – i.e., invite early adopters with generous administration-funded incentives, and build momentum toward critical mass.

2. The entire faculty could be petitioned to submit “draft” enduring or urgent questions that best suit their Common Ground courses, and from this a faculty committee would develop a question pool that would be both comprehensive of these contributions and still meet the standard of recognizably enduring/urgent questions for an undergraduate gen ed program.
3. A faculty committee could devise a system, perhaps analogous to the system used by Purdue faculty in their new Cornerstone program, to maintain and keep fresh a workable set of questions. In [this document](#), Purdue faculty explain the methodology they use to create and update a list of course options (in their case, a list of great books), designed with sufficient flexibility to get buy-in from all faculty. (See p.11 “How the Program Was Rolled Out at Purdue”). Alternatively, a more bottom-up approach could be designed in which Common Ground faculty wishing to translate a current course to the EUQ model would workshop a course proposal through a standards-and-practices process with committee oversight.

### 3. Senior Capstone

The basic principle of a senior capstone experience is to provide a structured opportunity for students to reflect on their college career, applying what they have learned to some kind of summative project of their own making or doing, and turn their accumulated gen ed experience reflectively toward their futures. It is no accident that the best general education programs the task force has reviewed are framed by both first-year and capstone experiences. These experiences greatly mitigate against the scattered impressions of a distribution model, as noted above.

A senior project that helps students see the living connections in their coursework would inherently increase their appreciation for general education. If students themselves are asked to discover the live connections across their general education experience, they would be engaging in the kind of higher order synthesis of knowledge that our gen ed mission explicitly demands. In addition, giving students the luxury to reflect on what their learning has meant for them would bring greater coherence to their years at IUB, and provide a meaningful springboard to life learning beyond college.

Universities and colleges have been experimenting with senior capstone experiences for decades, and [as the literature shows](#), there are numerous ways to approach this component of gen ed. A [2016 survey](#) of the senior capstone experience by the National Resource Center, summarized concisely [here](#), confirms. In fact we already have within the current Shared Goals

an *optional* senior experience opportunity which some programs take very seriously, and for precisely the reasons articulated above. In order to make a senior capstone *requirement* feasible at IU, however, we would have to find an approach that does not place undue burdens on existing programs that already have heavy curriculum loads. Even more than cost, which is offset by the tremendous publicity that capstone projects can generate for an institution, the curricular feasibility issue is a constraint that dictates the permissible range of options.

### Capstone Implementation Options

Given the load constraint mentioned above, one or more of the following versions of a senior capstone experience might be feasible:

- **Enduring and Urgent Questions Extension.** One option that readily suggests itself—recommended by the EUQ subcommittee as building on its approach to the distributions— is to require that students take one of their EUQ courses as a designated capstone in their late-junior or senior year. The capstone course would, in one version, return to an enduring or urgent question from a previous course and reflect on the difference of perspective achieved in sustained engagement with this question. For the second iteration to count as a capstone, it would require the production of a reflective paper or other summative project that demonstrated the student’s growth in knowledge and experience with the question.
- **Already existing capstones.** Existing capstone experiences that are now optional would obviously be included for the requirement. Programs that feature these robust versions of a capstone would be featured or highlighted by the university, giving them the recognition they so richly deserve. Moreover, they would now be augmented by their direct connection to the newly energized and meaningful general education mission. Further, the administration could encourage the expansion of more capstone experiences in more units across the university through incentives, so that they would become more the rule than the exception.

#### Existing Capstone Example: Informatics

The Luddy School of Informatics features [a capstone project](#) in its [undergraduate major](#). Its example is instructive:

*“Luddy’s B.S. in Informatics core curriculum ensures your technical skill level, but the heart of informatics is solving real-world problems. Through a senior capstone project, informatics majors showcase what they have learned by solving a specific problem for a local individual or organization, or by finding a broader solution for the world at large.*

*“You can complete the required capstone project in class or through an internship, by joining our [nonprofit Serve IT clinic](#), or completing a research-based thesis project. In the course option, you’ll work to solve a specific problem by creating an app or website, a*

*strategic plan, a policy proposal, or a device. The internship and thesis options involve working with a faculty advisor or employer to complete a project.*

*“Your informatics capstone is your chance to show how your perspective and skills can change the world. Use it to explore areas where you would like to pursue further education or demonstrate your skills to prospective employers.”*

As this confirms, the reflective feature of the capstone is built into an act of practical application, offering a summative translation of earlier skills acquisition into a real-world activity. Students draw widely from their academic learning to date through an active learning project animated by their own agentic energy.

