

# **Trends and Emerging Practices in General Education**

**Based On A Survey Among Members Of  
The Association Of American Colleges And Universities**

**Conducted By Hart Research Associates**

May 2009

*This report is the second of two reports summarizing findings from a survey conducted in late 2008 and early 2009 of chief academic officers at AAC&U member institutions. For other survey reports, see [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org)*

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From November 19, 2008, to February 16, 2009, Hart Research conducted an online survey among 433 Chief Academic Officers or designated representatives at AAC&U member institutions to measure the prevalence of specified learning outcomes in higher education institutions today and to document recent trends in curricular change, specifically in the areas of general education and assessment. The margin of error is  $\pm 4.7$  percentage points for the entire sample, and it is larger for subgroups. The total population for the survey included 906 AAC&U member institutions that were invited to complete the survey, and thus the response rate for the survey is 48%.

### Institutional Profile

The sample for this survey is representative of AAC&U's total membership in terms of both institutional type (Carnegie Classification) and affiliation or source of control.

	Proportion Of Sample
<b>Carnegie Classification</b>	%
Associates	8
Bachelor's	32
Master's	39
Doctoral/Research	19
Other	2
<b>Affiliation</b>	
Public	44
Private (including independent/religious)	55

### Executive Summary Of Key Findings

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- A large majority of AAC&U member institutions (78%) say they have a **common set of intended learning outcomes for all their undergraduate students**, and these outcomes address a wide variety of skills and knowledge areas. The skills most widely addressed are writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication skills, and the knowledge areas most often incorporated are humanities, sciences, social sciences, global cultures, and mathematics.
  - It is notable that many of the outcomes that AAC&U members are focusing on today are the ones that employers in a 2006 survey said they would like to see colleges and universities emphasize.
- The majority of administrators (56%) say **general education has increased as a priority** for their institution, and a mere 3% say it is becoming less of a priority. Additionally, most institutions are in some stage of reviewing or modifying their general education program.

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- The vast majority (89%) of institutions are **in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program**, including formally reviewing their program (19%), discussing proposals for change (22%), implementing changes adopted in the past five years (18%), and conducting assessments of learning outcomes in general education (30%). Just 11% state they are *not* currently making revisions to their general education program.
- **Institutions that are placing a higher priority on general education today compared with five years ago are placing more emphasis on many engaged learning practices than are those whose focus on general education has not increased.** When asked about trends in curricular practices at their institutions over the past five years, nearly four in five (78%) administrators report an increasing emphasis on undergraduate research. First-year experiences that support the transition to college also rank at the top of the list, with 73% claiming more emphasis on the practice. Service learning in courses (68%) and internships (62%) also are high on the list.
- Administrators' assessments of their institution's **general education program** vary notably depending on the characteristic or curricular pattern in question.
  - In regards to key characteristics of their general education program, administrators give their programs higher marks for having clear learning goals and having requirements that are linked to those goals than they do for assessing student achievement of the goals. They are least likely to describe their general education programs as having a coherent sequence of courses.
  - When it comes to the curricular patterns of institutions' general education, the majority of administrators say that their programs are characterized by global courses (60% say describes very or fairly well), first-year seminars (58%), diversity courses (56%), and interdisciplinary courses (51%). Low marks for civic learning or engagement activities (38% describes very well), service learning opportunities (38%), and experiential learning opportunities (36%) indicate that though these are increasingly popular topics of discussion, no single one of these real-world learning approaches is yet being incorporated into general education programs on a broad scale. Nearly half of institutions (49%) are using *at least* one of these approaches, however.
  - Less than half of member institutions feel that their general education programs are well integrated with students' major requirements.
- **Models and features of an institution's general education program** vary widely and relate to other key characteristics.
  - The large majority (80%) of member institutions employ a distribution model in their general education program, but only 15 percent use this model alone. Many institutions also incorporate common intellectual

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experiences<sup>1</sup> (41%), thematic required courses (36%), upper-level requirements (33%), core curriculum<sup>2</sup> (30%), and/or learning communities (24%) into their general education curricula.

- While four in five institutions include a distribution model as part of their general education program, **some notable differences exist between the minority that exclusively employ a distribution model (15%) and the large majority that use other models—either in combination with a distribution model (64%) or not (18%).** Institutions that incorporate other approaches besides a distribution model are more likely to have specified learning outcomes for all undergraduates; to recognize greater integration between general education and majors; and to be incorporating a variety of learning practices into their programs.

