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General Education Student Survey

Spring 2019 Results

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# Executive summary

In 2016, Penn State began an assessment of its General Education requirements. Since then, substantial work has been done to advance a General Education Assessment Plan and collect evidence needed for continued improvement, including several surveys of Penn State students. During the spring 2019 semester, the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (OPAIR), with direction from the Standing Joint Committee on General Education Assessment (the Committee), developed and administered an instrument designed to gauge upper-level students’ experiences with General Education, particularly as they relate to the goals of the General Education Assessment Plan. Because these students enrolled prior to the implementation of the revised curriculum in 2018, their responses will serve as a baseline for future assessments.

Ten thousand seventy-nine upper-level[[1]](#footnote-2) Penn State undergraduate students were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate of 16.6% included students from all Penn State campuses and colleges, as well as 228 undergraduate majors.

Key findings are highlighted below:

* Respondents were generally satisfied with the selection of General Education courses, their ability to enroll in them, and the flexibility in meeting the requirements.
* At least 65% of students indicated that at least one to three of their General Education courses addressed the broad goals of General Education, such as helping them develop new knowledge or skills they will use again or understand complex ideas and events.
* Over half of respondents agreed that General Education courses expanded their perspectives and were a worthwhile part of their education. A smaller percentage, but still over 30%, of respondents agreed that General Education courses were among their most valuable educational experiences or were as important as classes in their major.
* Half of respondents agreed that General Education courses were related to their major.
* Over 65% of respondents agreed that their General Education courses were primarily related to topics outside their majors.
* When asked how they choose General Education courses, the highest percentage of respondents indicated that fitting a course into their schedule, finishing the requirements, and interest in the topic were moderately or very important compared to other methods of selecting courses.

Finally, according to respondents’ most frequent open-ended responses, they perceive the purpose of General Education as broadening their educational experience, learning outside the major and fulfilling requirements. They also frequently reported that General Education had an impact on their major, in both positive and negative ways, and on their knowledge and skills. Respondents’ most frequent suggestions for improving General Education include increasing availability and changing the requirements.

These results suggest that Penn State students who enrolled prior to enactment of the revised General Education requirements are relatively satisfied with their General Education experience, and that the requirements address the important goals of General Education. A future survey conducted with students who began their college careers in summer 2018 or later will help to determine how the new requirements have impacted students’ experiences with General Education.

# Introduction

In 2018, Penn State began implementing its revision of the General Education requirements, which reflected updated and modernized language, as well as several new additions and areas of emphasis. Concomitant with these changes, substantial work was undertaken to advance a [General Education Assessment Plan](https://www.opa.psu.edu/learning-outcomes-assessment/general-education/) designed to collect the range of evidence needed to capture and describe the success of General Education programming at forwarding its stated goals. The plan is framed around four major goals of General Education at Penn State, each associated with several objectives. The survey that is the subject of this report was designed to provide evidence aligned with several of these objectives, which are outlined below.

* 1. Students will have sufficient opportunities to enroll in General Education Courses when they want to, and in the appropriate sequence.
1. Students will report satisfaction with the breadth of their General Education courses and the contribution of General Education courses to their educational experience at Penn State, their careers, and their everyday lives.
2. Students will report that General Education has a substantial impact on success in their majors.
3. Students will report that General Education has a substantial impact on their thinking, perspectives, interests, and/or career goals.

# Survey Development and Administration

OPAIR staff, with direction and advisement from the Committee, developed a survey instrument that was aligned with the four objectives stated above. In an iterative process taking place over several months, OPAIR staff wrote survey items designed to address these objectives, solicited feedback and input, and continually refined the instrument. Questions were piloted with a group of student workers from Penn State’s New Student Orientation, who provided substantive feedback that was incorporated into the final version.

The final instrument consisted of 10 Likert-type questions that prompted students to rate 36 different aspects of their General Education experiences along several scales (satisfaction, agreement, etc.). It also included three open-ended questions that prompted students to share what they perceived as a) the purpose of General Education, b) the impact of General Education on their educational experiences, and c) suggestions that would to improve General Education. Due to rounding, percentages reported in the results may not always add up to 100%.

Ten thousand seventy-nine upper-level[[2]](#footnote-3) Penn State undergraduate students were invited to participate in the survey, which was administered digitally using the Qualtrics survey management platform. Students that transferred in more than 15 credits from another institution were excluded from the sample because of the frequency with which transfer credits are applied to General Education requirements. Upper-level students were selected to ensure that respondents would have completed most, if not all, of their General Education requirements. Furthermore, these upper-level students have not had experience with the new General Education requirements and therefore their perceptions can serve as a baseline for future assessments.

The final sample included students from all Penn State campuses and colleges, as well as 228 undergraduate majors. The survey sample was designed to provide a representative sample for University Park, the University College, the Commonwealth Colleges in aggregate, and the World Campus[[3]](#footnote-4) and 30 $15 amazon.com gift certificates were offered to incentivize participation. Ultimately, 1,664 students (16.6%) responded. Survey respondents were fairly representative of the population in terms of their academic level, gender, and race/ethnicity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparing survey respondent and target population characteristics