- Linked Courses Option.** Various versions of so-called “linked” courses have been periodically attempted in recent IU history, and faculty sometimes create linked experiences on a given topic on their own, because they see a need or chance to do so. The task force learned, through extended interviews with administration and faculty, that hard experience weighs against the linked-course model on a large scale. Previous attempts to scale them up as a broad-based requirement proved to be a costly administrative nightmare. Yet, including a linked course as an option for a menu of senior capstone possibilities would make perfect sense. The very structure of the linked course accomplishes the goals of the capstone as we have articulated it. We should learn from our past experience and design such linked courses in ways that avoid previously discovered problems. For example, pairs of instructors would work more easily than teams, and the nature of the collaboration could be designed to combine maximum effect with minimum additional labor.

*Four-Year General Education Framework Conclusion.* Those who might worry that an ambitious overhaul of an existing gen ed program at a state school as large and complex as ours is not feasible need only look to the reform that has just been implemented at [Ohio State University](#). Their structural reform is significantly more ambitious than what we propose here. *All* undergraduates, regardless of school, adhere strictly to the same requirements; individual course [assessment](#) is systematic, thorough, and regular; and their mid-years “Themes” menu is similar to the most ambitious “clusters” approach we have encountered anywhere. The one goal we have proposed that is comparable in scope to OSU is the bookend structure laid out above, and we propose it for the same reason they do. Here is from the OSU [announcement](#):

The new GE is a multiyear program in which courses build upon each other, rather than a menu of unconnected courses. It begins with an introductory seminar and concludes with a capstone in which students demonstrate how their thinking has evolved over the course of their undergraduate studies. Consequently, these Bookend courses give the program cohesiveness. (OSU)

We have suggested much more flexible and modest paths to achieving the bookend features for a new framework, and a mid-years approach (EUQ) that would not at all disturb the current allocation of curricular resources.

#### **4. The Racial Justice (“Diversity”) Requirement**

In April of 2016, a group of students was convened into a Diversity Task Force with provost support. The group came before the BFC to present their findings. They had concluded that the Diversity in the United States, or DUS requirement was less than effective for several reasons: its focus on “diversity” rather than “social justice”; the fact that in some cases it was not curricular; and its location in “Shared Goals” rather than the “Common Ground.” They proposed a series of changes which were endorsed by the BFC but have yet to be implemented, as this section will detail.

The 2016 student Task Force discovered that the various campus units implemented the DUS requirement in vastly different ways: some via extracurricular means such as professional academic support systems or accreditation, some via dedicated courses, others through courses containing a component that focused on race or gender. There seemed to have been some entropy in the interpretation and application of the DUS requirement, the students noted, pointing out that its last revision had been in 1990.

The students offered several proposals such as placing required social justice-oriented courses under the World Languages & Cultures and DUS umbrellas, or cross-listing social justice courses that could also fulfill Arts and Humanities (A&H) or Social and Historical Studies (S&H) requirements.

The “social justice courses” the students envisioned would, “examine historical and contemporary oppression, the politics of identity and (the) strategies for resistance with an emphasis on intersectional identities, minority and underrepresented races, nationalities, genders, ability, and sexual orientations.” They took pains to emphasize the importance of intersectional approaches, insisting that a social justice course would need to engage more than a single axis of discrimination.

Bureaucratically, the students had a range of great ideas. Anxious not to further burden the traditional social justice-oriented departments, they suggested that instructors within each department self-nominate or be identified by others as “faculty champions” who would come together to create social justice-oriented courses in each unit. They hoped a larger number of associate instructors would be supported to participate in teaching these courses and advocated for the creation of a new administrative position, a director of social justice education within OVPUE, to lead the committee of faculty champions, ensure that the curriculum they created would align with the group’s stated learning goals, and provide support for underrepresented faculty who might gravitate to this cluster. (BFC minutes of this discussion from April 5, 2016 can be found [here](#).)

