

# TILting General Education at BC

## Context

During Winter and Spring quarters 2023, we conducted wide ranging initial conversations diagnosing the shortcomings of our standing approach to General Education and exploring ways to improve. Our current approach to General Education is not student centered. Student facing language about our Gen Ed program consists of one seldom read page in the catalogue where we list our 18 Gen Ed outcomes. Faculty largely consider Gen Ed only in the context of outcomes assessment and here we often lack a shared conception of what we aim to measure. The resulting data from our assessment activity provides little useful information about what our students are learning. In short, we have treated General Education and outcomes assessment as a mere accountability exercise for accreditation. And even at that, we have done little to get clear amongst ourselves on what we are accounting for.

Our lack of a student-centered program of General Education is a huge missed opportunity. We could be communicating clearly to students and other stakeholders what it means to get an education at BC. We could be clear with students how to attain the educational goals embodied in our institution wide learning outcomes. A student-centered approach to General Education would sharpen and define our institutional mission and it would help to address the rising crisis of public confidence in the value of a college education. Improved clarity and transparency concerning the basic skills we aim to teach as campus wide learning outcomes would support student success and retention. Our standing approach to General Education does none of these things.

Our conversations early in 2023 led us to the idea of TILting General Education. We are accustomed to the idea of TILting assignments. But the idea here isn't about TILting Gen Ed assessment assignments, though this is probably a good idea as well. Rather we have been interested in applying the principles of Transparency in Learning and Teaching to designing a program of General Education. That is, let's clearly communicate to students what we want them to get out of BC education, how they can achieve these learning goals, and how we will assess and support their progress. The idea of TILting our program of General Education has remained a guiding principle in developing the proposal for General Education reform we are now presenting.

At the end of Spring Quarter 2023, a team of people consisting of Anthony Tessandori, Alice Jenkins, W. Russ Payne, Zach Morgan and Rebecca Cory participated in an AAC&U Institute on General Education. The goal of the Institute was to develop a plan for General Education reform. We are now prepared to present a plan to the campus community. Any reform of General Education at BC will require broad faculty participation and buy in. We will ultimately put our new plan to a faculty vote, hopefully sometime in Winter Quarter 2024. While we think the

broad outlines of our proposal will win ample support on its merits. Much is provisional, and many details remain to be worked out. Broad faculty collaboration on building a new General Education program will be the key to a successful reform that serves our students well.

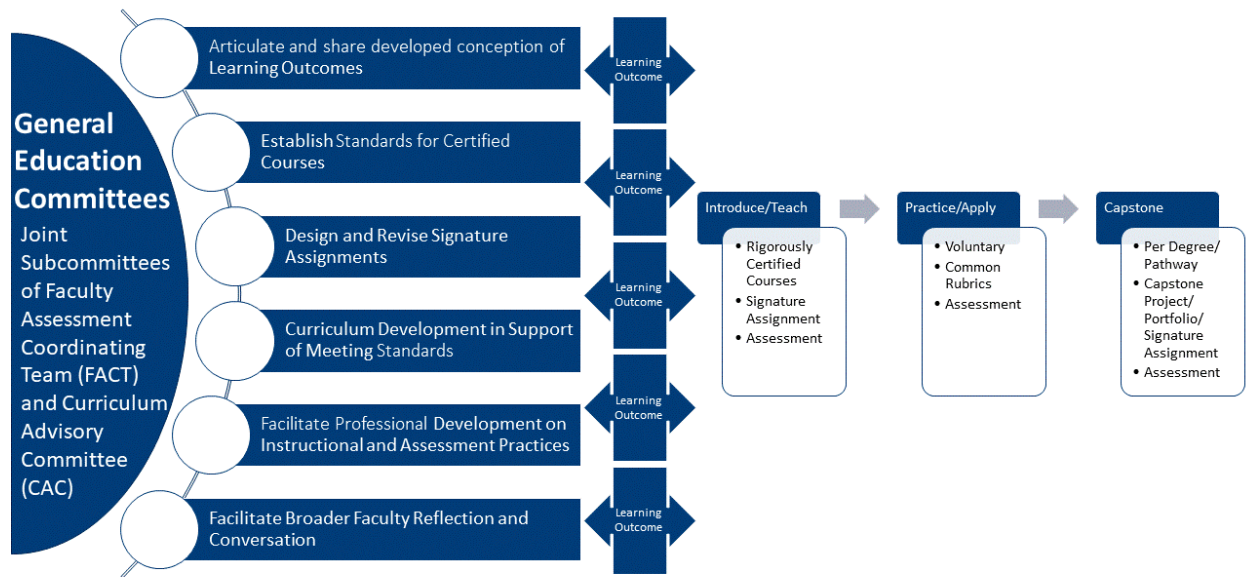
Tilting General Education will require formulating a compact set of Gen Ed outcomes that provide a distinctive expression of what it means to get an education at Bellevue College. Developing a campus wide program of General Education that is meaningful to students, where their path to attainment is clear and our methods of assessment are transparent will require that we collaborate in coming to a shared conception of our campus wide learning outcomes, engage collaboratively in formulating curricular standards for attaining these outcomes, and participate in formulating, norming and applying our standards of assessment. The model we propose aims to provide a framework for faculty collaboration in designing, implementing and sustaining a TILTed program of General Education.