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Student Characteristics** | **Percent of Target Population** | **Percent of Respondents** |
| **Academic level** |  |  |
| 7th semester standing | 27% | 27% |
| 8th semester standing | 37% | 36% |
| 9th semester standing | 21% | 21% |
| 10th semester standing | 9% | 9% |
| 11th semester standing | 6% | 7% |
| **Program campus\*** |  |  |
| Abington | 3% | 5% |
| Altoona | 2% | 4% |
| Beaver | <1% | 1% |
| Berks | 3% | 4% |
| Brandywine | 1% | 3% |
| DuBois | <1% | 1% |
| Erie | 5% | 7% |
| Fayette | 1% | 1% |
| Greater Allegheny | <1% | 1% |
| Harrisburg | 5% | 7% |
| Hazleton | <1% | 1% |
| Lehigh Valley | 1% | 2% |
| Mont Alto | 1% | 1% |
| New Kensington | 1% | 1% |
| Schuylkill | <1% | 1% |
| Scranton | 1% | 2% |
| Shenango | <1% | 1% |
| University Park | 61% | 31% |
| Wilkes-Barre | <1% | 1% |
| World Campus | 14% | 25% |
| York | 1% | 2% |
| **Gender** |  |  |
| Female | 47% | 48% |
| Male | 53% | 52% |
| **Race/ethnicity** |  |  |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | <1% | <1% |
| Asian | 7% | 6% |
| Black or African American | 5% | 6% |
| Hispanic or Latinx | 7% | 8% |
| International | 9% | 5% |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | <1% | <1% |
| White | 67% | 69% |
| Two or more races | 3% | 3% |
| Race/ethnicity unknown | 2% | 2% |

\*Different sampling strategies were used at University Park, the five Commonwealth Colleges, and the University College campuses; it was not expected that the survey respondents’ distribution by campus would reflect that of the target population. This is particularly noticeable for University Park, the largest campus, where a smaller overall proportion of students is required to achieve generalizable results.

# Student Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, a majority of respondents were either in their 7th (27%) or 8th (36%) semester; the remaining respondents had completed in excess of 8 semesters. Thirty-four percent of respondents began their Penn State education at one of the Campus Colleges, 29% started at University Park, 23% began at a University College campus, and 14% started as a World Campus student.

Table 1 shows the respondent’s primary current campus. However, some Penn State students move to or from University Park and one of the Commonwealth Campuses or between Commonwealth Campuses. Because the campus(es) attended may affect students’ General Education experiences, OPAIR staff created a variable that represents whether and how students move between campus locations. Figure 1 shows that twenty-four percent of the respondents attended University Park only, fifty-two percent attended a single Commonwealth Campus only, and twenty-four percent moved either between University Park and a Commonwealth Campus or between different Commonwealth Campuses during their college careers (see Figure 1).

Prescriptiveness of General Education courses differs between majors. In some majors (e.g. Nursing) many General Education courses are prescribed as part of the major requirements. In others (e.g. Liberal Arts), students have greater freedom to choose General Education courses. To explore how level of prescriptiveness may be related to students’ experiences in General Education, OPAIR staff constructed an additional variable that captures the number of prescribed credits in a given degree program. Each respondent was placed into one of three groups based on the program in which they were enrolled: high prescriptiveness (0-21 credits of choice), medium prescriptiveness (22-34.5 credits of choice), and low prescriptiveness (35-45 credits of choice). The vast majority (83%) of respondents were enrolled in degree programs with medium or high prescriptiveness (see Figure 2).

Figure . Respondents' movement between campuses

Figure . Prescriptiveness of General Education by respondents' academic program

# Opportunities to Enroll in General Education Courses

Penn State’s size and status as a “geographically dispersed” university often raises questions about the consistency of students’ abilities to select and enroll in courses that meet their General Education needs across Penn State locations. Accordingly, the survey included several questions to gauge students’ satisfaction with their abilities to enroll in desired courses.

Figure 3 shows that overall, a majority of respondents indicated they were somewhat or very satisfied with their ability to enroll in General Education courses. At least 80% of students reported that they were somewhat or very satisfied with their ability to enroll in General Education classes during the semester they wanted (80%), early in their academic careers (85%), in classes that fit their schedule (82%), in classes outside their major (83%) and in classes recommended or required by their program (86%)Although still relatively high, a lower percentage of students reported being somewhat or very satisfied with the selection of General Education classes available (77%) and the flexibility in how they could meet requirements (73%). In addition, as shown in Figure 4,61% of respondents reported satisfaction with the availability of online General Education offerings.

To further explore enrollment issues, the survey also asked students how frequently they had been unable to enroll in a General Education class they wanted. A majority (79%) of respondents indicated that they had difficulty enrolling in a desired course at least once (see Figure 5). Of those who had been unable to enroll in a General Education course, 74% attributed this to a lack of class availability and 71% to a mismatch with their class schedules. In contrast, only 37% of students somewhat or strongly agreed that the restrictive requirements of their academic major prevented them from enrolling in General Education courses they wanted to take (see Figure 6).

OPAIR conducted Pearson’s chi-square tests of independence[[4]](#footnote-5) to examine the relationship between campus(es) attended (University Park only, a single Commonwealth Campus, moved between University Park and a Commonwealth Campus, or moved between Commonwealth Campuses) and satisfaction with the selection of General Educations courses, as well as their ability to enroll in General Education classes. The following are selected results.

* Results showed no relationship between campus(es) attended and respondents’ satisfaction with the selection of classes available, ability to enroll in classes that fit their schedules, or the flexibility of General Education requirements.
* Generally, lower percentages of respondents who moved between University Park and one of the Commonwealth campuses were satisfied with their ability to enroll in General Education courses recommended by their major, early in their careers or during the semester they wanted, compared to other respondents.
* Lower percentages of respondents who moved between University Park and one of the Commonwealth Campuses or between Commonwealth Campuses were satisfied with the availability of online courses compared to other respondents.

Figure . Satisfaction with ability to enroll in General Education courses

Figure . Satisfaction with the ability to enroll in online General Education courses

Figure . Frequency with which students were unable to enroll in a General Education course they wanted

Figure . Reasons for having difficulty enrolling in General Education classes

# General Education’s Contributions to Students’ Education, Careers and Lives

A critical goal of General Education at Penn State is to contribute to students’ educational experiences, prospective career pathways, and everyday lives, as well as to expand their thinking, perspectives and interests. To gather evidence about how General Education courses are forwarding these objectives, the survey included several sets of questions. The first set asked students to indicate the number of General Education classes that had, for example, helped them prepare for their careers, stimulated them intellectually, helped them understand national and world events, introduced them to topics they have pursued further, and prepared them for their everyday lives.