The BFC resoundingly endorsed the students' recommendations, immediately and unanimously passing an enthusiastic resolution, which is copied [here](#).

Three years later, in April of 2019, the chair of the EPC presented to the BFC the results of its long process of fulfilling this mandate. It had kept the DUS requirement in the "Shared Goals," changing only the dictate that Schools "should" fulfill the requirement to a "must." The EPC had also generated learning outcomes for the goal. Inexcusably, no other changes were recommended. Today, the DUS requirement still languishes among the "Shared Goals," still fulfilled by accreditation, co-curricular activities, or courses. Social justice seems never even to have been considered. Intersectional approaches feature nowhere in the policy.

The BFC is beholden to the students who organized in 2016 and to the expression of support the entire body lent to their effort then. Most importantly, the reforms adopted in supposed fulfillment of their recommendations have ignored the crucial difference between the ways "diversity" and "social justice" function in large institutional contexts. At this point in time, "social justice" is more pointed and effective, while "diversity" has lost much of its intended reparative implication.

Scholarship in the field supports this distinction. The critical ethnic studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott has written strongly in this regard. In the journal *Public Culture* in 2019, Walcott called for attention to this dilemma:

Will we turn toward truth and ethics or toward a retrenchment of our terrible past? Should we turn toward truth and ethics, it would mean that we are seriously ready to tackle the conditions and the terms under which we might come to live differently together in the present and the future. However, to achieve such a desire, and to make it an actuality, we would have to come to terms with the lies that presently structure our current social relations and sociality, including those structuring the founding of our institutions — and I am suggesting that the rhetoric of diversity is one of those lies.

The lies I refer to are a set of ideas that are propagated concerning the evolved nature of our society in which contemporary individual and personal life is cut off from the former dreadful collective past. In the present we are told we should not reference the dreadful past as animating our current conditions of racial inequality—a past that produced these conditions in the first place. ([Walcott 393-408](#))

Pointing to an instance in which the presence of white women in a previously all-male, all-white body was described as conferring "diversity" despite the lack of Black members, Walcott points out that "the language of people of color (POC) and diversity is an obscuring language (Sexton 2010; Nopper 2011). By this I mean that the logics of POC and diversity lack specificity and therefore can continue to do the work of whiteness." In this context, he continued, "the lie of multiculturalism then functions to produce a compact in which certain kinds of diversity can be celebrated as standing in for collective representation" (397).



Walcott argues that the term “diversity” is no longer an effective liberatory instrument, because it can be used to imply that the goal is heterogeneity rather than reparative resource redistribution or disruptions of hierarchy. “Diversity” as applied today does not trouble the idea of the mainstream or the center, leaving intact the legitimacy of a whiteness that needs only a few decorative notes of color. It confuses representation in cultural fora such as movies or advertisements with political representation. Finally, its simplest meaning of “internal multiplicity” can overwhelm its activist crafters’ political intentions to recuperate and repair racial inequality. As a case in point, here at IUB a Latine literature course was rejected by the IUB Gen Ed committee as a candidate for DUS credit for its failure to feature non-Latine writers.

## Solutions

The BFC now has an opportunity to correct a past mistake. To return to the 2016 students’ well-developed proposal of a curricular social justice requirement, campus-wide, taught by a fleet of faculty and coordinated by a director of social justice education within OVPUE, would solve a series of problems that the Task Force’s process has revealed:

