

CAPC EXEC STATEMENT ON GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES

Background: The General Education 2019 Program takes a student learning outcome (SLO) approach. Unlike higher-level goals (e.g., communicate effectively), SLOs identify the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities students should possess and be able to demonstrate upon completion of a course (e.g., express oneself effectively in common college-level written forms). The SLO approach is a growing trend in higher education, because it focuses both instructors and students on specific learning activities that result in specific desirable competencies and skills, as reflected in the SLO and measured by specific assessment artifacts (i.e., assignments). Making such explicit links between learning activities, SLOs, and assessments is considered to be a pedagogical best practice in higher education. When taken seriously, this approach encourages instructors to more deeply consider the value of individual learning activities and assignments and allows students to see the purpose for specific learning activities and assessments in supporting the desired competencies and skills. One positive side-effect of this approach at WCU is that the General Education program is no longer primarily “prefix” based, allowing for better integration of General Education across the curriculum, in turn leading to a more robust and well-rounded liberal education for our students. For example, students can learn to “express themselves effectively in oral presentations” in a BIO Speaking Emphasis course rather than only a SPK or COM course.

Current Challenges: In spite of the advantages of the SLO approach to Gen Ed, CAPC sees several untoward trends at WCU, which individually and in sum could weaken our Gen Ed Program. Unfortunately, the emphasis on the SLOs has led to the misunderstanding that the SLOs are *all* that matter in preparing a Gen Ed course under this program.

1. **Dilution of the Distributives Component:** Although the Gen Ed Program is no longer prefix based, it was never CAPC’s intention to dilute students’ opportunity to problem-see and problem-solve through disciplinary lenses. For good or bad, disciplines exist in academe. We must help our students understand them—to comprehend that, even when they address similar content and problems, different disciplines have different goals and perspectives, and use different methods and styles of inquiry. CAPC is seeing a growing number of course proposals for Distributive designations (Art [ART], Behavioral and Social Sciences [BSS], Humanities [HUM], and Sciences [SCI]) coming from outside the disciplines typically housed in those areas at WCU. In and of itself this is not a concern. Such courses can, in theory, support a well-rounded Gen Ed experience. The SLO approach certainly permits, and perhaps even encourages, such courses. While we do not anticipate a lot of these courses, we have seen several interesting courses from outside the typical disciplines that seem to do justice to the Distributive area. Too often, however, that is not the case. Regardless of where a course is housed, to be a compelling Distributive course, it should be clear from the syllabus that the course not only covers traditional ART, BSS, HUM, or SCI content and issues, but also *that it does so through the lens of one of the disciplines typically housed in that distributive area. The use of that lens should be integral to the course.* For example, in a BSS course, it is important that the course not only meet the SLOs associated with Gen Ed Goals 1, 2, and 3 or 6, and that students learn content that deals with patterns and processes of human activities (e.g., the psychological or economic impact of illness), but also that students learn to view these patterns and processes *using the methods and styles of inquiry of a BSS discipline—i.e., Anthropology, Economics, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, and/or Psychology.* Thus, CAPC in its review must look beyond singular SLO-assessment links, and examine the readings, learning activities, and other content to determine if the course is suitable to be a Gen Ed Distributive. The goal of CAPC is to ensure that any Distributive proposal demonstrates effectively: (1) the assessment of relevant SLOs and (2) an exposure to and the application of specific methods, approaches, and styles of inquiry used in one or more of the typical disciplines in that Distributive area at WCU. To this end, CAPC provides [General Education Distributive Areas Definitions](#)*. These definitions should be used in addition to the relevant Gen Ed SLOs in preparing the course. Additional information about the expected characteristics of courses in the various Distributive areas also may be gleaned from the brief Course Catalogue descriptions of the [ART](#), [BSS](#), [HUM](#), and [SCI](#) Distributive areas (although these are more student-facing than the Definitions, they provide helpful information for preparers, as well, about what is expected).

*CAPC currently is revising the Gen Ed Distributive Definitions in keeping with the 2019

program, and will have that out soon, but preparers should use the existing document for now. Please be aware that this document reflects the pre-2019 Gen Ed goal numbering conventions.

A second issue that affords the possibility of diluting the Distributives component is seeking Distributive designation for a course that is too specialized or applied, and/or with explicit or implicit prerequisites. The purpose of the Distributives component of Gen Ed is to expose students to a broad range of ideas and perspectives. It encourages (in some cases forces) students to think outside their comfort zone—their focal area of academic interest—to become more well-rounded and thoughtful citizens. These courses are expected to be open to a wide range of students without assuming particular prior knowledge in the area, whether that is in the form of explicit course prerequisites or the assumption of specialized accumulated knowledge (e.g., the ability to read music, knowledge of how to take a blood pressure, or how to prepare a complex compound). Thus, Distributive courses should be thought of as broad (as opposed to overly specialized) and foundational (as opposed to advanced), tending toward the pure rather than the applied. If this were the only course a student takes in a Distributive area, we want to ensure that they leave WCU with an idea of what the discipline is about, their methods, theories, approaches, etc.

2. **Excessive course attributes:** CAPC is seeing a trend towards requests for courses to carry 3+ Gen Ed attributes (e.g., W, SE, Distributive, J). Although currently there is no explicit limit on the number of attributes a course can carry, and in many cases it makes sense for multiple attributes to apply, especially in certain combinations, we see some intertwined problems with this trend if left unchecked:

In too many cases it is suspect whether the course is rich enough to support robust learning in all of the proposed components. One challenge comes when one learning activity or assignment is carrying the load for several SLOs. Of course there is overlap, but if there are not adequate *unique* learning activities and at least one *unique* assignment associated with each SLO (or perhaps at most two), one has to wonder how well the SLOs are being met and about the level of competency the students will acquire. Although faculty in their disciplinary expertise can be creative in designing courses with multiple attributes, CAPC is worried about the effectiveness of successfully teaching and assessing all the specific components of the SLOs – i.e., the assurance of learning in that course.

Moreover, even if a single course can convincingly carry multiple attributes, a concern is that we are setting up situations where students can meet many of their Gen Ed requirements with a single course, which defeats the goal of encouraging a well-rounded liberal education. Students will gravitate to these “multi-dip” classes and eschew taking a wide range of courses that would expand their horizons.

In conclusion: At this point, CAPC Exec is hesitant to restrain with policy. Rather, as we further study these trends and implications, we encourage our colleagues to be circumspect in proposing non-traditional Distributive courses and Gen Ed courses with more than two attributes. We will be attending closely to these issues and pushing preparers to ensure courses are doing the work intended in supporting a well-rounded liberal education. We will be rolling back proposals when this is not clear.