As shown in Figure 7, over 68% of students indicated that at least one of their General Education classes addressed the broad goals of General Education. Respondents indicated that at least one General Education course helped them to develop new knowledge or skills that they will use again (88%), stimulated them intellectually (88%), broadened their understanding of national and world events (84%), helped them to understand complex ideas and events (82%), or helped them grow in non-academic ways (79%). Though still a majority, a smaller percentage of respondents indicated that they had at least one General Education course that prepared them for their chosen career path (69%), prepared them for everyday life (69%), or helped them understand themselves better (71%).

Although these percentages appear quite positive, one class represents only 7% of the General Education requirements. A much lower percentage of respondents (15% to 37%) indicated that at least four classes, which represents 26% of the requirements, addressed these important General Education goals.

Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that at least one General Education classes introduced them to topics they subsequently pursued further. That even a single course motivated a student to delve into a new area of interest is evidence that the General Education is successfully meeting its goal of providing opportunities to explore.

Figure . Number of classes that meet the goals of General Education

A second set of questions asked students to indicate their level of agreement that their General Education courses expanded their perspective on a range of topics, were a worthwhile part of their education, were among their most valuable educational experiences, and were as important as their major. An additional question asked students whether a General Education course or courses prompted them to change or add a major or minor.

Figure 8 demonstrates that most respondents (72%) somewhat or strongly agreed that their General Education courses had expanded their perspective on a range of topics. A smaller percentage, though still a majority (60%), of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that General Education courses were a worthwhile part of their Penn State education. Fewer respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their General Education courses were among their most valuable educational experiences (37%) or were as important as classes in their majors (31%). Although these percentages seem low compared to those related to expanding perspectives and the worth of General Education courses, they suggest a positive impact of General Education, considering the extent to which students focus on their major courses.

Another finding that seems low but is positive when considered in the context of the exploration goal of General Education, is that 16% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that a General Education course or courses had prompted them to change or add an academic major or minor (see Figure 9).

Figure . Perspectives on the importance and value of General Education courses

Figure . Percentage of students who changed/added a major or minor due to a General Education course

**Impact of program prescriptiveness on student perceptions of the impact of General Education**

Because the prescriptiveness of General Education courses in some majors might influence students’ perceptions of General Education, OPAIR conducted Pearson’s chi-square tests of independence to examine the relationship between program prescriptiveness and the number of General Education courses respondents indicated had addressed the broad goals of General Education, such as helping them to prepare for everyday life or stimulating them intellectually. In all but one case (helped you grow in non-academic ways) the relationships were statistically significant.

The results suggest that respondents’ perceptions of their General Education experiences are influenced by the prescriptiveness of their major. A pattern emerged suggesting that, generally, a higher percentage of students in low-prescriptive majors indicated that at least one to three courses addressed the broad goals of General Education, when compared with respondents in more prescriptive majors.

OPAIR staff also conducted Pearson’s chi-square tests of independence to examine the relationship between the prescriptiveness of the major and the level of agreement that General Education classes expanded their perspectives on a range of topics, were a worthwhile part of their education, were among their most valuable educational experiences, and were as important as classes in their major. Again, each of the relationships was statistically significant.

The overall pattern suggests that, generally, a higher percent of respondents in programs with low prescriptiveness agreed that General Education courses expanded their perspectives and were worthwhile, valuable and important parts of their education compared with respondents in more prescriptive majors.

# General Education’s Relationship to Academic Majors

An important goal of General Education at Penn State is for the coursework to contribute significantly to students’ success in their academic majors. Thus, the survey included several questions designed to better understand how students see the relationship between their General Education classes and their academic majors.

A majority of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their General Education courses primarily addressed topics outside their majors (83%) and motivated them to learn about topics outside their major (64%). Half of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that General Education classes had complimented their major field of study (50%) or enriched their understanding of topics related to their major (49%). These percentages suggest that General Education is providing experiences that relate to the major and address topics outside of the major, both important goals of General Education (see Figure 10).

Figure . Impact of General Education on academic major

# Factors Influencing Choice of General Education Classes

In addition to questions that addressed the goals of General Education, the survey also explored factors that students deemed important when choosing General Education courses. These factors included, for example, recommendations, interest in the topic, and how the course fits into their schedule. The question specified that students respond based on classes that were not prescribed by their major.

As Figure 11 shows, most respondents indicated that how a course fits into their schedule (85%) and finishing the requirement (83%) are moderately to very important factors that help them choose General Education courses. Other reasons deemed moderately or very important at relatively high percentages include interest in the topic (79%) and who is teaching the class (71%). Rating tools/social media was considered moderately or very important by 60% of the respondents. The factors considered moderately or very important by the lowest percentage of respondents, though still a majority, include recommendations from friends (57%), relevance to intended career path (56%), recommendations from advisors (55%), and recommendations from professors (54%).

Figure . Important factors influencing students' choice of General Education classes

OPAIR conducted Pearson’s chi-square tests of independence to examine the relationship between student’s movement between campuses and the importance of various factors in their choice of General Education courses. All but one (my interest in the topic) of the tests were statistically significant. The following highlights some of the results.

* A higher percentage of respondents who attended UP and never moved rated how a course fits into their schedule and recommendations from friends as moderately to very important compared to other respondents.
* A higher percentage of respondents attended a single Commonwealth Campus or moved between Commonwealth Campuses (never attended University Park), rated recommendations from advisors and recommendations from professors moderately or very important compared to other respondents.
* A higher percentage of respondents who attended a single Commonwealth Campus and never moved rated relevance to career path moderately to very important compared to other respondents.