It would not be realistic, or even all that helpful, to have all faculty on campus fully participating in a TILTed program of General Education. The model we are proposing is opt in and it affords varying levels of participation. Still, we all have a stake in this and it is important that all faculty be well informed participants in designing this program. A faculty member in a Prof Tech program, for instance, might not have a great deal to do with teaching key aspects of critical thinking or cultural diversity, but she may still have a great interest in what sort of knowledge and skill she can expect to find in her students when they get to her classroom. Because our General Education outcomes are campus wide institutional learning outcomes, all faculty have a stake and should have a voice in the development and implementation of these.

## The Model

FACT (Faculty Assessment Coordinating Team) is currently the only body on campus that is directly concerned with our General Education program. The standing reduction of General Education to outcomes assessment is currently reflected in our governance structure. We propose to replace FACT with General Education sub-committees to the CAC. The idea is to have one such sub-committee for each of only four or five campus wide General Education outcomes. The role of the Gen Ed sub-committees will be complex. Broadly speaking, the Gen Ed sub-committees will play some of the functional roles of an academic program, only for learning outcomes that may be taught across many programs. Each Gen Ed sub-committee will serve as the campus brain trust for a single Gen Ed outcome. The sub-committees will have CAC approved bylaws that define their roles.

The roles we recommend for the Gen Ed sub-committees are represented on the left of this visual:



Each Gen Ed Subcommittee will be responsible for articulating and sharing a developed conception of its single Gen Ed outcome. It will also be responsible for maintaining curricular standards for that outcome and recommending certification of courses to the CAC. The Gen Ed subcommittees should not serve merely as gate keepers for Gen Ed certification, they should also play an active role in supporting programs and faculty in bringing courses up to curricular standards for the respective Gen Ed. This should be done through faculty collaboration with the Gen Ed subcommittee directly, or in conjunction with Faculty Commons workshops for faculty professional development and curriculum development in the Gen Ed area. Finally, the Gen Ed subcommittees will take over the role of FACT in assessing student attainment of our learning outcomes.

Our first step towards approving and implementing a new program of General Education, will be to convene outcome working groups. These groups will be open to all interested faculty and it will be here that we take up work of developing a shared conception of our Gen Ed outcomes and developing a preliminary sketch of curricular standards. Once faculty have approved a plan, Gen Ed working groups will be replaced by Gen Ed committees with elected members. The working groups will provide broad open forums for initially shaping a shared conception of what an education at BC means and for discussing appropriate curricular standards for our Gen Ed outcomes. Further articulation and refinement will continue with the Gen Ed sub-committees. Still, it is in the working groups over the coming months that we will seek the broadest based faculty collaboration as our initial investment in faculty ownership of our Gen Ed program.