- **Atomization.** Allowing each unit to decide how the DUS requirement will be met creates a patchwork of diversity courses and materials unconnected to each other, lacking any unifying field matrix, taught by people never invited into relationship to each other. An atomized system ignores the real distribution of expertise on race and racism, both inside and outside of the College, and separates faculty from their peers in other units and Schools, weakening both research and teaching.
- **Shallow engagement.** Instructors whose research directly concerns intersections of discriminatory racial and other social categories and social justice teach about this subject in substantive, scholarly ways. These are the instructors most likely to approach the process free of the assumption students also sometimes share that these are obvious or simple subjects. This disservice to the scholarly field also reinforces counter-productive popular notions that race, racism, gender, sexuality, etc. are themselves simple and obvious, obscuring the complex ideological and material ways these categories function to shape lived experience. These assumptions further feed the thoroughly captured version of “diversity” as multicultural window-dressing which compromised the implementation of this requirement in the first place.
- **Student resentment.** When a course on race rehearses clichés or pushes simplistic analysis, students see through it. The main product of a non-substantive course, as with an anti-prejudice webinar or a course with diversity tacked on as a requirement-fulfilling afterthought, is student resentment. Adding to the balance of resentment around anti-racism as well as student cynicism about education as purely instrumental moves in precisely the opposite direction from that which the student authors of this initiative intended.

To fulfill the potential of this solution, it will be crucial to support the participating faculty through salary supplements, research and teaching funds, course releases or teaching considerations, and by recognizing the significance of this service in promotion. It would also be vital to have

administrative support in the form of mitigation of the RCM consequences of these course creations. If we could lift the boom of RCM's financial incentive for enrollment, there would be no reason an instructor would join this project other than genuine commitment to this field of study.

With that support, changing the diversity requirement to a curricular social justice requirement taught by faculty champions and led by a director of social justice education would accomplish the following:

- **Support social justice scholarship and scholars** at all levels, presuming adequate administrative support for this innovation. The cluster or cohort of instructors would have the opportunity to meet each other and discover their various research and/or teaching foci through shared activities and planning, providing the peer group structure that can be so powerfully engaging, inviting, and supportive.
- **Support innovative teaching and scholarly collaborations** between faculty in the ethnic studies programs and outside them, and similar collaboration between faculty in the College and outside it. There are many scholars in the College outside the ethnic studies programs whose main interests lie in race and racial justice. Particularly heavy concentrations of such scholars exist in Gender and Women's Studies, American Studies, and Sociology, just to give three examples. These faculty would benefit from closer ties to colleagues, programs, themes and people in the ethnic studies departments. Faculty outside the College who have expertise in racial and social justice would also benefit from this system substantially. Without the entirely logistical motivations imposed by RCM, they would be encouraged to strengthen their ties to colleagues in the College and crossover (theoretical or empirical) scholarship on social justice. Freedom to imagine linked courses or multidisciplinary programs would result in teaching on race and justice flourishing on the Bloomington campus.
- **Achieve critical mass:** Ethnic studies units are often more able to hire underrepresented faculty of color than other programs, strengthening their presence on campus. Increasing numbers of such faculty would allow for an increase of graduate students, which would feed a culture of attracting and retaining undergraduate students of color on campus. IU has been trying to achieve higher proportions of undergraduate students of color for decades. This measure, if it were supported by the administration with the Presidential Diversity Hiring Initiative or similar program, would create a critical mass and a climate of support for ethnic studies and people of color that would improve IU Bloomington.
- **Save administrative labor:** the administrative work of the current DUS group, an OVPUE General Education Monitoring Subcommittee, would be replaced by a single director of social justice education.
- **Diminish overall requirements:** the balance of faculty engaged in teaching social justice courses in the College fall in either the Arts and Humanities or the Social and

Historical Sciences. All the courses taught there fulfill or could fulfill one or another of the existing distribution requirements, alleviating pressure on student schedules.

## D. Institutional Adjustments

### 1. Adjacent Reform: Financing/RCM

As noted above (IV A.1), RCM has contributed to territorialism, discouraged collaboration, and made Gen Ed a campus battleground. In order to implement a genuinely effective Gen Ed reform, the administration can and should reform the mechanisms of finance to best support general education learning outcomes for the third century *as determined by the faculty*.

The process of modifying RCM is already underway, as confirmed by Provost Shrivastav's recent alterations to the formula. Faculty may not realize the extent to which RCM is flexible and that IUB budgets follow a highly modified RCM model. RCM can be further modified, and for Gen Ed purposes, should.

