



As you prepare to register for your first semester of college, it's tempting to look at your general education courses as a list of unrelated requirements that you have to check off before you get to the subjects you really want to study. On the contrary, your general education experience is a program in its own right, with a crucial role in your St. Olaf education.

The excerpts on the following pages include the perspectives of employers, gathered from a national study of employer opinions about higher education and college graduates, and advice and experiences from recent St. Olaf seniors and alumni about the value of a general education curriculum.

The St. Olaf General Education curriculum provides the breadth of knowledge and understanding essential for both personal development and professional success. With some reflection on your part — and good advice from your faculty and peer advisers — you can create a coherent and customized program that is as important as your major in preparing you for your future.

Employers* say: In recent research sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Hart Research Associates, 2015), 80% of employers indicated that their organizations are looking for employees who have the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings.

Additionally, 78% of employers somewhat agree or strongly agree that college students should develop broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. “The majority of employers think that having both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge that apply to a variety of fields is important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success” (Hart Research Associates, 2015, p. 2).

Seniors and alumni† agree: “I would say that the general education classes were very beneficial at expanding my mind. I remember when I took a class freshman year that had me thinking about the world in a whole new way. It really calls you to challenge your assumptions and be open to new ideas. That is very helpful in a career. It is also nice to have had the variety of subjects, because it allows you to be informed and educated about many things, helping you relate to others in different fields.”

“I think the GE coursework helped me to see the interdisciplinary importance of the knowledge I was gaining. Although it would appear that different majors don't overlap to a great extent, I would continuously find myself applying concepts across disciplines.”

*All employer data excerpted from Hart Research Associates, 2015.

†Quotes from seniors and alumni excerpted from the HEDS Alumni Survey. For more information visit, <http://wp.stolaf.edu/ir-e/heds-alumni-survey/>

Foundational Studies Courses

✓ First-Year Writing

[FYW] — A course (WRIT 111), taken the first year, that equips students for effective writing in the liberal arts and introduces writing as a means of learning.

Employers say: 82% of employers consider the ability to effectively communicate in writing very important.

Seniors say: “My first-year writing class emphasized writing clearly and effectively in a way that has stuck with me throughout my four years.”

✓ Writing in Context

[WRI] — Four courses that enhance students’ writing competence and confidence in a variety of knowledge domains.

Employers say: 81% of employers indicate that their company would be more likely to consider hiring a recent college graduate who completed multiple courses involving significant writing.

Seniors say: 90% of seniors reported that they used the writing processes developed in their WRI courses in completing writing assignments for other courses. “I found it very helpful to learn writing in different disciplines. Great Con taught me how to write as a scholar, psychology as a scientist, social work as an advocate, and religion as a theologian. This was the best experience I could have while learning how to write effectively.”

Alumni say: “PAY ATTENTION IN WRITING CLASSES. Four credits seemed like a lot, but it definitely wasn’t. I cannot emphasize enough how much writing has helped me since graduating. Not only is it my tool of distinguishing myself and portraying a professional image, it also has gotten me out of several scrapes and bumps along the way by being able to convince others of my point of view.”

✓ Foreign Language

[FOL] — Up to four courses that develop language skills, extend understanding of language as a human phenomenon, and generate insights into a culture other than one’s own.

Alumni say: “I think the foreign language requirement was the most impactful of the GE requirements since it spurred my interest in Latin America and gave me a good level of Spanish speaking skills to serve me in my post-college experiences.”

Alumni say: “Living abroad has made it all too clear to me that knowing another modern language is pivotal for success in today’s world.”

✓ Oral Communication

[ORC] — A course that incorporates specific instruction, practice, and feedback to develop oral communication competence and confidence.

Employers say: 85% of employers consider the ability to effectively communicate orally very important.

Alumni say: “I found ORC courses to be extremely beneficial to my public speaking abilities...I knew, of all the skills needed in a business/professional environment, public speaking was of utmost importance, and this realization has helped me tremendously in my young career.”

✓ Abstract and Quantitative Reasoning

[AQR] — A course that develops analytic thinking skills through systematic focus on abstract and quantitative reasoning.

Employers say: 81% of employers suggest that students should place more emphasis on developing critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills; 70% believe that students should develop an ability to analyze and solve complex problems.

Alumni say: “I found that the mathematical reasoning courses helped me keep my logical thought skills while continuing to pursue my humanities degrees. The retention of these skills has proved invaluable in my current profession, which requires rapid analysis of complex problems.”

✓ Studies in Physical Movement

[SPM] — Two courses that expand students’ experiences in and understanding of movement and promote lifelong health and wellness of the whole person.

Alumni say: “I took an Aerobics class, which surprisingly had a lasting impact on my personal life. I’ve never been very involved in sports, but through this class I discovered that I like yoga, Pilates, and other group fitness activities that I never tried before. Ever since that class, I have stayed active in those types of activities, and I probably never would have tried them if I [hadn’t taken] that class for my Gen Ed requirement.”