## Basic, Deluxe and Premium versions of the Model

We have outlined basic, deluxe and premium versions of this model. These vary based on whether we adopt the first, first and second, or all three of the boxes to the right of the “learning outcomes” arrows in the graphic above. On the basic version of the model, we only assess the certified courses for each outcome through our familiar rubrics system plus a signature assignment. That is, if your course is not certified for a Gen Ed outcome, you don’t have to do Gen Ed assessment (yeah!). On the deluxe model, we add optional assessment for courses that aren’t certified in a Gen Ed outcome but claim a Gen Ed outcome as practiced or applied. The premium version of the model, which of course is the best, also includes assessment of Gen Ed outcomes in capstone projects appropriate to specific pathways. The premium version of the model, which we recommend, tracks student development in a Gen Ed outcome from initial dedicated instruction, through widely infused practice and application and finally in a capstone project pertaining to the student’s chosen pathway. Signature assignments at the beginning, student work applying skills and knowledge in infused courses, and a capstone project at the end of a student’s BC career will constitute an e-portfolio representing a student’s development and achievement in Gen Ed areas.

## The Timeline

The Timeline we propose for Gen Ed reform is informed by the expectation that we have a few years of assessment data on the books in time for our next Accreditation visit in the Spring of 2026. This puts us on an ambitious but doable schedule.

- Fall 2023: Convene working groups, open to all faculty, for possible Gen Ed outcomes.
- Winter 2024: Develop preliminary outcome and curricular language in preparation for a faculty vote at the end of the quarter. We will vote on whether to proceed with Gen Ed reform, whether to go with the basic, deluxe or premium version of the proposed model, and which of the proposed outcomes to adopt for a maximum of five.
- Spring 2024: Elect membership of Gen Ed sub-committees and begin to certify courses in the new Gen Eds.
- Fall 2024: Run pilots of certified courses and implement outcomes assessment for these.
- Spring 2026: Implement institution wide degree requirements for our Gen Ed outcomes.

As long as we are collecting Assessment data on a healthy population of students by the end of Fall 2024, we should be in good stead with Accreditation. We can then proceed towards implementing our Gen Eds as degree requirements at a pace that is deliberate but realistic. It would be good to be on track for full implementation in time for our Accreditation visit in Spring 2026.

This fall, we will form working groups for each of 4 or 5 new General Education outcomes. These working groups will be open to participation by interested faculty. This is where we will begin to work out a shared conception of our Gen Ed outcomes, discuss curricular standards and

methods of assessment. These working groups will be open to any interested faculty. The role of the work groups will be to draw broad faculty input and integrate this into a clear vision for each Gen Ed outcome. Once a new plan is approved, the working groups will be replaced standing Gen Ed subcommittees, one for each Gen Ed outcome, made up of elected faculty members.

## What Should our new Institutional General Education Outcomes be?

We are recommending that BC adopt a small number (four or five) Campus wide General Education outcomes. Our own experience demonstrates that we simply can't be transparent with students if we have a large number of campus wide outcomes. These outcomes are to be institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) incorporated into the requirements for all degree programs (though not necessarily taught in those programs).

Neither FACT nor the AAC&U team get to determine what our campus wide learning outcomes will be. Faculty at large own Gen Ed. And the only program of General Education that will be implemented at BC is one that faculty support and take ownership of. That said, there are some obvious choices we'd recommend.

Two of the four or five outcomes we'd recommend are captured in existing degree requirements for the DTA. These are Literacy and Quantitative/symbolic reasoning. We recommend Critical Thinking as one further basic skills outcome. Critical Thinking is far and away the most widely claimed and assessed of our current outcomes. Critical Thinking is also consistently at or near the top of the list in surveys of skills employers hope to find among new college graduates.