# Respondents’ Open-Ended Perspectives of General Education

The spring 2019 General Education Student Survey included three open-ended questions designed to elicit student perspectives related to General Education, and to provide respondents an opportunity to highlight aspects of their experiences that were important to them. Specifically, the three questions asked students a) to articulate their understanding of the purpose of General Education, b) to describe impacts—if any—General Education courses might have had on their college experiences, and c) to make recommendations about how General Education at Penn State might be improved. Roughly 70% of the 1,662 students who responded to the survey completed the open-ended questions, though response rates varied slightly for each question.

## Procedure

OPAIR analysts carefully read through the responses in search of common patterns or similarities that made them relate to one another, forward similar ideas or perspectives, and coalesce into basic response categories. Categories were further combined, where appropriate, into themes that reflected meaningful viewpoints about the purpose of General Education, the impact of General Education, and ways to improve General Education.

As individual responses might contain multiple perspectives or ideas relevant to a given question, a single respondent’s contribution could be coded into multiple categories or themes. Due to this approach it is not meaningful to represent the relative importance of a given theme in the dataset as a percentage of the total number of responses. To visualize basic representation of the codes and themes as a function of the full response sample, we created hierarchy charts that give a close representation of the general distribution of a given code in the dataset. In the sections that follow, individual codes and themes are presented with counts of the number of times that a particular idea or perspective was assigned a given code. Again, these numbers represent the number of *coded instances*, not the number of *respondents*.

## The Purpose of General Education

The first of the open-ended questions on the survey asked students to describe what is, to them, the purpose of General Education. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 1,192 Penn State students who provided a response to this item held a wide variety of opinions about that purpose. What follows is a summary of major themes to emerge from their coded responses. Figure 12 displays the relative proportion of responses to this question that align with a specific theme. Table A-1 (see Appendix) includes example responses grouped by theme.

The most frequently cited purpose respondents ascribed to General Education at Penn State (312 responses) was that it exists to “broaden educational experiences.” While the comments reflected this theme, overall, individuals framed their responses in three main ways. Some students suggested that the purpose was to broaden “knowledge.” In contrast, others highlighted “skills” as what General Education seeks to broaden. Finally, another group of students focused on the ability of General Education to broaden “perspectives” one is exposed to or encounters in school.

The second highest number of responses (241) suggested General Education’s purpose was to support “learning outside of the major.” This overarching theme included several sub-themes around which students’ responses coalesced. This included offering coursework that would provide “extra” experiences or opportunities, including exposure to topics or perspectives that would not otherwise be available, or was outside the scope of their majors. Some students felt that General Education provided learning opportunities that were complementary to their major fields of study. Others noted that their General Education courses covered “classical” or canonical knowledge that should be shared across disciplines. Taken together, these respondents seemed to think that the purpose of General Education is to provide learning outside of one’s “field” whether “field” was framed as a major, minor, or eventual career path.

A slightly lower number of responses (216 comments) posited that purpose of General Education is to make a “well-rounded” person, or to provide a “well-rounded” education. Students came to this purpose from several directions, with differences laying in where they tended to situate the well-roundedness. For some “education” was the entity qualified by the phrase, as in “a well-rounded education;” for others it was “people,” “students,” or even “intellectuals.” Some went as far as to frame well-roundedness in contrast to the specialization of their major or career training, implying that they saw their own majors and specializations as narrowly wrought and that General Education’s purpose is to balance that specialization in pursuit of a more well-rounded educational experience.

In what is likely the most cynical theme to arise from students’ responses, some felt that the purpose of General Education is simply to make Penn State more money. These responses (123 comments) described this belief in a number of ways, with some focusing on the breadth of requirements, the number of credits necessary, or the way General Education effectively extended the time-to-degree –and with each being a policy with a financial purpose. In focusing on the pecuniary aspect of General Education requirements, some respondents went as far as to declare that General Education credits were useless and that the classes themselves were not valuable—except to Penn State’s bottom line.

In another theme, respondents (118 comments) elided the basic question of purpose and shied away from making a value judgement on the purpose of General Education. Their comments framed General Education as just another requirement that students need to complete. These students did not seem to want to engage with General Education in terms other than as a requirement of graduation that must be dispatched in pursuing the larger goal of a degree.

In contrast, though again without articulating a specific purpose, respondents (84 comments) stated directly that General Education courses are a waste of time and money. Reasons provided for this characterization were diverse, but included that topics and materials are generally not useful, are easily forgotten, are a review of material taught in middle and high school or will simply never be used again beyond the course in which they are taught.

Others (73 comments) characterized the purpose of General Education as being about providing “basic or foundational knowledge.” These comments alluded to there being a basic set of knowledge or information that “everyone should know,” or a basic “set of tools” that all students should have developed or possess at graduation. Students making these comments seemed to suggest that it is in General Education courses, not within students’ majors, that this type of learning occurs.

A smaller group (58 comments) framed the purpose of General Education as being an opportunity for new and undecided students to explore potential majors, minors, and career interests. They saw General Education courses, as a group, as well as some courses, specifically, as explicitly provided opportunities for students to try on new avenues of study, to find a new major, change their minds about majors, or solidify their thinking around choice of a major. Comments further seem to suggest that this purpose was most important for new, uncertain, or exploring students as opposed to those who already had firmer ideas about their future studies.

A small number of comments (36 comments), directly addressed the question prompt by stating that there is no purpose to General Education. These responses, rather than imagining or acknowledging any potential purpose, simply rejected the possibility altogether.

Finally, the survey also elicited responses (31 comments) that framed the purpose of General Education as being a way to mediate GPA. It may be that students were not suggesting this to be a true purpose, but rather an effect of General Education courses. Moreover, students were split about the mediating effect with some suggesting that General Education courses were too hard and ended up having a negative effect on their GPAs. In contrast, other respondents suggested that many General Education courses were GPA-boosters and easy ways to buffer or prop up an ailing GPA.

