



## OLE Core Review and Renewal: Initial Conversations

### April 2026

As we wrap up the first round of OLE Core attribute assessment this year, the Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) has been looking ahead to the “sunset provision”<sup>1</sup> of the Core and thinking about ways to begin conversations that will support an eventual revision or reaffirmation of the curriculum. The AAC planned a Center for Innovation in the Liberal Arts (CILA) workshop in March that invited faculty and staff together for small group discussions guided by the following questions:

- How do you see the OLE Core impacting students?
- How has the OLE Core influenced or intersected with your own interactions with students (advising, teaching, other)?
- What unintended consequences have you encountered with the OLE Core?
- How has the OLE Core impacted the departments, centers, offices (etc.) in which you work?
- What are your thoughts about the level(s) (100-level, etc.) at which OLE Core courses should be?

The conversation among the 25 faculty and staff attendees flowed freely and covered a wide range of topics, including and beyond the guiding questions above. At the end of the workshop, the AAC shared a Google Form that will be used on an ongoing basis to collect thoughts and feedback about the OLE Core from faculty and staff; this form continues to be shared at faculty meetings and in written reports to the faculty. The following summary presents the themes that emerged from this initial conversation and gives examples of the kinds of observations or questions that arose.

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<sup>1</sup> The original resolution establishing the OLE Core (as copied from the Curriculum Committee [website](#)) stated the following: “**Sunset Provision.** This general education curriculum is not meant to remain a permanent feature of the college. The requirements, policies, and procedures outlined in this resolution will remain in effect no longer than ten years. This means that if this curriculum comes into effect in the 2021-2022 academic year, the college must either approve the adoption of a revised general education curriculum or re-approve this general education curriculum (with any subsequent modifications) prior to the 2031-2032 academic year.”

## Theme 1: Flexibility and Exploration

Many faculty and staff appreciate the smaller size of the OLE Core compared to St. Olaf's prior general education curriculum, noting that it allows students more autonomy to take other courses of interest outside or within their major, and fits better with certain larger majors (e.g., education, environmental studies). This leads to a greater potential for exploration and breadth, key elements of a liberal arts education.

On the other hand, some faculty worried that students were filling their open credits with additional majors and concentrations rather than electives. While we do not yet have enough data to explore this anecdotal observation (2025 graduates were the first full class to graduate under the OLE Core curriculum), it will be important to keep an eye on this trend.

It's also possible that extra concentrations and even majors may actually help students make broader connections, especially if the additional majors and concentrations represent quite different fields. Still, encouraging students to explore may continue to be an ongoing challenge; some noted that students view courses that don't count towards their major/concentration or the OLE Core as "dead courses" or a "waste of time." This begs the question: can we "prescribe" exploration (perhaps via stronger elective requirements) without taking away too much student autonomy?

## Theme 2: The "Checkbox Mentality"

Despite a smaller curriculum, students can still view it as something to get out of the way; some workshop attendees felt that most students try to complete all of their OLE Core courses by the end of sophomore year. This can create challenges for instructors and limit the depth to which students engage with the content. Even if there are older students enrolled, the course still needs to be "pitched" towards the younger students' content knowledge and intellectual maturity levels. This raised questions around building a more scaffolded curriculum, where some OLE Core courses are sequentially linked and therefore taken later in a students' college career.

Relatedly, some wondered whether students actually understand the "linked" nature of the curriculum as it currently stands (OLE = Open, Linked, Enduring). Furthermore, is this even clear to faculty or intentionally communicated through advising? Faculty aren't specifically trained on how to explain the OLE Core and/or philosophy of the liberal arts to students. All of this can make it difficult to help students deeply engage with the

intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the OLE Core or foster the sense of a coherent curriculum.

### Theme 3: The First-Year Experience

Overall, the First-Year Experience (FYE) courses (First-Year Seminar and Writing & Rhetoric) were viewed as significant positive changes from the prior general education curriculum. They provide opportunities for faculty to teach a variety of topics, while students are able to engage with peers they may not otherwise see given that these courses are focused on “topics of interest and not academic disciplines” (to quote a workshop attendee). Finally, these courses are valued for their particular emphasis on reflection and college readiness.

Nonetheless, some raised concerns with the structure of the FYE courses. While most students take First-Year Seminar in the Fall and Writing & Rhetoric in the Spring, there is a worry that those who have the opposite structure, or transfer students who receive prior credit for one or more of these courses, may not get the same preparation for college and/or timely introduction to St. Olaf-specific resources. At the same time, there are many things that are similar about the two FYE courses; they even share two ILOs related to reflection and academic preparation. Is there a clear justification for having both courses?

Finally, the large number of non-tenure-track (especially term) faculty who teach these courses<sup>2</sup> presents other challenges. It can particularly strain advising, which strives to match first-year students with an advisor who instructs one of their courses, and typically NTT faculty are not expected to take advisees. More broadly, it makes it more difficult for students to build rapport with faculty members who do not have a permanent position at the college. This can be particularly tricky for some departments to address, if they cannot “spare” tenured/tenure-track faculty from other large courses or labs to teach in the FYE.

