



## **Reimagining General Education: Toward a New AU Core Curriculum**

Proposal of January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017

*We seek approval from the Faculty Senate to implement the AU Core curriculum for the class entering in 2018-2019.*

### **Our Mission**

Students come to American University hoping to make a positive difference in a complex world. To further this aspiration, we seek to foster within them habits conducive to critical, multi-perspective engagement. No single academic field or discipline has all of the answers, although each provides important insights; no singular point of view commands a monopoly of valuable ideas. So the rigorous development of effective citizens must always foster the capacity to understand the relative promise and problems of our individual perspective and the courage to explore the perspectives of others. By addressing the challenges of the present, we aim to educate students so that they become capable, informed participants in the great conversation that defines the future.

Through our commitment to a robust liberal education core, we encourage our students to engage with complexity, value diversity and understand change. We seek to develop our students' individual intellectual capabilities, while challenging them to expand their view and extend their ways of knowing. The following proposal seeks to reimagine liberal education at American University by grounding the essential skills and habits of mind it provides within the complex world our students seek to serve.

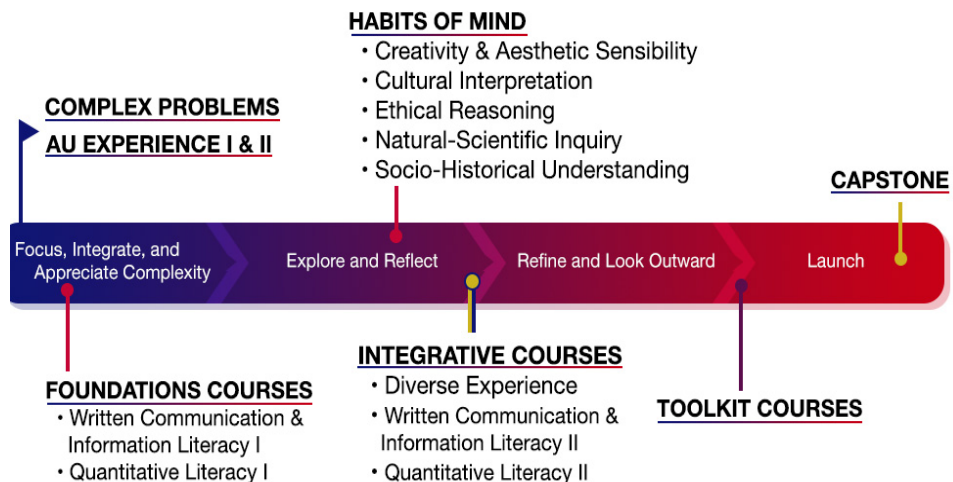
### **Our Proposal**

Our current General Education program, designed in 1989 and revised again in 2009, exposes students to a broad base of knowledge. That aim, however, has been undermined by extensive granting of General Education credit to students with high AP scores (of the 20,000 AP courses accepted for credit over the past four years, roughly half were applied toward General Education requirements) and widespread double counting of courses toward both Gen Ed and the majors. The result is that our students experience our General Education program in wildly different ways—some taking all ten courses, others taking as few as four. While the number of courses students take varies, their attitudes toward the program cohere around one central idea: Gen Ed is an obstacle, a list of requirements to tick off before they can take courses in their areas of interest.

In revising the program, our aim is to create an intellectual core that all students participate in equally. We have tried to balance three central values at the center of liberal education reform: a curriculum that focuses on what students should know and be able to do upon graduation; a curriculum that creates an “effective citizen,” someone who understands connections among ideas and can engage in a global society; and a model of curiosity that helps students understand how different disciplines ask and answer questions, creating a set of intellectual habits and skills. To achieve these goals, we have designed a core curriculum that highlights metacognition—that is, making students aware that learning is a recursive process that happens over time, equipping them to participate more deliberately in that process. Perhaps the most important thing a student learns in our proposed program is *how to learn*, whether that learning comes from books, from teachers, or from each other.