###

Figure . Respondents' perceptions of the purpose of General Education



## The Impact of General Education

Among survey respondents, 1,137 provided comments on the positive and negative impacts of General Education classes on their college experience. Figure 13 presents the proportional distribution of response themes and Table A-2 (see Appendix) provides example comments by theme. The single most commonly referenced theme (248 responses) was that of little or no impact. It is critical to note, however, that overall, comments related to this question across themes were roughly evenly split between positive comments (692) and negative comments (600). The dominant refrain under the little or no impact theme was that General Education courses were a waste of time and money and, as in the purpose of General Education, many respondents perceived them to be a revenue-generator for the University. A relatively small number of comments included in this theme, primarily from self-identified adult learners and transfer students, focused on General Education as unnecessary given their life experience and prior coursework.

Another common theme centered on the many contributions of General Education courses to students’ knowledge and skills (221 responses). Such comments were most often around the acquisition of new knowledge in specific areas and becoming a more “well-rounded” person, but students also noted increased understanding of society and culture, appreciation of diversity, career-related skills, communication skills, time-management skills, learning skills, and life skills.

The impact of General Education on students’ academic experience was multifaceted, with students describing both positive and negative impacts (173 responses). The positive academic aspects largely focused on the choice of a major, change of major, or addition of a minor, as well as on General Education courses as “GPA-boosters”. Interestingly, many students seemed to see General Education as the University’s attempt to *encourage* them to change majors. The negative academic impacts often focused on General Education as a distraction from major courses that created an unnecessary workload and were, for some, a detriment to their GPA. Similarly, students described both positive and negative relationships between their General Education courses and their major (292 responses). On the positive side, students described General Education courses as a welcome “break” from their major courses, as courses that complemented their major studies, and as an opportunity for extra-major exploration. Again, the negative comments were typically around the irrelevance of General Education to students’ majors and career plans.

Other positive impacts of General Education described by students were the opportunity for personal growth (63 responses) and the opportunity to make friends outside of their majors (39 responses). Another theme was stress (50 responses). While most students who commented on stress saw General Education as adding stress to their academic careers, some viewed these courses as a way to relieve stress. Scheduling challenges and the need to take “any course that fit” one’s schedule were also noted by some as negative impacts of General Education (19 responses).

Clearly, student respondents had both positive and negative views on the impact of General Education. In fact, many comments from a single individual included both positive and negative impacts and were coded as a “mixed bag” (76 responses) while also being coded in other themes. Often students both described their frustrations with General Education but mentioned one or two positive aspects of their experience in the same comment.

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Figure . Hierarchy chart of respondents' perceptions of the impact of General Education



**Academic impact**

**Relationship to major**

## Suggestions for Improving General Education

A total of 1,129 Penn State students responded to the question asking them to provide suggestions for improving General Education. They provided a variety of suggestions for improving General Education, including some that were repeated often and some that were unique. Figure 14 displays the relative proportion of responses to this question that align with a specific theme. Table A-3 (see Appendix) includes example responses grouped by theme.

The highest number of suggestions (337 responses) involved availability of General Education courses. Sub-themes included increased availability, increased variety, and increased online course offerings. Most comments referring to availability suggested more time slots or more sections, especially at Commonwealth Campuses and for the most popular courses, to make General Education courses easier to schedule. A second major suggestion, closely related to availability, was for an increase in the variety of General Education courses. Again, several students mentioned the need for a larger variety of courses specifically at Commonwealth Campuses. Some students requested more courses/sections in specific domains, such as Health and Wellness (GHW). Finally, some students requested more, or more accessible, online courses.

The next most common theme (301 responses) involved changes to General Education requirements, either by eliminating them, making them more flexible, or reducing them. Many students who suggested eliminating General Education requirements phrased it as “get rid of them.” When students wrote more than that, they typically mentioned the increased cost of the General Education credits over the cost if they were only required to take major courses. The next most common sub-theme related to General Education requirements was to make them more flexible. Students proposed a variety of modifications, such as making General Education optional, allowing students more freedom to take courses that interest them regardless of domain, offering independent study General Educations that would allow students to go deeper into a topic of interest, and grading General Education courses on a pass/fail basis to emphasize learning. Several returning adult students thought flexibility in General Education requirements was particularly important for them. Finally, many students suggested reducing requirements, often because of cost.

Many students (141 responses) thought General Education courses could be improved if they were more practical. Within this theme, students wanted General Education courses that teach real-world or practical skills, such as how to file taxes, or were more related to their major or career.

A substantial number of students (93 responses) indicated that General Education courses could be improved by improving instructors or pedagogy. These comments included those related to instructors or pedagogy generally, or those that indicated that General Education courses should be easier. These comments often mentioned that improvement in instructor quality would improve General Education courses. Some students also suggested pedagogical changes, such as more hands-on activities, more discussions, or more video lectures in online courses. About an equal number of responses related to the difficulty of General Education courses and commonly included sentiments such as “instructors don’t seem to realize that General Education courses are not major courses and should not take more time than courses in the major.”

Some students (35 responses) suggested methods for making it easier to choose General Education. Three sample suggestions are “Have clearer lists of all of the possible General Educations at Penn State so students have more information about the types of classes offered,” “Provide more resources to research and look into the best General Education fit for each students,” and “Not all General Educations have to be so useless if we (students) were given more guidance of our choices.”

A few suggestions were unique, but noteworthy. Five students indicated they didn’t like 7-week General Education courses, and a few mentioned that variation in credits (1 credit for music, for example) makes meeting General Education requirements difficult. Seven students thought General Education courses should be more rigorous. One example comment was “Stop making Gen Eds so easy. It is disrespectful to students’ intelligence and money.”

Finally, a substantial number of respondents (76 responses) indicated that General Education requirements are fine as they are – no changes necessary.