### Learning Outcomes

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**The large majority of AAC&U member institutions say they have a common set of intended learning outcomes for *all* their undergraduate students, and these outcomes address a wide variety of skills and knowledge areas.**

Virtually all (98%) member institutions have specified field-specific learning outcomes in at least some of their departments, including fully 65% that have defined outcomes in *all* departments.

When it comes to a common set of outcomes that apply to *all* undergraduate students, nearly four in five (78%) AAC&U member institutions say they have them. This applies to large majorities of all types of institutions, but baccalaureate (79%) and master's (80%) institutions are slightly more likely than doctoral/research institutions (70%) to have a common set of learning outcomes for all students. There are not notable differences by general education model, but those that have upper-level requirements (88%) and a core curriculum (84%) are the most likely to say that they have a common set of learning outcomes for their entire undergraduate student body.

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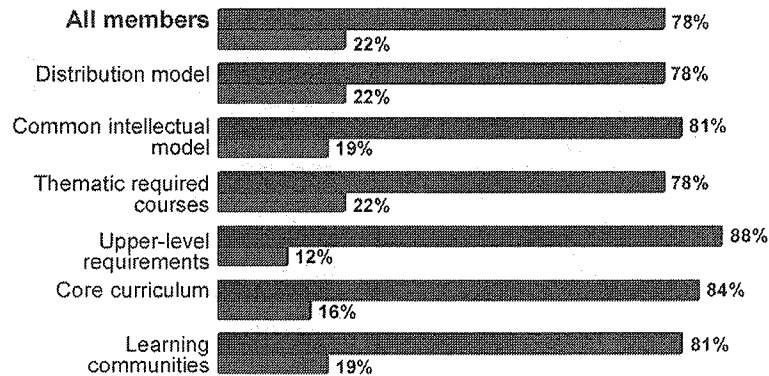
<sup>1</sup> The full wording of this item was: "a common intellectual experience (all students take one or a small set of required core courses)."

<sup>2</sup> The full wording of this item was: "core curriculum (all students take the same set of core courses)."

## Common Learning Outcomes By General Education Model

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■ Have common set of intended learning outcomes that apply to all undergrads  
■ Do not have common set of intended learning outcomes that apply to all

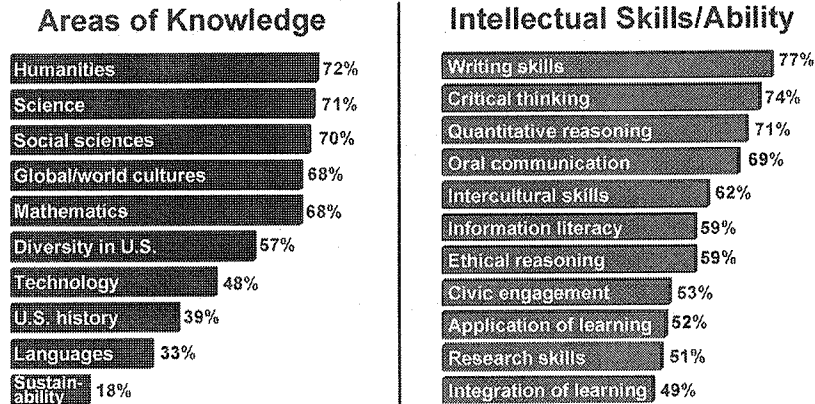


Of the 78% of institutions with a common set of outcomes for all students, 26% of administrators say that they apply to the entire undergraduate experience including majors, 18% indicate that they apply only to general education requirements, and 34% report that some outcomes apply to the entire undergraduate experience and some apply to general education.

Member institutions indicate that their common set of learning outcomes address a wide variety of skills and knowledge areas. The skills most widely included in institutions' learning goals are writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication skills. The areas of knowledge most commonly included are humanities, science, social sciences, global cultures, and mathematics.

