

Signature Core Curriculum Action Plan

Executive Summary

This document has been developed by UAB's Signature Core Curriculum Committee as a roadmap for future changes to UAB's general education requirements. It has five parts:

- “Mission Statement” lays out our vision for what the general education curriculum should provide as a foundational part of a world-class undergraduate education.
- “Rationale for Changing the Core” indicates why it is important for UAB to revise its core requirements at this point in time.
- “Guiding Principles for the Signature Core Curriculum” maps out the four main principles that should inform and structure a revised core. While committee members have collectively shaped these principles into their current form, the committee is not their source or originator. Instead, these principles are rooted in the thoughts of the UAB community as a whole as communicated in two ways. 1) During the 2018-2019 academic year, we held numerous town halls, presentations, and listening sessions across campus with faculty, students and staff, and we also talked with parents, alumni, employers, and community members. In these sessions, we asked people to share their thoughts about the core (frustrations, hopes, suggestions, etc.) and took detailed notes about what we heard. 2) In spring 2019, all students, faculty, and staff were invited to participate in an online survey in which they selected the main learning outcomes that they feel the core should deliver.¹ This document synthesizes these two sources of feedback into four broad educational principles and provides a rationale for each.
- “Approaches to Change” proposes a multi-pronged strategy toward revising the core.
- “Timeline” gives a broad-brush overview of when changes will be implemented.

¹ For a full listing of presentations and listening sessions, see [Signature Core Curriculum > Events](#). The results of survey can be found in Appendix A.

Mission Statement

The Signature Core Curriculum supports the larger university mission to inspire and empower the creation of knowledge that changes the world. It will help students develop the skills, bodies of knowledge, and habits of mind that they need to be effective lifelong learners. The Signature Core Curriculum will encourage students to think critically, to develop innovative solutions to local and global problems, to communicate clearly, and to be aware of their responsibilities as citizens and leaders.

Rationale for Change

While many other colleges and universities nationwide have been diligent about updating and revising their general education requirements, UAB has not. For a variety of reasons, our requirements are essentially the same as they were in 1969 when the university awarded its first undergraduate degree. This 50-year stasis is all the more striking given the innovation that has otherwise characterized this institution, especially in recent years. Moreover, we can look around us and see that that our world is changing rapidly as larger forces (e.g., political, environmental, technological, cultural, etc.) bring different forms of pressure to bear. It seems high time for us to take a hard look at our existing core curriculum to make sure that it best serves the interests of our students.

Conversations with students suggest that they see the current core as having exceeded its shelf life. All too often they think of our core requirements as being too repetitive of their secondary educational experience (one student memorably called the UAB Core “high school 2.0”) and the classes themselves as dull sites of passive learning that lack intellectual urgency. These views should not be dismissed. When we fail to capture students’ imaginations and to jump start their intellectual development early in their college careers, they enter their chosen majors with underdeveloped arrays of skills and truncated fields of vision, and this then shortchanges their full flourishing as leaders, thinkers, and citizens. We owe our students the best education we can provide.

To begin breathing fresh air into our general education curriculum, the Education Pillar of UAB’s Strategic Plan, [“Forging the Future,”](#) calls for the university to develop a Signature Core Curriculum “focused on modelling and developing socially conscious global citizens and leaders.” As a first step to delivering on this goal, UAB’s Senior Vice President and Provost, Dr. Pam Benoit, in consultation with Deans and the Faculty Senate, established a [Signature Core Curriculum Committee](#) in spring 2018. The primary goal of this committee during the 2018-2019 academic year was to collect the thoughts of all UAB stakeholders about the strengths and weaknesses of the existing curriculum and about what the ideal core at UAB should accomplish. The committee was charged with an ambitious goal: creating a vibrant and intellectually enriching program of general education at UAB, one that is meaningful for the students, rewarding for the faculty, and sustainable for the institution.

Guiding Principles for the Signature Core Curriculum

The following four interlocking principles express our central vision of what the Signature Core Curriculum should provide to students. For each principle, we give a rationale that connects to the feedback collected from the UAB community as a whole.