### Theme 4: Challenging Requirements

A few different OLE Core requirements seem to present particular challenges. First, the OLE Experience in Practice (OEP), while seen as an innovative and positive addition to the OLE Core in a similar way to the First-Year Experience, is also perhaps the most “unwieldy” of the requirements. Some departments have courses that naturally lend

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<sup>2</sup> For 2025-26, nearly half of FYE instructors (21 out of 44) were/are non-tenure-track; 12 of these faculty were on an annual contract.

themselves to OEP, while others can struggle to provide these offerings. From the student side, a wide variety of credit- and non-credit-bearing opportunities can count, including more selective experiences like CURI; not all students who complete a particular experience (e.g., study abroad/away) will automatically earn OEP credit; and students are able to petition for other outside experiences to fulfill this requirement. This can create inequities in the number of “paths” open to a given student for fulfilling OEP. Additionally, not all students across all OEP experiences have the same opportunities for reflection,, which is arguably essential to the intentions of this requirement and should be consistent.

Additionally, the nuanced nature of the World Languages and Cultures (WLC) requirement, which students earn by taking anywhere from 0-3 semesters depending on their language and/or placement, frequently causes confusion for students and non-language faculty advisors. Languages faculty feel that an ideal solution would be to require all students to take up to the fourth semester of the sequence, which would provide consistency as well as greater opportunity to address the “culture” aspect of the WLC ILOs. However, they also recognize that this is probably not feasible in practice, making it difficult to know how to address the confusion and challenges of this requirement.

Finally, several people raised concerns that Power and Race (PAR) is too U.S./Western-focused (e.g., the first ILO states, "Explain how inequalities in US power dynamics are produced and sustained by ideas about race and ethnicity"). This can limit the types of departments and courses that are able to offer this requirement, and may also limit the perspectives on privilege and power students receive. These individuals felt that moving to a global focus would be more inclusive and expansive.

## Theme 5: Gaps in the OLE Core

During the workshop, participants were also prompted to think about gaps in student preparation within the OLE Core. Several observed that students’ writing and speaking skills seem diminished compared to prior years. Some wondered whether this could be due to the reduction in the number of writing-intensive courses required and the removal of an oral communications attribute that was part of the old general education curriculum. For writing, individuals raised ideas such as requiring Writing Across the Curriculum to be fulfilled outside of a student’s major (so they can gain experience with multiple types of writing styles) and/or to require more than one WAC credit.

Other participants noted a gap in providing students with skills to bolster mental health or broader well-being; some wondered whether this could be more of an emphasis in Active Body. Finally, some raised questions around “future-proofing” the OLE Core – how can we design a curriculum that is flexible enough to adapt to skills students will need in the future? When the current OLE Core was designed, for example, no one was thinking or talking about generative AI; now, technical literacy skills are becoming increasingly essential and AI is changing the salience of other skills such as oral communication and ethical reasoning.

## Theme 6: Department/Program Differences

While much of the workshop focused intentionally on how the OLE Core is impacting students, it is equally important to consider the impact on the faculty and staff who teach or advise students within this curriculum. Some initial observations noted the different ways the OLE Core can be viewed by departments or programs. Particularly for smaller programs, having courses with these attributes is necessary to drive enrollment. This can pressure some to add an OLE Core attribute to a course in a way that might feel superficial or “shoehorned.” On the other hand, some smaller departments have used enrollment pressures as inspiration for designing new courses, embracing the OLE Core rather than fighting against it.

It can also feel as though particular departments “own” certain OLE Core requirements; the Religion department and Religion, Faith, and Values/Christian Theology in Dialogue is a salient example. This can make it difficult to incentivize other departments or programs to offer these OLE Core courses; those with large enrollments in general may also feel little need to work these requirements in. One participant wondered about the value of adding more co-taught courses, particularly for expanding the range of course topics and driving student interest. Perhaps this could also be a way to alleviate pressures on smaller departments or create more explicit “links” across the curriculum for students.

## Final Thoughts

As the AAC reviewed notes from the workshop and initial Google Form submissions, we noticed a couple of key things:

1. In many cases, characteristics of the OLE Core were not easily classified as “good” or “bad.” Judgements were impacted by individual situations or experiences of specific departments/programs. Tensions between competing

value systems will need to be acknowledged and addressed as we move forward with OLE Core review and possible revisions.

2. People have a lot to say! AAC members came away with the sense that more conversations would be helpful, especially if they could focus more deeply on a specific question or wrestle with the nuances of a particular requirement.

The CILA workshop was a great success in starting these conversations, and we hope that this is just the start of many similar gatherings in the future. The AAC also plans to partner with the Curriculum Committee to formally organize and orchestrate a process for sustained feedback and conversation, such that the faculty are prepared to review the OLE Core in advance of renewing, revising, or replacing it in 2030-31. The OLE Core itself was built with the guidance of a task force rather than by standing committees; a similar approach might be appropriate for its renewal or revision. The AAC believes it will be important to include both staff and faculty on such a task force, as the mixed group at the CILA workshop provided valuable perspectives from those who work with students and the OLE Core in a variety of capacities.