## Many areas of knowledge and intellectual skills are addressed by common learning outcomes.

*Proportion saying their institution's common set of learning goals or outcomes addresses each area of learning/intellectual skills & ability*



It is notable that many of the outcomes that AAC&U members are focusing on today are the ones that employers would like to see colleges and universities emphasizing more. In 2006, Hart Research conducted a survey on behalf of AAC&U among business leaders in which employers were asked to assess the emphasis that colleges and universities are putting on selected learning outcomes. The survey revealed that employers believe that colleges and universities should do more to achieve learning outcomes in several areas to ensure that individuals will be successful and contributing members of today's global economy. Indeed, majorities of business executives said that colleges and universities should place more emphasis than they currently do on 13 of the 16 learning outcomes tested, and there was no area in which they felt colleges should place less emphasis. Business executives felt the following areas were most in need of increased emphasis by higher education institutions:

- Science and technology (82% should place more emphasis)
- Applied knowledge in real-world settings through internships and other hands-on experiences (73% should place more emphasis)
- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (73% should place more emphasis)
- Communication skills (73% should place more emphasis)
- Global issues (72% should place more emphasis)

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## Trends In General Education

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**The majority of administrators say general education has increased as a priority for their institution, and most institutions are in some stage of reviewing or modifying their general education program.**

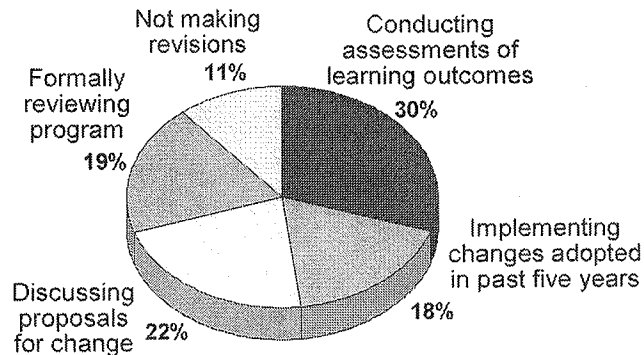
Many AAC&U member institutions (56%) report that general education has become more of a priority over the past five years. While two in five (41%) have not seen a change, very few (3%) note that general education is becoming less of a priority. Public institutions (64%) are more likely than private institutions (48%) to indicate that general education has become a greater priority.

Administrators also indicate that their general education programs are constantly evolving. The vast majority (89%) of institutions are in some stage of assessing or modifying their program, including formally reviewing their program (19%), discussing proposals for change (22%), implementing changes adopted in the past five years (18%), and conducting assessments of learning outcomes in general education (30%). Just 11% state they are *not* currently making revisions to their general education program.

**A majority of institutions are in the process of assessing or modifying their general education program.**

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**Status of Institutions' General Education Program**



Institutions that have defined a common set of learning outcomes for all undergraduate students show more involvement in assessing and implementing changes in their general education programs than those without defined outcomes. Twice as many institutions without outcomes for all undergraduates (18%) as those with outcomes (9%) are not currently making any revisions to their general education programs. Institutions with common learning outcomes also are more likely to be implementing changes adopted in the past five years (20% versus 13%).

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There is notable variation in the emphasis higher education institutions are putting on a variety of engaged learning practices, with undergraduate research, first-year experiences, and study abroad all registering the greatest increase in focus. Institutions that are placing a higher priority on general education today compared with five years ago are placing more emphasis on most of these practices than are those whose focus on general education has not increased.

When asked about trends in curricular practices at their institutions over the past five years, nearly four in five (78%) administrators report an increasing emphasis on undergraduate research. First-year experiences that support the transition to college also rank at the top of the list, with 73% claiming more emphasis on the practice. Service learning in courses (68%) and internships (62%) also are high on the list. First-year academic seminars and learning communities, while still gaining emphasis among more than half of those surveyed, are not garnering the same level of focus. Practices showing less momentum are practicums and supervised fieldwork (47% placing more emphasis and 52% placing the same amount of emphasis) and orientations to the purposes and value of liberal education (38% more emphasis and 59% the same emphasis).

<b>Proportion Of Member Institutions Placing More Emphasis On The Practice</b>			
	<b>All Respondents</b>	<b>Gen Ed More Of A Priority</b>	<b>Gen Ed Not More Of A Priority</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Undergraduate research	78	80	77
First-year experiences that support transition to college	73	77	68
Study abroad	71	71	71
Service learning in courses	68	<b>74</b>	60
Internships	62	65	59
First-year academic seminars	54	62	45
Diversity studies and experiences	54	56	52
Learning communities (two or more courses linked by a theme)	52	<b>58</b>	43
Practicums and supervised fieldwork	47	50	44
Orientations to the purposes and value of liberal education	38	<b>45</b>	28

Notably, institutions that are placing a higher priority on general education today are more likely than those that are not to say that they are placing more emphasis on nearly all of the practices in the corresponding chart. The biggest gaps in the emphasis these two groups are placing on practices are in service learning in courses (74% among those that are placing higher priority on general education versus 60% among those that are not), learning communities (58% versus 43%), and orientations to liberal education, including its purpose and value (45% versus 28%).