1. The Signature Core Curriculum will develop critical, analytical thinking and data-driven decision making in ways that engage students actively in the learning process. As much as possible, it will encourage students to synthesize bodies of knowledge and to think across disciplines.

Justification: This principle brings together two dominant notes in the feedback received. Critical thinking was the top learning outcome in the online survey across all categories of respondents, and thus it should form *the* central, indispensable element in our general education program. However, in-person listening sessions and online survey feedback have also prompted us to adopt a particular orientation toward critical thinking: students want to be more actively engaged in the learning process (see, for instance, their emphasis on Integrative and Applied Learning). They are eager for more opportunities to apply what they learn and to think about how various bodies of knowledge connect together.

2. The Signature Core will teach students the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind they need to solve real-world problems. As part of teaching students how to tackle problems, this core should encourage them to think about local issues in global, diverse, and multicultural contexts.

Rationale: Problem Solving ranked second overall in the survey of learning outcomes, reinforcing the general impression from listening sessions that both students and faculty would like to see more opportunities for engaged learning. Effective problem solving involves creative or innovative thinking, and it also means grappling with the impact that technology has had on virtually every facet of our lives. In an increasingly interconnected world, few problems are purely local ones, and almost all issues exist in relationship to larger conversations and larger webs of cause and effect. The core should teach students to examine issues in the widest possible context and from many points of view.

3. The Signature Core Curriculum will teach excellent communication skills.

Rationale: When students cannot communicate in clear and compelling ways, their critical thinking and problem solving skills are left stranded. Not surprisingly, written and oral communication ranked high in the online survey, and listening sessions with faculty and employers revealed a widespread sense of urgency about ensuring that students develop first-rate writing skills across a variety of genres or mediums. Effective communication is not just

about controlling language mechanics. It also involves listening, understanding, and evaluating, different sources of information and constructing logical, nuanced arguments, and thus excellent communication is one expression of the first principle above, critical thinking. And since communication is often used to persuade or to communicate change, this third principle also supports the goal of teaching students how to solve problems.

4. The Core Curriculum will allow students freely to exchange and debate new ideas, question biases and assumptions, and test and refine their personal values.

Rationale: Ethical reasoning ranked in the top five in the online survey, and participants in listening sessions repeatedly hoped that the core curriculum would help students develop an awareness of ethics, citizenship, accountability, service, etc. Rather than “teaching” ethics or citizenship, however, in the sense of top-down instruction to students in how they should behave, the Signature Core should be a curricular space in which students are encouraged to share their ideas and to listen respectfully and respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others as a means to develop their own moral compass. The free flow of ideas and sharing of values works best when students feel themselves to be members of a meaningful intellectual community where their voices matter.

Approaches to Change

To be truly effective, an educational curriculum should be more than simply a set of requirements on a page. Instead, it should impact how students, faculty and staff think and talk about the core, how the core is taught, and how the core intersects with other aspects of the undergraduate experience. Accordingly, the Signature Core Curriculum Committee will work to improve and support the general education curriculum along each of the following five axes:

Curricular change

The committee will examine the existing UAB core requirements to see where and how they can better deliver on the above Guiding Principles.

Enriched Teaching

We will explore ways to provide robust support to instructors who would like to develop new approaches to core teaching. Fostering a culture of good teaching also requires having policies that reward it, and the Signature Core Curriculum committee will work to promote these policies wherever possible.

Improved Communication

Largely because the existing core has been in place so long that, as a university, we take it more or less for granted, we do not do an effective job of explaining its value to students, their families, community members—or even to faculty. Going forward, the Signature Core Curriculum Committee will work with various groups (e.g., Admissions, academic advisors, administration) to better communicate the important role that general education plays in the UAB undergraduate experience.

Co-curricular connections

We know that students learn both inside and outside of classrooms. While many instructors have connected individual core classes to co-curricular and off-campus opportunities (e.g., service learning, fine arts experiences, community projects, etc.), the curriculum as a whole has never been examined with an eye to creating similar, systematic linkages. We will work with supporting offices and groups to identify ways that the curriculum and the co-curriculum might complement one another.