Beyond these basic skills outcomes, the college is already committed to Cultural Diversity. This is a core value. Perhaps sustainability merits inclusion as a second core value. This is ultimately for faculty to decide as part of a vote for a new program of General Education at BC.

We propose these four or five Gen Ed outcomes on the grounds that they represent our standing commitments to basic skills and core values, and that we already have some or much of the institutional infrastructure in place for implementing these as required as required Gen Ed outcomes. Literacy and Quantitative/symbolic are already widely required as elements of the DTA. A degree requirement for Critical Thinking would be new but we already claim this outcome in a full third of our transferable courses.

Developing a shared conception of critical thinking may be a heavy lift, but given how, forgive me, critical, critical thinking skills are, we are duty bound to try. Some might despair at the idea of defining critical thinking. Here I will only point out that if critical thinking is just many different things to many different people, then we don't really have *a* General Education outcome here. In that case, we shouldn't claim one. But it's a bit early in the game for such despair.

In the realm of core values, it is several years since we adopted Cultural Diversity as a degree requirement for the college. The program we propose offers an opportunity to more clearly

articulate what we want to achieve with this outcome and to develop and implement clear curricular standards that will be transparent to students and assure robust instruction. Perhaps a working group in this area will also struggle some to develop a shared conception of what we want from a Cultural Diversity outcome. But as with Critical Thinking, if we can't say what it is, we cannot reasonably claim to be teaching it. TILting Gen Ed requires that we rise to this challenge. I think we are up to it.

Sustainability can't be overlooked as a core value worthy of consideration. Whether or not climate change is already an existential threat to human civilization, it is already a variety of systemic injustice similar in some ways to the racial and ethnic injustices we often focus on through the lens of Cultural Diversity. Indeed, the burdens of climate injustice fall disproportionately on the same marginalized groups. We have standing institutional infrastructure to help support a required Gen Ed outcome in sustainability in the form of our Sustainability in the Curriculum Committee and the many Faculty Commons workshops it has facilitated on incorporating sustainability into our courses. A great many of us are already teaching sustainability.

## Impacts on Enrollment

If we want our General Education program to be *general*, we need to ensure that our Gen Ed outcomes are taught by requiring that students take certified courses. Degree requirements, even when satisfiable through a variety of courses, have the potential to steer enrollment. We can minimize this by limiting the number of General Education outcomes we require. Three of the five Gen Ed outcomes we recommend are covered by existing degree requirements. There will be no enrollment impact in the case of Literacy and Quantitative/symbolic reasoning since we already have clear degree requirements here. There is some potential for impact in the case of Cultural Diversity, since some courses claiming this outcome currently might not take on newly articulated curricular standards. Critical thinking is already so widely taught that impacts on enrollment would be minimal. Likewise for sustainability.

So, will the plan we propose impact enrollment patterns? Perhaps a little, but not much. A good deal less than Pathways, at any rate. The small degree, if any, to which the proposed plan would impact enrollment patterns remains up to us since it depends on how rigorous we want to make the curricular standards for each of our Gen Eds and on how many of us are willing to bring our courses up to the curricular standards we negotiate and decide on. Again, bear in mind that the role of the Gen Ed committees is not to serve merely as gate keepers for certified courses. The Gen Ed committees are also to serve as resources for supporting efforts to bring classes up to the standards we set for ourselves.

In any case, if there are things we want all of our students to learn during their time at BC, that is, if we are to have institution wide General Education learning outcomes, then it is up to us to assure that our students get that instruction. This carries with it the potential for making some adjustments either to enrollment patterns, or to curriculum and faculty professional

development. But this is not a zero-sum game for faculty and programs. A meaningful TILTed program of General Education will at the same time support college enrollment overall by addressing the crisis of public confidence in higher education and, more substantively, it will support student success and retention (which also means enrollment) through more transparently and effectively providing students with the basic skills they need to succeed in college.