Our recommendations here are necessarily vague, for the reform of RCM is an administrative responsibility. As set out in the [Constitution of the Bloomington Faculty](#), faculty have *legislative* authority over curriculum and *consultative* authority over other matters. It is the administration's responsibility to structure the institution so as to enable the implementation of the curriculum the faculty designs *and* to work in conversation with the faculty as it crafts programs that support student success using outcomes well beyond graduation rates.

Instead of suggesting a specific and detailed alteration to RCM or its removal and replacement by some other system, therefore, the task force here outlines some practical mechanisms by which the university might contribute financially to the implementation and support of a thriving and sustainable Gen Ed program.

One blunt way to lower the stakes for Gen Ed teaching would be to diminish the weight RCM allocates to Gen Ed courses. An equity-focused approach might be to allocate revenue between units providing Gen Ed courses and units whose students seek to enroll in these courses. Further possibilities involve financial reform at the College level. Because the College plays a unique role in Gen Ed, and because Gen Ed plays such a profoundly important and unique role in student success, we envision a funding model modification specifically for the College. So that this reform iteration does not negatively affect the College, which would paradoxically weaken Gen Ed's most logical and solid base, a modification could be based on existing Gen Ed allocations but offer the possibility of enhanced support for the College from the central administration if certain benchmarks are regularly met.

The question of what those benchmarks might be is a wide and important question. Some might include increases in the percentage of Gen Ed courses taught by full-time faculty at all ranks. Full-time faculty are more invested in the unit than part-time faculty, are accountable through

annual review and/or re-appointment process, and have more teaching experience than graduate students. Another benchmark might address the success rate in Gen Ed courses by incentivizing the lowering of their DWF rates. Under RCM as it currently exists, schools could be incentivized to fail students in required courses because re-enrollment increases tuition revenue. A tweak might alter RCM so that a school would get paid only the first time a student takes a course. That might be implemented so as to generate a pool of money from classes that are often taken twice, to be reallocated from the Provost level as incentives for Gen Ed student success. Another benchmark might entail increasing the number of sections that incorporate evidence-based instructional practices to improve student learning, or improving on a metric that measures meeting the demand for specific, popular Gen Ed course options (e.g., Math 106).

Notably, the benchmarks must be administered so that departments are incentivized to act cooperatively. Departments might get a margin of the benefit as operating budget or be granted permission to conduct tenure-track searches in exchange for meeting their specific benchmarks. We note that under the existing system, departments are not incentivized, leaving morale dangerously low and leading to lower than ideal rates of student success.

Administrators will need to act with creativity and expertise, selecting benchmarks that can maximize the curricular and educational outcomes we prioritize. Such changes could enhance undergraduate success and encourage all programs to contribute collegially to the general education of our student body.

## **2. Overlays**

Any implementation of large-scale changes to Gen Ed will require the use of **overlays**, the alignment of new and old requirements to continue to serve students operating on old requirements. Students must be allowed to complete the requirements specified in the Bulletins under which they were admitted. Should the structure of the General Education program change such that they are no longer able to complete the requirements as they understood them (and as they were promised by the advisors), this would create serious problems. Any new structure must therefore be able to be “dropped on top” or overlaid on the current program. This might involve marking any new classes created as also fulfilling appropriate requirements in the current General Education program. Students completing the course under either set of requirements are then served and have the ability to make academic progress. Overlays would be a requirement for as long as students enrolled in the previous structure were in need of them, after which the old structure could be retired fully. Alternatively, the faculty might choose to retain both the new structure and the old one and allow students to elect which set of requirements they wished to complete for the General Education program at IU Bloomington.

## **3. Assessment**

The way Gen Ed is assessed at present requires an instructor to specify a single assignment’s relation to a single learning goal. The clearly bureaucratic nature of this exercise is lost on

nobody. As a respondent suggested to their representative on the Liaison Subcommittee: “Re-think the assessment expectations, starting with re-thinking what any such expectations should be meant to accomplish and whether they should actually be required.” Moreover, it is not clear that the current policy is enacted systematically, and there is no follow-through feedback with the instructor.