Governance:

No committee, however far-sighted, can anticipate all future needs, and even the most elegantly designed curriculum will grow outdated over time. The Signature Core Curriculum committee will recommend a governance structure for making sure that UAB's core requirements remain vibrant and relevant.

Timeline for Change

This document represents the results of a one-year listening tour of campus. Broadly speaking, our plan for year two is to develop a draft curriculum and begin workshopping it around campus. By the end of the 2019-2020 we hope to have a workable version that can form the basis of pilot projects and pilot courses in 2020-2021. As the broad outlines of the curriculum take shape during year two, the committee will begin working in a more focused way toward providing teaching incentives, improving communication, and exploring synergies with the university's co-curricular offerings.

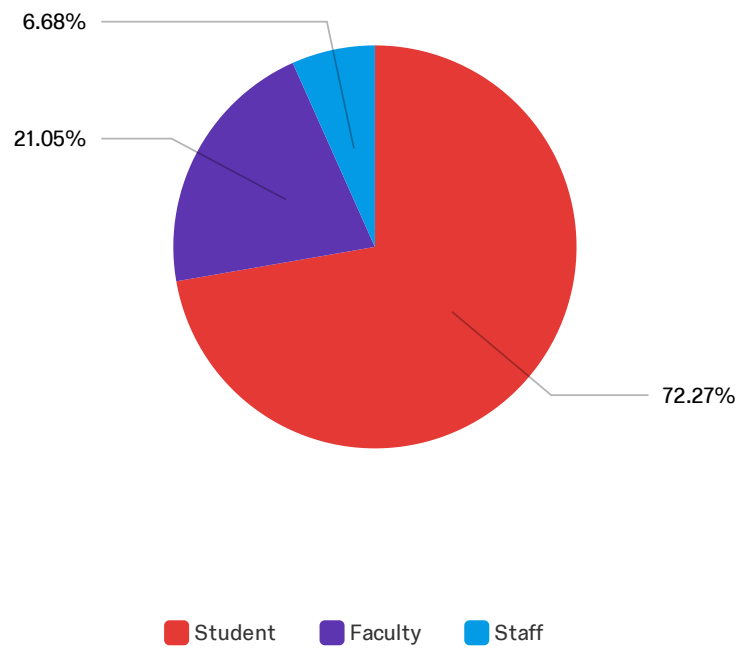
The Signature Core Curriculum Committee is committed to an open, transparent and consultative process, one that involves multiple voices at each step in the process and that respects the role that faculty play in supervising the curriculum. This downside to this commitment is that curricular change, especially at the scale of a university-wide general education curriculum, does not happen quickly. However, given the fact that the core is foundational to all undergraduate majors at the university and is woven deeply into the institutional fabric of many departments, we feel that careful, deliberative progress is the wisest course of action.