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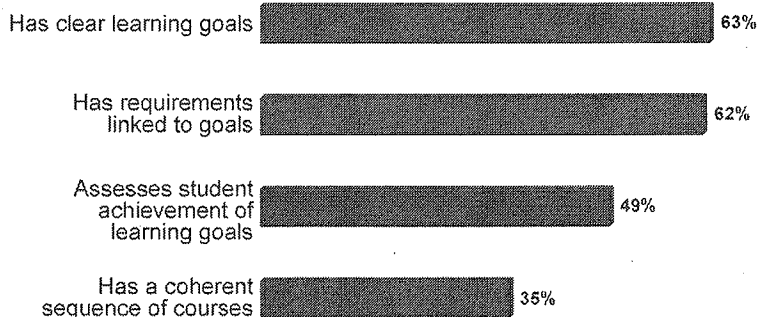
Nearly two in three administrators give their general education programs high marks for having clear learning goals and having requirements that are linked to those goals, but only about half give their programs similarly high marks for assessing student achievement of the goals. Only slightly more than one in three administrators think their general education programs have a coherent sequence of courses.

Regarding the characteristics of member institutions' general education programs, nearly two-thirds of administrators say that having clear learning goals (63%) and having requirements that are linked to goals (62%) are at the top of the list and describe their program very or fairly well. (As previously outlined, 78% of administrators report that their institution has a common set of learning outcomes—significantly fewer say they have "clear learning goals." This difference may indicate that though many institutions *have* learning goals, it is a greater challenge to make these goals clear to students. This is supported by the fact that the majority of administrators do not think that many of their students understand the learning outcomes set out for them.)

### Characteristics Of General Education Programs

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*Proportion rating each as describing their general education program well\**



\* ratings of 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale

The factors most strongly correlated with these characteristics (clear learning goals and requirements linked to goals) include broad assessments, integration of general education and majors, and requiring culminating or capstone projects for students.

- Nearly four in five (79%) institutions that assess outcomes both in general education and in departments report that having clear goals describes their general education program very or fairly well, and three-quarters (76%) state that having requirements linked to their goals describes them well.
- More than three-quarters (77%) of those who say their institutions' general education and major requirements are very or fairly well integrated also report having clear goals and requirements linked to them.

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- Institutions that require capstone projects in general education for all students also rank high in terms of these characteristics. Of particular note, however, these institutions are most likely to give their general education programs the highest rating ("5" on a five-point scale) on these characteristics: 71% indicate that having clear goals describes their general education programs well, including 45% who feel it describes it very well; and 76% state having goal-linked requirements describes them well, including 44% who say very well. These findings suggest a close relationship among clear goals for learning, coherent sequences of courses, and the development of capstone experiences in general education.

	Has Clear Goals (Rank 4 and 5)	Has Requirements Linked To Goals (Rank 4 and 5)
	%	%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>62</b>
Defined outcomes for all departments	71	67
Common outcomes for all undergraduates	72	68
Assess outcomes across curriculum in all/most depts.	76	72
Assess outcomes in general education	78	74
Assess outcomes in general education and across depts.	79	76
General education very/fairly well integrated with majors	77	77
Capstones required of all students in general education	71	76

Just less than half of administrators (49%) say that "assesses student achievement of learning goals" describes their institution very well. (This aligns closely with the 52% who said their institution assesses cumulative learning outcomes in general education across multiple courses.) The gap between the 63% who feel their institution's general education program has clear learning goals and the 49% who say their program assesses student achievement of learning goals well is notable, but not major.

Only 35% of administrators report that their general education programs have a coherent sequence of courses. Coherence proves to be a challenge for all types of institutions. While institutions using a core curriculum model rank themselves higher than any other subgroup for coherence, only 50% of these administrators say that having a coherent set of courses describes their programs very or fairly well. Institutions with a common intellectual model (43%), upper-level requirements (46%), and learning communities (45%) also rise above the average, but providing a clearly linked set of courses in the general education curriculum is a challenge for these institutions.