Our work complements the Reinventing the Student Experience (RiSE) project, which aims to focus and improve students' experiences during their time at AU. (The four developmental stages in the graph below derive from the

RiSE project's student life-cycle map.) In particular, our proposal is built around a developmental arc that starts with a first-year experience and foundational skills, highlights essential habits of mind, then integrates these skills and habits with the major, culminating in a capstone. At each stage, the curriculum offers sustained attention to equity, diversity and inclusion. We also seek to address current deficits in quantitative literacy and writing and information literacy training that were identified by recent campus task forces. By reducing the number of overall credits and creating more flexibility as to when students take their core courses, we aim to expand students' ability to pursue double majors and minors, as well as to study abroad. We strongly encourage units across campus to review the size of their majors to the same end.



Although the proposed model is holistic in design, tracking our students' intellectual development from matriculation to graduation, it is helpful to think of the courses that it comprises in three broad categories:

- A sequence of courses mostly taken outside the major: Complex Problems, five Habits of Mind courses, Quantitative Literacy I, Written Communication and Information Literacy I and AU Experience I & II;
- A set of second-level integrative courses, often within existing courses in the major: Quantitative Literacy II, Written Communication and Information Literacy II, a Diverse Experiences course and a Capstone; and
- An optional set of one-credit professional skills modules, some for credit.

This draft has been the work of two *ad hoc* task forces and the General Education Committee (listed below). Over the summer of 2015, the task force met bi-weekly to study current scholarship in liberal education, examine programs from across the country, meet with outside experts and write a first draft of the proposal. In Fall 2015, the General Education Committee, comprising faculty from AU's primary undergraduate schools, met repeatedly to discuss and further revise the draft. The co-chairs of the task force also met with student leaders and representatives of many campus offices, with an eye toward anticipating implementation issues. In November 2015, a new draft was circulated campus-wide to faculty, staff and students, who offered feedback at several town halls. Following these conversations, the task force incorporated many of the offered suggestions and circulated another draft campus-wide in March.

Starting in Fall 2016, and with Faculty Senate approval, 8 sections of Complex Problems and 4 sections of AUx1 were piloted and assessed. Four sections of AUx2 are being piloted in Spring 2017. The faculty directors of each program are working with assessment data and are modifying their curriculum accordingly. AUx1, AUx2 and Complex Problems will be piloted again on a larger scale in 2017-2018; we will run and assess 47 sections of Complex Problems courses, 24 sections of AUx1, and 24 sections of AUx2. Students who take Complex Problems and/or AUx1 & AUx2 prior to Fall 2018 will be able to apply those courses toward current Gen Ed requirements. The General Education Committee has also hosted faculty-wide forums on the learning outcomes associated with each Habit of Mind, and work continues this semester to finalize learning outcomes. Campus-wide discussions on Written Communication and Information Literacy II (W2), Quantitative Literacy II (Q2), and Diverse Experiences (DIV) courses will be held throughout the Spring 2017 semester.

Our goal is to implement a new core program for all undergraduate students, including transfer students, who arrive on campus in Fall 2018 and beyond. Students who arrive prior to that date will be subject to current requirements.

#### **AU Core Implementation Task Force**

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#### **General Education Committee Members (2016-2017)**

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William Quirk, Professorial Lecturer, World Languages and Cultures  
Tom Ratekin, Assistant Professor, Literature  
Jennifer Steele, Associate Professor, School of Education  
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Jennifer Steele, Associate Professor, School of Education  
E. Andrew Taylor, Associate Professor, Performing Arts  
John Willoughby, Professor, Economics

## Foundation Courses

**Complex Problems** (3 credits): A 1<sup>st</sup>-year special topics seminar, taught in fall and spring semesters by full-time faculty from across the university and capped at 19 students. We anticipate offering roughly 60% of the total sections of Complex Problems in the fall semester. These sections will be associated with a living-learning community. Students who take Complex Problems in the spring will not live in a living-learning community. All students, including transfer students, must take a Complex Problems seminar. A signature gateway to the core curriculum, this course will introduce students to the process of university-level inquiry through the analysis of one or more complex problems. Complex Problems courses will demonstrate the value of approaching important conceptual problems and social issues from a variety of perspectives, often from multiple disciplines and including multiple voices—an intellectual habit that will prepare students for future academic work. A core promise of the education we seek to deliver is the understanding that complementary perspectives, despite the very real tensions between them, can provide a richer texture and more nuanced way to move forward in the work we're preparing our students to do. Although many Complex Problems courses will draw heavily on the social sciences, others will be grounded in the sciences or arts and humanities. As the topic and faculty interest warrant, Complex Problems courses may include a DC-based experience.