We propose a different method of Gen Ed course assessment: peer review. The university [already supports](#) peer review as a valuable method for improving teaching effectiveness in general. We propose that the somewhat scattershot and routine efforts to monitor compliance of Gen Ed learning goals be replaced by the thoughtful exchange of ideas “by bolstering the integrity of personnel decisions, and by enabling more intentional and mutually supportive communities of scholar teachers” ([Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching](#)). Substantive, meaningful attention to best teaching practices is likely to have better results than bureaucratic oversight. Faculty who have expertise in the category or field would assess each other and provide summary assessment reports to the General Education committee on a reasonable schedule.

An additional resource would be the development of a Colloquium for faculty teaching Gen Ed courses. A yearly meeting of these faculty would offer opportunities for formal and informal discussion and the dissemination of best practices in teaching. The introduction of current topics to these courses would be facilitated by providing an atmosphere of collegial discussion and the opportunity to collaborate across units and Schools. Faculty-led and faculty-driven structures ensure participation by those who are most invested, rather than those who are mandated. Brian Gareau, the Associate Dean of the University Core Curriculum at Boston College, might be a useful consultant here; he helped build a new assessment process to align with the “Enduring Questions” general education reform at BC. He spoke about this at some length during our task force interview.

#### **4. Mathematical Modeling**

IUB’s commitment to quantitative reasoning in our general education is commendable. In 2009, when IUB decided to require mathematical modeling in its General Education program, it was the only large public state school to require such an advanced course. Some stakeholders we spoke to think this is still the case, and even that this requirement could be part of IUB’s low yield rate for admitted students. In particular, Math M-118, Finite Mathematics, generates intense anxiety and resentment in students as confirmed by the surveys we conducted with students and advisors. “Finite” is only one of the courses students can take to fulfill the Math Modeling requirement, but it is the one many students ultimately are forced to take because there are seats available. This is a complex problem involving dynamics internal to the Department of Mathematics which we need not detail here. What is important to note is that several solutions present themselves readily, and these solutions are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

First, there is already an alternative to Finite: Math M-106, “The Mathematics of Decision and Beauty,” but it is not enabled structurally. Math M-106 is designed to offer math modeling in a supported way. Classes are small in size, meet four or five days a week, and are organized in more forgiving ways than math classes tend to be. The frequency and size make faculty less willing to teach it, and so there are never enough seats for the students who would prefer this option. The simple solution is administrative: fund the hiring of sufficient teaching faculty to offer this course broadly, at a salary sufficient to motivate excellent teaching.

Second, the point about student support must not be lost. M-106 is not simply easier, though it is geared to questions more appropriate to non-Math majors; it is *supported*. If Finite (or any other math modeling class) were taught in small classes, meeting frequently, with syllabi designed to help students through, student experience of and success in it would improve. Once again, administrative support for these structural changes would solve the problem.

Third and finally, another possible solution to the problem of Math modeling is simply to eliminate this specific requirement. Instead, the scope could be broadened to include courses in formal logic, quantitative reasoning, or statistics. The math modeling requirement as it stands proves a stumbling ground for a number of our students, contributing to resentment, driving students to fulfill this requirement outside of IU, and fostering illegitimacy of Gen Ed as a whole.

All three of these solutions can and should be implemented together, with all deliberate speed. Whatever solution is chosen, persisting tensions among faculty constituencies about the required math curriculum need the full attention of all affected parties. Everyone involved must encourage the administration and faculty to work collaboratively to ensure that our required classes fulfill their crucial role in the Gen Ed mission.

## 5. Distribution Requirements

As noted above (II B), state guidance by means of the Indiana Commission on Higher Education (ICHE)'s [Indiana College Core](#) requires thirty (30) credits worth of general education. ICHE specifies, in numbered points, that students must complete at least three (3) credits in each of the six (6) areas of competency (the “Foundational Intellectual Skills” of Written Communication, Speaking and Listening, and Quantitative Reasoning; and “Ways of Knowing” that are either Scientific, Humanistic and Artistic, or Social and Behavioral). IU Bloomington calls these “Ways of Knowing” “Natural and Mathematical Sciences,” abbreviated “N & M”; “Social and Historical Studies,” or “S & H”; and “Arts and Humanities,” “A & H,” and requires not just three (3) but six (6) credit hours in each. Some units require even more (e.g., the College).