Appendix A

Core Curriculum Committee Faculty and Student Survey

March 18, 2019 4:02 PM GMT

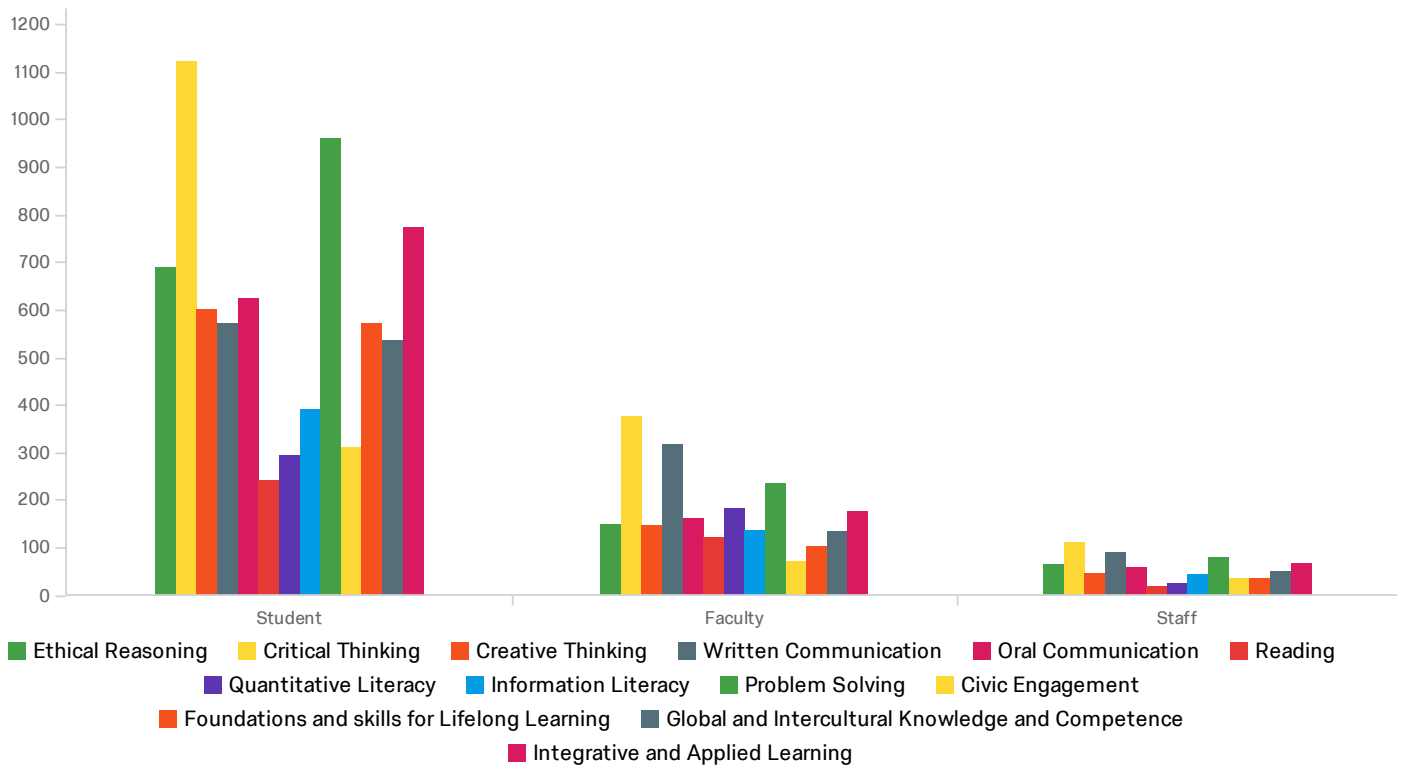
Q3 - What is your role at UAB:



#	Field	Choice Count
1	Student	72.27% 1600
2	Faculty	21.05% 466
3	Staff	6.68% 148
		2214

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q2 - Select 5 learning outcomes that you see as foundational to the undergraduate experien...



#	Field	Student	Faculty	Staff	Total
1	Critical Thinking	69.70% 1120	23.40% 376	6.91% 111	1607
2	Creative Thinking	75.73% 599	18.46% 146	5.82% 46	791
3	Written Communication	58.40% 570	32.38% 316	9.22% 90	976
4	Oral Communication	74.08% 623	19.02% 160	6.90% 58	841
5	Reading	63.42% 241	31.84% 121	4.74% 18	380
6	Quantitative Literacy	58.92% 294	36.27% 181	4.81% 24	499
7	Information Literacy	68.54% 390	23.73% 135	7.73% 44	569
8	Problem Solving	75.35% 960	18.45% 235	6.20% 79	1274
9	Civic Engagement	74.82% 309	16.95% 70	8.23% 34	413
10	Ethical Reasoning	76.30% 689	16.50% 149	7.20% 65	903
11	Foundations and skills for Lifelong Learning	80.62% 570	14.57% 103	4.81% 34	707

#	Field	Student		Faculty		Staff		Total
12	Global and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence	74.58%	534	18.58%	133	6.84%	49	716
13	Integrative and Applied Learning	76.16%	773	17.24%	175	6.60%	67	1015

Showing rows 1 - 13 of 13