### **AU Experience I** (1.5 credits):

A one-and-a-half credit required and graded (A-F) hybrid course (EDU-196), taken by all students in their first semester at American University. Drawing on many academic disciplines and on student development theory, this course helps students navigate their academic, social, cultural, and psychological adjustment to university life consistent with American University's learning outcomes. These include cultural competency and effective communication (communicating across differences of race, culture, sex, gender, disability, and sexual orientation; understanding the perspectives of others; exploring and expressing identities; academic freedom and freedom of expression), civic engagement, collaboration, and ethics (finding and creating community on campus; responding to conflict; responsible advocacy; bystander intervention; leading within one's community), and personal growth (embracing change; making independent decisions; health, wellness, and resilience; self-assessment; and early exploration of career goals).

### **AU Experience II** (1.5 credits):

A one-and-a-half credit required and graded (A-F) hybrid course (EDU-296), typically taken by all students in their second semester at American University. This course equips students to become part of a community of learners whose members come from a variety of backgrounds and bring with them a range of experiences. The course continues a discussion of identity and difference begun in AU Experience I that lays the groundwork for learning from one another and for collaborating to address pressing challenges in society. It builds on the sociological and psychological aspects of the individual and community, with focus on the past and present challenges of diversity and identity in society. Historical events and movements involving a range of racial and ethnic groups inform discussions about inequality, race relations, and the ways in which race and ethnicity intersect with sex, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other identities. Readings and assignments explore social constructions of, and engagement with, issues of race and identity through historic and contemporary literature, film, theory, and data. Online course materials, writing assignments and interactive exercises focus on race and ethnicity as a starting point for the exploration of students' own complex identities and cultural experiences, as well as for the academic study of the structures of culture, power and social movements.

**Written Communication & Information Literacy I** (3-6 credits): Satisfied by WRTG-100 and 101 or WRTG-106. All students must complete the WRTG-100 and WRTG-101 sequence, unless they earn a 4 or higher on the AP or a 5 or higher on the IB, in which case they may take WRTG-106. This course sequence focuses on learning how to make effective writing choices, including formulating original theses and well-supported, effectively organized arguments. Students will learn how to write in several academic genres and how to produce error-free prose. In addition, they will acquire the conceptual knowledge needed to negotiate a complex information ecosystem, which includes web sites, social media, databases, visual media and other sources of information. Students will learn about their role and

responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding changing dynamics in the world of information, and in using information, data and scholarship ethically.

**Quantitative Literacy I** (3-4 credits): Because students come to AU with diverse backgrounds, interests and goals, there will be a variety of paths for different students to improve their quantitative skills, and they may choose from a selection of mathematics and statistics courses at the 15x level or higher. Students who earn high scores on the AP or IB exam will receive credit for their coursework and be placed at a higher course level; however, they will not place out of the Q1 requirement. If they possess most, but not all, of the necessary background for such a course, they may take one or more supplemental for-credit or not for-credit modules (to be developed) concurrently with one of the above mentioned courses to meet these skill requirements. Most students will satisfy the Quantitative Literacy requirement in year one, although units that scaffold a junior research-methods course on top of a statistics course may prefer their students take this requirement in the sophomore year.