Figure . Hierarchy chart of respondents' suggestions for improving General Education



**Increase availability**

**Change requirements**

**Teach practical or major-related skills**

**Improve guidance**

# Summary and Conclusions

Survey respondents were generally satisfied with the flexibility of their General Education requirements and the selection of classes available, and satisfaction did not differ by movement between campuses. Most respondents were satisfied with their ability to enroll in General Education classes despite the finding that a majority of those who had difficulty enrolling in General Education courses agreed that lack of availability was one cause, and the most common suggestion for improving General Education was to increase availability of courses. These contrary findings may be a explained by differences in satisfaction depending on respondents’ campus location or movement between campuses. These results suggest that Penn State is doing a good job ensuring that enough General Education courses are offered but has room to improve.

Most respondents (over two-thirds) indicated that at least one to three General Education classes addressed the broad goals of General Education, such as helping them prepare for their careers, stimulating them intellectually, or broadening their understanding of national and world events, and almost three-quarters of respondents agreed that General Education courses expanded their perspectives on a range of topics. Furthermore, percentages were generally higher for respondents in low-prescriptive majors. These findings are consistent with the open-ended comments, which indicated that broadening educational experience, knowledge and skills, and personal growth are among the reasons for, or salient impacts of, General Education. However, because one to three courses are typically only seven to twenty-five percent of the General Education requirements, these results are not as positive as they may seem. In fact, less than half of respondents claimed that at least four to six courses (26% to 40% of requirements) addressed these General Education goals. Penn State students may benefit if more of Penn State’s General Education courses explicitly addressed one or more of the overarching goals.

Approximately one-third of respondents agreed that General Education courses were as important as their major classes or among their most valuable educational experiences. These results are quite positive given that most students come to Penn State to earn a degree in a specific discipline. However, the ratings of importance appear to be lower for respondents in programs that prescribe most General Education courses than for those who prescribe the fewest.

About half of respondents agreed that General Education courses were related to their major, which is important to them as evidenced by themes that arose from the qualitative analysis. Some respondents believed the purpose of General Education to be preparation for their majors, some indicated that General Education distracted them from that purpose, and some suggested that General Education could be improved by aligning it with their careers or majors.

In contrast, a large majority of respondents agreed that General Education primarily addresses topics outside their major. This finding was complimented by the open-ended comments, which included learning outside the major as one of the most frequently mentioned purposes of General Education. In addition, some respondents claimed that General Education courses provided a welcome “break” from their major courses. Given that General Education seeks to support the majors while also providing a “well-rounded” education, these findings are satisfying.

Finally, though the largest percentage of respondents consider superficial factors, such as how General Education courses would fit into their schedule and whether the course would help them to finish their requirements, as important factors when choosing classes, almost as many regard interest in the topic as important. Furthermore, relative importance of various factors for choosing General Education courses seem to differ depending on which location the respondents were enrolled at and whether they moved to a different location during the course of their education. This outcome suggests that the way in which students choose their General Education courses is, at least somewhat, aligned with the goal of General Education to provide students with an opportunity to explore. Of note, some strategies for choosing General Education courses differ depending on respondents’ location of enrollment and whether they moved between campuses.

One important caveat to consider when interpreting these results is that, in some cases, students may not perceive some of their General Education courses as General Education courses. For example, Engineering students likely don’t think of their math courses, which are required for the major, as General Education requirements. This variation in perspective likely impacts the results reported here. Some, but not all questions in this survey attempted to account for this, but future assessments should account for this more systematically.

Though the Committee may decide to follow up on some of these results, one of the major goals of this survey was to provide a baseline against which to compare students who enrolled after 2018, when new General Education requirements began and after Penn State’s enhanced focus on General Education, including a dedicated office.

# Appendix

### Table A-1. Summary of Themes Related to The Purpose of General Education

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Sub-theme(s)** | **No. of References\*** | **Sample Comments** |
| Broaden educational experience | * Broaden knowledge
* Broaden skills
* Broaden perspectives
 | 312 | * To obtain skills and knowledge that you would otherwise not be exposed to in your own major.
* Broadening my knowledge which may benefit me in an unpredictable future career.
* To expand the interests and views of the people taking the classes, or to develop new skills.
* To acquire unique educated perspectives on a variety of academic topics
* To broaden your educational background
 |
| Learning outside major | * Extra non-major opportunities
* Different topics than major
* Complementary to major
* Classical/canonical study
* Learning outside one’s “field”
 | 241 | * To acquire unique educated perspectives on a variety of academic topics
* Ability to learn about different subjects outside my major
* To fill in pieces that compliment my major coursework
* To ensure that even students in very specialized and demanding fields still obtain a "classical" education
* Help me learn something outside of my field
 |
| Well-rounded person/education | * Well-rounded education
* Well-rounded as people
* Well-rounded as students
* Well-rounded as intellectuals
* Balance to specialization
 | 216 | * To achieve a well-rounded education
* To make us more well-rounded people
* To make a student more well rounded
* we need to be well rounded students, and that won’t happen if we are fully immersed in our specialization
* Develop you as a well-rounded intellectual
 |
| Make PSU money | * Earn PSU money
* Prolong studies
* Require more classes
* Require more credits
* Pay for non-valuable classes
 | 123 | * I believe they are a way for Penn State to take more of my money.
* I feel like PSU just wanted to prolong my graduation to get more money from me.
* To get students to take more classes so that PSU can make more money
* For Penn state to get more money for 18 useless credits
* To make students pay more money for the university for non-valuable classes
 |
| Fulfill requirements or credits | * Just a requirement
* Required credits
* Check off/get out of the way
* Graduation requirement
 | 118 | * To fill a requirement the Penn State forces me to take
* Mainly just for fulfilling the credit requirement
* Arbitrary boxes to check off in order to complete a degree
* Solely for graduation requirements
 |
| Waste of money, time | * Wastes time
* Wastes money
 | 84 | * I think they are a waste of time and students should not have to take them
* The majority of them feel like a waste of time, as I afterwards realize I have retained little to nothing from them
* I think General Educations are a waste of time. It is all stuff we will never use again. And we learn most of it in high school
 |
| Basic skills or foundational knowledge | * Basic knowledge
* Foundational knowledge
 | 73 | * to get a base knowledge of important things
* They ensure that each graduate has the same basic set of tools
* for students to get a variety of a basic understanding of many topics
* General Education allows you to learn the basics that everyone should know
* To provide basic knowledge on all aspects of education
 |
| Exploration of majors, minors, or career interests | * Help when undecided
* Exposure
* Solidify major, minor, career interests
 | 58 | * To perhaps decide between majors when you're still starting fresh and not entirely sure what you want to study.
* Can serve students as a tool to help them choose a major by allowing them to experience a variety of courses
* To expand my options on potential majors/minors and to give me purpose other than just my major
* Some of the classes can be interesting and maybe help generate some curiosity and the career path you choose
* Exploring topics outside my major was very important to confirming my decision of my major and what I want to do with my career
 |
| Not important; no purpose | * No purpose
* Irrelevant to interests/career
* Not useful
 | 36 | * In my honest opinion, there is absolutely no purpose.
* There is no purpose. General Educations was just a requirement and mandatory, so I took them.
* Not really relevant to my major.
* I had to take three classes and I have yet to use any of the information I learned from those classes.
 |
| Preparation for major studies | * Preparation for future coursework
* A way to begin college
* Courses support majors, minors, or careers
 | 36 | * General Educations provide an academic background to the future classes you will take
* Serve as base courses to begin your college career
* To make you more prepared for major classes/workload management
* General Educations should help to support students’ studies of minors and majors
* I try to pick classes that kinda go along with my major or my career
 |
| Ease or difficulty of courses; effect on GPA | * Negative GPA impacts
* Positive GPA impacts
 | 31 | * Took focus from my major classes and brought down my GPA
* All my General Educations did was lower my GPA
* To relieve stress from difficult courses in my major
* It is an easier course people take to raise GPA
* GPA boosters
 |