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Those with a distribution model were the least likely to rate their general education curriculum as having a coherent sequence of courses (32%).

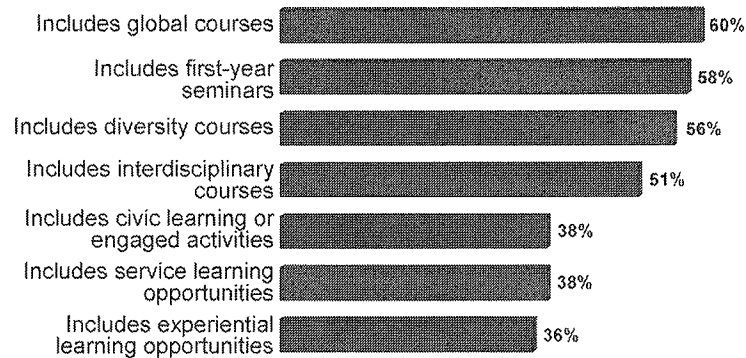
**When it comes to the curricular patterns of institutions' general education, administrators are more likely to say their programs include global courses, first-year seminars, diversity courses, and interdisciplinary courses than to include civic engagement, service learning, and real-world learning opportunities.**

Global courses (60% say describes very or fairly well), first-year seminars (58%), diversity courses (56%), and interdisciplinary courses (51%) are common curricular approaches for half or more member institutions' general education programs.

### Curricular Patterns Of General Education Programs

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*Proportion rating each as describing their general education program well\**



\* ratings of 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale

Indications that member institutions engage students in real-world learning opportunities in general education rank near the bottom of the list of characteristics. Low marks for civic learning or engagement activities (38% describes very well), service learning opportunities (38%), and experiential learning opportunities (36%) indicate that though these are increasingly popular topics of discussion, no single one of these real-world learning approaches is yet being incorporated into general education programs on a broad scale. Nearly half of institutions (49%) are using *at least* one of these approaches, however.

Real-world experiences may prove to be critical once students enter the workplace. In the 2007 business leaders survey, 69% said that they think that completion of a supervised and evaluated internship or community-based project that requires students to apply their college learning in real-world settings would be very effective in ensuring that recent college graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed for success. Furthermore, faculty-evaluated internships or community-based learning experiences ranked highest among a list of potential practices that

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business leaders would recommend for colleges and universities to develop to assess student learning.

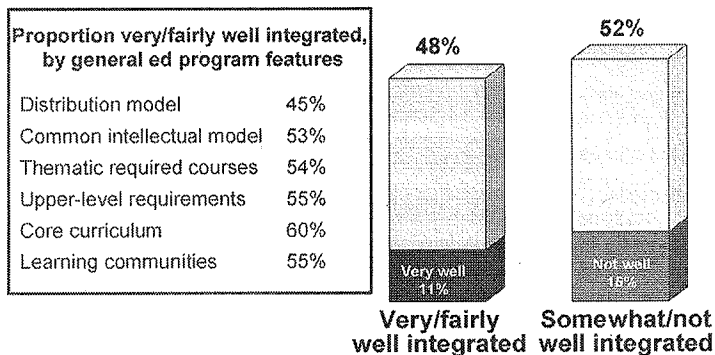
**Less than half of member institutions feel that their general education programs are well integrated with students' major requirements.**

Just one in 10 (11%) administrators says their institution's general education program is very well integrated with students' major requirements, and another 37% say they are fairly well integrated. More than half (52%) think they are only somewhat well integrated (37%) or not well integrated (15%).

### Integration Of General Education And Major Requirements.

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*How well integrated is your general education program with students' major requirements?*



Previous research found that students feel this disconnect as well. In focus groups conducted by Hart Research for AAC&U in 2004, college students expressed criticism of general education courses as lacking relevance to their area of concentration. Rather than seeing general education courses as complementary to and enhancing their understanding of their chosen area of study, many saw it as inapplicable to or even detracting from their major. Some described it as two separate tracks of study, with general education in the first two years and a focus on their major(s) in the last two.

The survey findings suggest that many institutions recognize they can be more effective in linking general education courses to areas of concentration and communicating to the benefits of general education to students.