Core Studies and Integrative Courses

✓ Historical Studies in Western Culture

[HWC] — Two courses dealing with the Western cultural heritage, intended to develop historical perspective on, and critical appreciation of, its major traditions, institutions, and achievements.

Seniors say: “My [HWC] classes have given me a chance to analyze extremely pertinent cultural and social issues of today.”

Alumni say: “I probably would not have taken many writing or history classes were it not for the GE requirements, but through these courses I developed new skills and improved existing ones, such as critical thinking and writing essays. It also allowed me to be introduced to topics that I wouldn’t otherwise have pursued, such as the history of civil rights or biomedical ethics.”

✓ Multicultural Studies

Domestic [MCD] — A course focused on the beliefs, history, social experiences, artistic or literary expressions, and/or traditions of one or more groups in the United States, considered to have experiences and/or a culture substantially different from those of its dominant groups.

Global [MCG] — A course focused on the beliefs, history, social experiences, artistic or literary expressions, and/or traditions of one or more cultures located primarily outside the United States, considered to have experiences and/or a culture substantially different from those of the dominant groups in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.

Employers say: 78% of employers believe that all students, regardless of their major, should gain intercultural skills and an understanding of societies outside the United States.

Seniors say: “[MCG] classes have allowed me to encounter cultures and their value systems; I’ve garnered a great respect for diversity as a result.” “I have gained a generally greater perspective on global culture and different aspects of several world cultures.”

Alumni say: “I feel much more cultured and able to discuss a wider range of issues and subjects, having taken GE classes on topics that I never would have otherwise learned about, like a linguistics class in Asian Studies.”

✓ Artistic and Literary Studies

[ALS-A] — A course intended to develop appreciation and understanding of artistic forms, their essential elements, as well as their various functions in human life and culture.

[ALS-L] — A course intended to develop appreciation and understanding of literary forms, their essential elements, as well as their various functions in human life and culture.

Employers say: 65% of employers suggest that students should place more emphasis on innovation and creativity.

Seniors say: “[The] fine arts are a way to send messages and change society that has endless potential.”

Alumni say: “Art and ethics are about making room for differences, appreciating the new and the different while also holding on to one’s principles and keeping one’s principles under construction for the remainder of life.”

✓ Biblical and Theological Studies

Bible [BTS-B] — A course that introduces first-year students to dialogue between biblical traditions and the cultures and communities related to them. Students study major biblical texts and their interaction with theology, religious practice, ethics and social values, while considering methods and fields in the study of religion in a liberal arts setting.

Theology [BTS-T] — A course on Christian theology that acquaints students with ongoing efforts to understand the essential content of Christian belief in a critical and coherent manner and engages students in theological reflection.

Seniors say: 90% of seniors believe that their undergraduate experience enhanced their understanding of the Bible and Christian theology and provided an opportunity to explore questions of meaning and religious experience. In addition, “studying other religions and their convictions can give a person a much deeper and intellectually stronger idea of [his or her] own beliefs.”

Alumni say: “GEs presented my first real exposure to the Bible, which has proved to be invaluable in understanding a huge percentage of decisions made in the U.S.”



✓ Studies in the Natural Sciences

Scientific Exploration and Discovery [SED] — A course that develops an understanding of scientific content, scientific principles, and the methods of contemporary natural science.

Integrated Scientific Topics [IST] — A course that incorporates a variety of disciplinary perspectives, within or in addition to the natural sciences, on one or more scientific topics.

Seniors say: “In [SED] courses, I learned the way living organisms and ecosystems are so complex and beautiful, and their vulnerability to disturbance. In [IST courses], I’ve learned that the way we treat the natural world really will reflect in the way we can live in it, often with more immediacy than we think.”

Alumni say: “Had I not been required to take a science class, I might never have been inspired by biological/cellular forms in my artwork.”

Employers say: 78% of employers agree that students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, regardless of their chosen field of study. Additionally, 60% of employers believe that it takes both field-specific and broad-ranging knowledge and skills to achieve long-term career success.

✓ Studies in Human Behavior and Society

[HBS] — Two courses introducing concepts, theories, and methods for the empirical understanding of human behavior, social relations, social institutions and social issues.

Seniors say: “I’ve learned that these [concepts, theories, and methods of understanding human behavior] are important for everyone to learn, not just ‘majors’ or people who think it’s their specialty.”

Alumni say: “I took some political science courses that really got me to think about things off the hill. That was one of the first times being an engaged citizen was important to me, and it stuck with me.”

✓ Ethical Issues and Normative Perspectives

[EIN] — An upper level course that analyzes ethical issues from a variety of perspectives that provide norms of justice and well-being and guide moral reasoning.

Employers say: 81% of employers consider the ability to make ethical judgments and decisions very important.

Alumni say: “You will come across ethical situations repeatedly in the workplace, situations that will pit your idealism against your ability to make a living. Discussing ethics in classes and through the EIN credit has been especially beneficial for me in handling those.”

References

Hart Research Associates. (2015). *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success*. Washington, D.C.: Hart Research Associates.