\*The number of references does not directly reflect the number of students that responded to the question because a single comment could be coded under multiple themes or not coded at all if irrelevant to the question.

### Table A-2. Summary of Themes Related to the Impact of General Education Courses.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme / Subthemes** | **No. of References\*** | **Sample Comments** |
| **Little or no impact*** Waste of time and money
* Life experience
 | 248 | * A General Education is a way for schools to make more money off students by requiring them to take an unnecessary amount of credits that don’t help the student in any aspect of life.
* I don’t pay $12,000 a semester to learn how to do yoga.
* Other than the enjoyment I have had from a few of them, they have only slowed me down.
* I believe General Education is great for students fresh out of high school who are still deciding on a career path. However, I see little benefit for adult learners. When I decided to finish my degree, I knew exactly what I wanted to do and in many cases the General Education courses seemed like a waste of time and money.
 |
| **Knowledge and skills*** New knowledge/well-rounded
* Society, world, culture
* Life skills
* Learning skills
* Communication skills
* Working with diverse others
* Career skills
 | 221 | * Helped me understand different cultures and develop a better personal worldview.
* These classes all helped me to become a well-rounded student.
* They opened my eyes and taught me about common things and life outside of my major.
* General Education classes have helped me with cultural differences, math and other areas that I probably didn't realize was important before. There have been many times on the job I have referenced a class that I have taken outside of my major.
* General Educations have significantly improved my writing abilities; it was a weakness that I truly wanted to improve on.
 |
| **Relationship to major*** Not relevant to major/career
* Explore outside of major
* Enhanced major
* Break from major
 | 292 | *See examples below of “positive” and “negative” relationships to major.*  |
| *Positive impact* | 179 | * They have been a great reprieve from my major--accounting--and have influenced my life for the better, such as Nutrition 101.
* As an engineering student, a few of the general education prerequisites have made me a more well-rounded student and given me a better fundamental understanding of engineering principles.
* They gave me the chance to learn about things completely different than my major. One (HDFS 129) was very valuable to me as a human being, not just a student.
 |
| *Negative impact* | 130 | * None of my General Education classes did anything for my accounting degree.
* I didn’t learn anything particularly useful for my major & while they were interesting at times, I seriously regret having to take them.
* None of my General Education classes related to my major or really provided me with information that will be beneficial in the future.
 |
| **Academic impact*** Workload
* GPA
* Choose/change major
* Minor
 | 173 | See examples below of “positive” and “negative” academic impacts.  |
| *Positive impact* | 110 | * Some of my General Education classes helped me to find a major that I am passionate about and helped me acquire knowledge that is useful not only in my field but applicable to everyday life.
* It made me decide to add a minor I never thought I would have chosen.
* The greatest impact I felt from most of my General Education classes came from the professors. A lot of my General Education professors were obviously passionate about what they were teaching. I feel like a lot of them also knew that many students were not majoring in those specific classes, so it gave professors the opportunity to teach us new skills and potentially sway us to change majors.
* I added a major and two minors because of my new range of interests brought on by General Education classes. I value alternative perspectives on a range of topics now, and more than I could have imagined without these classes.
 |
| *Negative impact* | 78 | * They made my gpa decrease, the worst grades I had in college were in General Education classes, so they took time away from my more important major classes.
* I feel as though they have distracted me from my true interests in my major and that they take up time I could be focusing and doing better in my major. Sometimes I'd have more work and have to put in more time to my General Educations than I ever had in any of my classes for my major!
* I am no smarter having taken Punk Rock. I am no smarter having taken GeoSci. General Educations are oftentimes a TON of busy work and truly hinder my performance in my core, major classes. Additionally, many General Education professors seem to be incredibly tough graders because they assume students do not care about their class (I quite literally had a professor outwardly state that in class during syllabus week). It is disheartening that my GPA drops because of getting a B in General Education classes that are pointless to my future career.
 |
| Mixed bag | 76 | * Classes varied depending on the instructor. Some were very valuable…but others were useless and seemed like it presented made-up material….
* A few were worthwhile to take. Most were just unnecessary busy work.
* Some of my General Education classes were pretty useless, but others really helped expand my perspective of the world and gave me practical skills that are important in all fields.
 |
| Personal growth | 63 | * My personal experience with General Education courses has been the most important highlights of my academic career. While my major is more focused to enable me a specific set of skills to function in a related entry level career or graduate school, it is actually the General Education courses that helped me grow as a person, learn about finance, math, race, cultures, programming, and important lessons I need to function as a contributing member of society. In the "real world," we need ALL of these things, and not just learn about a single subject. Without my General Education classes, I believe I would have been extremely limited.
* They opened the doors for new ways of thinking and different perspectives when tackling future endeavors.
* Helped me grow as an individual. If you don’t challenge your mind out if you comfort zone (i.e. major) are you truly learning?
* Particularly, I have taken two General Education courses with … that have greatly opened my mind to history and governmental affairs. Both of these classes have impacted the way I think about the world and myself.
 |
| Stress | 50 | * Added unnecessary stress to my academics.
* I'd say they were just added stress, the classes I wanted we're never available, so I had to dig to find something interesting that still fit in my schedule.
* They only added stress because they were irrelevant, but I still wanted to do well in them.
* They caused me time and caused stress. I had to work very hard at some just to make sure my gpa didn’t drop though I knew I’d never need the information after I graduated.
* I took a painting class and it impacted my mental health in a positive way. It was a de-stressor for me and gave me time to focus my energy on something calming and that took my mind off of everything for a while.
 |
| Make friends | 39 | * General Education has its up and downs, mostly in math, but I’ve had learned and met some of my best friends through these classes.
* It has forced people of different majors to become friends outside the typical day in the same building with the same people within a chosen major.
 |
| Scheduling | 19 | * I am forced to take classes that fit my schedule as opposed to anything that I am remotely interested in.
* There is hardly any General Educations that you can take with people you know - so there is little hope for potential study groups. The classes never fit correctly into my schedules, especially because as an engineering student our schedules often include Lab classes that create conflicts with a majority of General Educations.
* Most of my General Education classes were taken just because I had to. Most of the General Education classes I would have liked to take didn't fit into my schedule unfortunately.
 |