**While four in five institutions include a distribution model as part of their general education program, there are some notable differences between the minority that exclusively employ a distribution model (15%) and the large majority that use other models—either in combination with a distribution model (64%) or not (18%). Institutions that incorporate other approaches besides a distribution model are more likely to have**

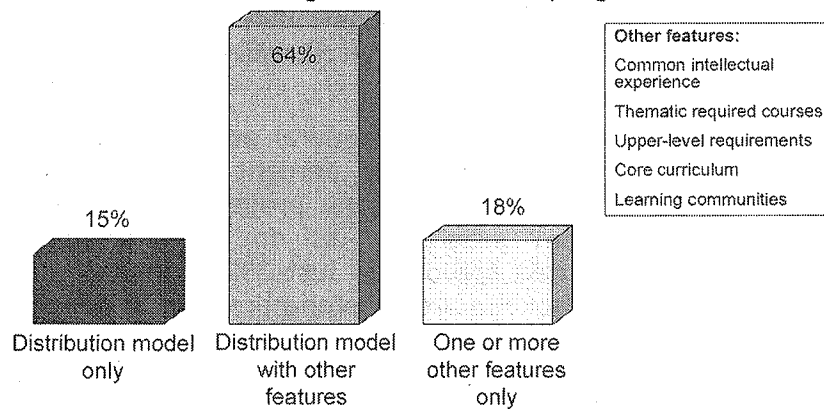
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specified learning outcomes for all undergraduates; to recognize greater integration between general education and majors; and to be incorporating a variety of learning practices into their programs.

Four in five member institutions employ a distribution model in their general education program. However, administrators indicate that many of their institutions also incorporate common intellectual experiences (41%), thematic required courses (36%), upper-level requirements (33%), core curriculum (30%), and/or learning communities (24%) in their general education curricula.

### The majority of institutions uses a distribution model with additional integrative features.

*Which of these features are part of your institution's general education program?*



Fully 82% of member institutions' general education programs include at least one of these six models, including 64% who employ the distribution model in conjunction with at least one other integrative feature and 18% who do not use a distribution model but use at least one other integrative feature. Just 15% use the distribution model alone.

	Carnegie Classification			
	All Respondents	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral/Research
	%	%	%	%
Distribution model only	15	14	11	23
Distribution model with other integrative features	64	68	68	55
Other integrative features only	18	16	18	19

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Institutions that go beyond a distribution model to incorporate any of the other integrative approaches are much more likely to have specified learning outcomes for all their undergraduates (82%) than those using solely the distribution model (60%), and are more likely to say their students understand the outcomes put forth. Among those with stated outcomes, less than one-third (30%) of institutions with a strictly distribution model report that almost all or a majority of their students understand outcomes, while 44% of those who use at least one of the other integrative features say the same.

Furthermore, institutions that include these other approaches are more likely to report greater integration of the general education and major requirements, the use of capstone projects in general education, and other curricular practices.

- About three in 10 (31%) administrators whose institutions use only the distribution model say that their general education and major requirements are very or fairly well integrated, compared with half of institutions that use other approaches and do not use the distribution model. Institutions that use the distribution model in conjunction with some other features fall in the middle, with 48% of administrations claiming their requirements are well integrated.
- Looking at different approaches to general education also reveals a gap in the use of capstones. Forty-four percent of institutions not using a distribution model report that capstone projects are offered or required in their general education programs, as do 32% of those who include distribution in a combined approach. Just 3% of institutions using only the distribution model offer or require capstone projects in general education.
- The corresponding table (see below) illustrates that institutions using integrative features beyond just the distribution model also are more likely to say they are using a variety of curricular patterns and practices.