By deciding to require two instead of one course in each distribution area, the crafters of the original Gen Ed program hoped to provide IUB students with a more robust foundation than the minimum, honoring the campus’s status as an R1 (research-based) institution. The way it has been implemented, however, as discussed in this report, makes Gen Ed difficult to complete for many students, and makes it difficult to implement this report’s suggested reforms.

In fact, state requirements allow for more flexibility than the current implementation. There is leeway here to reallocate credit requirements for our students. One option would be to require only one course in each distribution area: one N&M, one S&H, and one A&H. The other credits required in Gen Ed (remember, the state mandates a total of 30 credits) could be in any of the 3 areas or could enable development of first-year experience, Enduring and Urgent Questions, and Capstone courses. The advantages of the flexibility conferred on each student outweigh the disadvantage of a possible imbalance or a more narrow course of study.

One example of this reallocation is presented below, to illustrate how this might function to increase the ability of programs to offer novel approaches to general education. While this reallocation could occur across all units, it could also occur differently from unit to unit to better support the needs of each program.

	Current GenEd	Proposed innovation*
A&H	6 credits/2 courses	3 credits/1 course
S&H	6 credits/2 courses	3 credits/1 course
N&M	6 credits/2 courses	3 credits/1 course
Any other course in COAS, any level (including first year experience, EUQ, or capstone courses) OR courses designated S&H, N&M, or A&H in the student's home unit.		9 credits/3 courses
Total courses	18 credits/6 courses	18 credits/6 courses

\*Requirements for English composition and Math modeling are not engaged here.

### **E. De Minimis Overall Administrative Improvements to Current Program**

A series of immediate, de minimis next steps can and should be taken regardless of the simultaneous development of a full structural reform. On many elements of the existing General Education program, faculty, students, and staff expressed consistent feedback, frustration, or confusion. The task force recommends the following changes that are agnostic to whether a larger effort is underway to renovate Gen Ed:

- Move towards replacing current assessment of Gen Ed towards the *less bureaucratic* peer review process described above.

If such a method of assessment cannot accommodate Indiana state mandates, then the BFC should install the above-described system as a parallel mechanism for more meaningful, regular, and transparent review of Gen Ed.

- Address student confusion with deliberate efforts to clarify and simplify the presentation of the current General Education program by making the requirements easier to understand and by clearly communicating their purpose to students.
- Provide additional training for academic advisors so that they are more knowledgeable about the purpose and structure of the General Education program, enabling them to clearly and consistently communicate with students concepts beyond which course options are most efficient for the speedy completion of requirements. (Please see [“Advising as Liberal Learning”](#))
- Communicate to all faculty teaching courses that satisfy General Education requirements the structure of the General Education; the place of their course(s) within it; and which programs and units are encouraging their students to take these courses (through degree maps and suggestions of academic advisors).
- Improve transparency in the process of proposing courses to the General Education program by openly sharing reasons for proposal approval or rejection. Allow rolling or multiple deadlines for course proposal and evaluation. Have the committee performing this labor work year-round instead of solely in the spring. If the burden of this service rises too high with this change, shift the period of service for each committee member to a single year. This will have the added advantage of familiarizing more faculty with the approval process. In addition, the approval process should be **blind** to the proposing unit. As a respondent to the Liaison Subcommittee survey requested, “Whoever is approving courses, outside of one’s own school, should be blinded to the school/department from which the course originated to reduce potential bias in evaluating the course as a Gen Ed.” This seems fair and useful, as well as extremely easy to do. Overall, task the BFC to revisit required documents and steps necessary to teach a course in the General Education program at IU Bloomington to make sure they serve the purpose of the faculty and do not simply create barriers to proposing new courses.
- Task the BFC to revisit the structure of committees implementing the General Education program to make sure that they are still well-aligned with the intent of the faculty, and that the steps with which they operate are suitable and efficient.
- Once substantive Gen Ed reforms are underway, enlist the University’s communications office in a major, sustained campaign to help form student understanding of and appreciation for general education--from the minute students arrive on campus. Communications is well-endowed with resources and works very hard to shape the image



of IU in the eyes of the public; its great power needs to be turned toward one of the most distinctive and important features of our program.