\*The number of references does not directly reflect the number of students that responded to the question because a single comment could be coded under multiple themes or not coded at all if irrelevant to the question.

### Table A-3. Summary of Themes Related to Suggested Improvements of General Education

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Sub-theme** | **No. of References** | **Sample Comments** |
| Increase availability | * Increase availability (157)
* Increase variety (126)
* Increase online courses (54)
 | 337 | * More time slots for popular courses
* I would implement more class offerings (MWF & TTh) to fit the different scheduling needs of students.
* It would be nice to have more options than once every Fall, for example to take a General Education. The downfall of small campus and limited instructors.
* More options and a better variety
* More variety available at branch campuses
* more available classes for online students
* a student at a physical branch campus should have no issue enrolling in an online class offered at another branch or world campus
 |
| Change Requirements | * More flexible General Education requirements (106)
* Eliminate General Educations (109)
* Reduce General Education requirements (86)
 | 301 | * More flexibility in the exact requirements
* Do not make them have a certain amount of math, science, English, history, art, etc. when people are not interested in that and it causes them stress and time for no reason. It is better to have classes that people want to take because it interests them than forcing them to take classes that they don't like which will negatively impact their GPA.
* The 3/6/9 option is a nice step, but I think allowing students to outright reject a single category of General Educations (maybe a 0/6/12) option would be helpful.
* I would allow other options for adult students.
* Make them optional
* Remove them from the requirements would be a good start.
* General Education needs to be removed as a requirement and focus solely on career training and preparation
* I would have lower requirements for general Ed course but offer different courses that are intriguing.
* Don’t make us turn a short degree into a long one.
* The requirements seemed excessive, especially for a transfer student like myself that has had prior college and real world experience such as in the military.
* Reduce the number of required
 |
| Teach practical or major-related skills | * Align with career or major (99)
* Teach practical skills (42)
 | 141 | * Not require ones that do not relate to the major or minor a person is taking. I am a business major and extremely disliked taking science classes
* Have classes within the colleges on niche topics that are both relevant to programs of study
* Allow us to substitute an upper level class pertaining to my major for any of the General Education requirements.
* I am not sure specifically, but I would recommend learning opportunities focused on improving the student's ability to think critically and operate as a sophisticated citizen in the community. I believe that fact-checking, research skills, and skills for identifying propaganda and deception are vital.
* Relate them to topically to general life skills that many students don't currently have, such as taxes, what paperwork is required to be filled out legally for different reasons such as immigration, court filing, etc, or how to recognize scammers in everyday life like telemarketers, phishing, and other common thieving techniques.
 |
| Improve instructors/pedagogy | Instructors/ pedagogy (48) Make General Educations easier (45) | 93 | * Replacing the mediocre instructors
* Probably smaller classes
* Make more classes that aren't exam and homework based, but more discussion based - that's how people will both learn and have fun.
* Make sure the professor does not treat the class as if it is a graduate class
* have a maximum work requirement
* Making sure you do not need to invest more time in them than your actual major classes. They should not affect your gpa as strongly as mine did
 |
| Improve guidance | Improve information about General Educations and support for choosing them | 35 | * I would like a better way to search for General Education's when enrolling with a search function in lionpath that filters by interests
* Have clearer lists of all of the possible General Educations at Penn State so students have more information about the types of classes offered.
* Provide more resources to research and look into the best General Education fit for each student.
* Better course descriptions. In a few classes I ended up focusing on something completely different than what I thought I signed up for and I just stuck them out instead of being fully engaged.
 |

1. Seventh semester or higher. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Seventh semester and higher. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For more information about the sampling design, please contact the Office of Planning, Assessment and Institutional Research at (814) 863-8721. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Nonparametric statistical test used to evaluate whether the differences in distributions between groups is likely to have occurred by chance. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)