## Habits of Mind

**Habits of Mind** (16 credits): Habits of Mind (HoM) courses form the heart of the proposed core curriculum. They foster current general education learning outcomes yet expose students to a broad range of disciplines. Students may count one Habit of Mind course—as an elective or major selective—toward each major or minor they pursue. Courses that are major requirements may not be offered as Habits of Mind courses, nor may any courses be offered as “majors only” courses. HoM courses may be offered at the 100, 200, 300, or 400 level, but must be open to students across the university. Entering students may not apply AP credit toward their Habits of Mind requirements. (Note that the restrictions above do not preclude a student from taking a Habits of Mind course in the same department as a Complex Problems course). HoM courses may also carry a DIV course type (see below).

Any department may offer a course in any of the following Habits of Mind (with the likely exception of Natural-Scientific inquiry). While the categories might, at first blush, suggest disciplinary silos, we encourage all departments to consider how they might develop courses for several different Habits of Mind. The following descriptions of each HoM are “placeholders” and are intended to suggest how the categories differ from one another. Faculty with expertise in each area will develop learning outcomes associated with each HoM during the Spring 2017 semester.

- **Creativity and Aesthetic Sensibility** (3 credits):  
Courses offered in this HoM will attend to ideas surrounding intentions, contexts, audiences and modes of artistic expression. Students will also learn how to express appreciation for, or understanding of, the arts through engagement with the creative process.
- **Cultural Interpretation** (3 credits):  
Students in Cultural Interpretation courses will learn how to critically analyze the values, ideas, thought systems and politics of various local, regional and global cultures. Students will apply methods and theories of analysis so as to learn how to evaluate categories of difference and to communicate clearly about them. Such work may include quantitative or qualitative analysis.
- **Ethical Reasoning** (3 credits):  
Courses in ethical reasoning will explore questions about what is right or what is good, in everyday life as in professional practice. These courses will provide tools that help students identify ethical questions and evaluate claims concerning human conduct and values.
- **Natural-Scientific Inquiry** (4 credits, with lab):  
Through an inquiry-based approach to understanding the natural world, students will learn how scientific inquiry advances through experimentation. Students will design and execute experiments to explore natural processes relevant to one or more scientific disciplines. They will learn to articulate the role of science in public discourse and consider how scientific investigation and evidence differs from personal and cultural beliefs.

- **Socio-Historical Understanding** (3 credits):

In Socio-Historical Understanding courses, students will examine past events, societies, institutions and ideas in their specific contexts and develop the ability to analyze them critically. Courses may also draw on historical perspective to evaluate contemporary issues, problems and policies.

## Integrative Courses

*Wherever possible, the following requirements may be satisfied by courses within the major, either by existing courses that fully meet the relevant learning outcomes (TBD), existing courses that are modified to meet those outcomes, or by substantially new courses. (Please note that per the Registrar's advice the "course type" label is the new term for courses with attached categories.)*

**Diverse Experience:** a 3-credit course with a DIV course type offered in the major or minor, in a Habit of Mind course or in a free elective. (An HoM course with a DIV course type can be counted toward fulfilling both requirements.)

These courses attend to issues of power, privilege and inequality that are embedded in social, cultural or economic hierarchies, including (but not limited to) those around race, class, ability, gender and sexual expression. These courses should build on the intellectual skills developed in Complex Problems and on the diversity content introduced in AU Experience II. As with all courses in the AU Core, DIV course types will be approved by a committee of faculty with specific expertise in this area.

**Written Communication and Information Literacy II:** a 3-credit course with a W course type. W2 courses will build on the writing and information literacy foundations offered in College Writing seminars by training students in the writing conventions, research expectations and technological resources most central to the relevant discipline. More specifically, students will refine their argumentation, organization and proofreading skills while learning the disciplinary or professional conventions of their field. Students will learn to recognize the role of research and information in creating new disciplinary knowledge, thinking critically about how information is created, valued, stored and shared in specific disciplinary conversations. W2 courses need not be in the English language. Students in the (relatively rare) majors with no appreciable writing component may pursue this credit in a related field or through custom-made courses (e.g., Writing for the Arts). Although most majors will designate a specific course or courses in the major as a required W2, any W2 may be applied toward the university's graduation requirement. Unless otherwise specified by the major(s) or minor(s), students who pursue any combination of majors and minors need only complete a single W2.