- Encourage OVPUE and faculty directors of required multi-section Gen Ed courses to work collaboratively to address instructor supply issues. As enrollments for these courses shift dramatically throughout the IU system during this tumultuous period, thoughtful and sensitive solutions will have to be sought by all concerned parties.
- Allow upper-level courses to count towards Gen Ed requirements when the instructor deems appropriate. Instructor decision-making on this question would resolve the problem of upper-level courses not covering the learning outcomes for the various Breadth of Inquiry ways of knowing. As this change would increase the raw numbers of proposed courses, it would require administrative support for the process of approving these courses, and possibly for their assessment as well unless the process shifts to our recommended one of peer review. In that case, the administrative labor involved in assessing them would be much less.

## V. Conclusion: Summary of Task Force Recommendations to the BFC

The BFC EPC charged the task force to make “recommendations for evolutionary change” to the requirements and structure of general education. This report has described four categories of recommendation: a full four-year general education *framework* (first-year experience, thematic distribution, senior capstone) as a regulative vision of a robust third century general education; a themed option for reforming the Common Ground distribution courses (“Enduring & Urgent Questions”); the strengthening of the “diversity” requirement by shifting it to a social justice framework; and practical administrative changes for the smoother functioning of the current system (de minimis, necessary steps for immediate improvement).

This report is meant to serve as a guiding framework for the first major reform of Indiana University’s general education program since its inception. It contains a broad aspirational vision of what a twenty-first-century program could be at its best, a number of granular improvements—some that can be taken up right away as useful administrative fixes in appropriate committees of jurisdiction, some that we as faculty must continue to deliberate as cruces of our evolving identity—and one major programmatic change (“Enduring & Urgent Questions”) that would at a stroke address the four key areas of needed reform without upsetting the basic structure of the 2009 framework.

**Create an Implementation Committee.** Once the BFC has received and discussed the recommendations of the Task Force, the BFC Educational Policies Committee (EPC) and Constitution and Rules Committee (CARC) should jointly constitute a follow-up Task Force charged with creating specific policies and changing existing ones in order to implement the reforms proposed here. *This Task Force should be directed to act in response to this report rather than reviewing Gen Ed again.* The new body should be faculty-led, should include all

programs involved in the General Education program at IU Bloomington, and should solicit the active input of students and administrators throughout its process. This Task Force should aim to implement short-term recommendations to policy or procedure such as those proposed in the De Minimis section by the 2024-2025 academic year with more follow-up changes formally recommended so as to begin by 2025-2026.

**Endorse the most effective program components.** All experience points to the superiority of Gen Ed programs that include the three reform components analyzed above:

- a first-year experience centered in the College of Arts and Sciences;
- an examination of enduring and urgent questions;
- a capstone experience centered in the student's major or in COAS.

**Commit to a Coherent Program.** The Task Force strongly supports the development of a cohesive, coherent program of Gen Ed study including the above three components. If, however, it proves impractical to implement all three, we support the implementation of any of them independently.

**Commit to Social Justice.** The Task Force supports the shift from the current "diversity in the US" requirement and towards a campus-wide required social justice course taught by instructors in a team formation and led by a director of social justice education.

**Alter Distribution Requirements.** Reduce the number of credits required in each distribution area from six to three so as to accommodate the first-year and capstone experiences and the revised social justice (diversity) requirement.

**Charge Administrative Agents with Alteration of RCM.** The administration must change RCM so that a budgetary system does not incentivize redundant and instrumental course design.

**Take the De Minimis Steps.** The immediate, de minimis next steps recommended here can be commenced asynchronously and should be.

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<https://www.ursinus.edu/academics/catalog/the-core/core-requirements/>

What Will They Learn? “FAQ”

<https://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/faq>