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	All Respon- dents	Distribution Model Only	Distribution With Other Integrative Features	Other Integrative Features Only
	%	%	%	%
Has learning outcomes for all undergraduates	78	60	82	79
Almost all/majority of students understand learning outcomes (among those who have learning outcomes for all undergraduates)	33	30	45	42
Capstones required of all students/ offered in gen ed	29	3	32	44
Gen ed and major requirement are very/fairly well integrated	48	31	48	60
Has clear learning goals in gen ed (describes well)	63	43	65	70
Has requirements that are linked to goals in gen ed (describes well)	62	46	64	72
Includes global courses in gen ed (describes well)	60	43	65	56
Includes first-year seminars in gen ed (describes well)	58	44	62	63
Includes diversity courses in gen ed (describes well)	56	44	61	47
Includes interdisciplinary courses in gen ed (describes well)	51	32	53	61
Assessment of student achievement of learning goals in gen ed (describes well)	49	43	50	52
Includes civic learning or engagement activities in gen ed (describes well)	38	31	39	36
Includes service learning opportunities in gen ed (describes well)	38	27	40	38
Includes experiential learning opportunities in gen ed (describes well)	36	28	36	42
Has a coherent sequence of courses in gen ed (describes well)	35	14	36	48

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Furthermore, administrators reveal that general education is increasing as more of a priority among those institutions that incorporate learning communities (67% say it has become more of a priority in the past five years), common intellectual experiences (64%), and core curricula (63%) than among all member institutions (56%).

Also of note, institutions utilizing a core curriculum model perceive that their students have a higher understanding of their intended learning outcomes. Among this group, 54% of administrators say almost all or a majority of students understand the outcomes, compared with 42% among all respondents.

### Assessing General Education

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**The majority of AAC&U member institutions assess learning outcomes across the curriculum with more institutions assessing at the department level than in general education. Nonetheless, nearly half (48%) of member institutions are assessing at *both* the departmental level and in general education.**

While the survey results reveal a fairly high incidence (68%) of outcomes assessment within AAC&U member institutions at the departmental level, it shows that assessment of outcomes in general education across multiple courses is less prevalent at 52%. However, nearly as many (42%) indicate they are planning to assess outcomes in general education. Just 6% of academic administrators do not assess in general education beyond course grades and do not plan to do so.

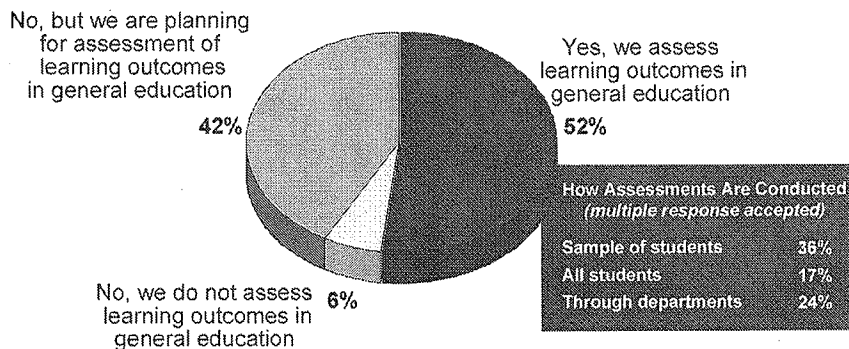
Master's institutions (55%) are slightly more likely to assess outcomes in general education than are baccalaureate colleges (49%) and doctoral/research institutions (47%). The 78% of institutions that have a common set of outcomes for all undergraduates (59%) are nearly twice as likely to assess outcomes in general education as are those who do not have a common set of outcomes (30%).

**Rather than having a universal approach to assessing learning outcomes, AAC&U member institutions use varied approaches and tools for assessment.**

AAC&U members use a variety of approaches for assessing general education outcomes. Thirty-six percent employ assessments based on a sample of students, 24% use departmental assessments for evidence of general education outcomes, and 17% of members use assessments that all students complete.

## Assessment In General Education.

*Does your institution assess cumulative learning outcomes in general education across multiple courses?*



Member institutions also use a diverse set of assessment tools, with the most widely used including rubrics of student work (40%), capstone projects (37%), and student surveys (35%). Approximately one in four say they use locally developed common assignments, standardized tests of general skills, and locally developed examinations. Relatively few use standardized national tests of general knowledge (16%) and student essays and writing portfolios (1%).

## Types Of Assessments Used In General Education

*Which of the following do you use to assess student learning outcomes in general education?*

- 40% Rubrics applied to examples of student work
  - 37% Culminating or capstone projects
  - 35% Surveys and self-reports
  - 27% Locally developed common assignments in some courses
  - 26% Standardized national tests of general skills, such as critical thinking
  - 23% Locally developed examinations
  - 16% Standardized national tests of general knowledge, such as science or humanities
  - 1% Student essays/writing portfolios
- 
- 48% My institution doesn't assess outcomes in general education