**Quantitative Literacy II:** a 3-credit course with a Q course type in the major or related area, or a combination of three 1-credit modules (to be developed, many in a hybrid or intensive format) pertinent to the student's field of study. Q2 courses should add depth or otherwise extend instructional outcomes from Q1 courses. For example, in a Q2 course offered within an academic department or school, the goals of instruction would likely stress applications within a discipline or specialization. In the case of majors whose research-methods courses are only partially quantitative, these courses may be supplemented by one or two 1-credit modules (on such topics as modeling, algorithms, GIS, etc.). In the absence of a Q course in the major, students may satisfy the Q2 requirement by taking a Q course in a related field or a Q course specifically designed for this purpose (possibly in collaboration with the major discipline) by a department in which quantitative reasoning is more central. Although most majors will designate a specific course or courses in the major as a required Q2, any Q2 may be applied toward the university's graduation requirement. Unless otherwise specified by the major(s) or minor(s), students who pursue any combination of majors and minors need only complete a single approved Q2 requirement.

**Capstone:** typically, a 3-credit capstone project or course, likely in the major, drawing on many of the HoMs previously acquired. Existing capstones for the major or for other programs will count toward the HoM requirement. Students will not be expected to complete a separate capstone. In majors without formal capstone courses, independent studies, team projects, individual projects, structured alternatives or "signature work" (often an essay or project that demonstrates a student's ability to synthesize the skills associated with completion of the major) may

serve in their stead. Units unable to offer formal capstone courses within existing resource allocations may opt to require students to identify signature work in conjunction with an existing upper-level course.

## Optional 'Toolkit' Courses

**Toolkit Courses:** courses, normally one-credit, designated in the catalogue by a T course type and offered in a variety of formats (including online, hybrid and intensive). Toolkit courses help students acquire and demonstrate both employer-relevant competencies and general life skills. With the exception of the Financial Literacy sequence, which is specifically designed for first- and second-year students, Toolkit courses are intended for juniors and seniors seeking to build upon their liberal arts training as they move into careers and subsequent education. Most Toolkit courses will not have prerequisites. Exceptions may be made in the case of prerequisites (such as STAT-202 or STAT-203) that large numbers of undergraduates will likely have taken. We expect the majority of these courses to be offered for a grade, though some will naturally lend themselves to being offered pass/fail.

In addition to Toolkit courses, the university will offer a series of optional non-credit Career Edge workshops on topics to be determined in dialogue with the Career Center. During implementation discussions, the task force will work with the Provost's Office and the Career Center to assess whether it makes sense to require students to complete a specified number of Career Edge workshops and include notations of completion on the student's transcript.

The following are examples of *potential* toolkit courses. (In cases where 3-credit courses on these subjects already exist, Toolkit course are not intended to replace them.) Toolkit offerings will evolve over time, largely as a function of student demand.

### *Financial Literacy*

- Financial Literacy I: Financial Planning and the Time Value of Money
- Financial Literacy II: Debt, Insurance and Savings
- Financial Literacy III: Personal Investing

### *Communication and Interpersonal Productivity*

- Public Speaking
- Interpersonal Communication
- Collaboration and Team Communication
- Addressing and Preventing Micro-aggressions
- Racial Sensitivity
- The Art of Mediation
- Step UP! Training
- Unconscious Bias Training

### *Research and Analysis Skills*

- Survey Research: Design, Data Collection, Analysis
- SPSS Statistics Fundamentals
- Stata Fundamentals
- Nvivo Fundamentals

### *Digital Skills*

- Digital Media and Culture
- Social Media Strategies and Tactics
- The Art of Online Presentation
- Fundamentals of Web Design
- Video Editing
- Designing Mobile Apps
- Programming
- Data Visualization
- Social Media Skills
- Microsoft Certification

### *Organization Skills*

- Project Management
- Accounting Fundamentals
- Entrepreneurship
- Ecommerce

### *Career Planning*

- Career Exploration
- Foundations of Career Development
- Personal Branding and Online Identity
- Personal Branding and the Career Campaign

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