

## **Focus Groups: Executive Summary**

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On January 5th and 6th four student researchers working for the GE Task Force conducted focus groups with 29 St. Olaf students. Participants were recruited by email and chosen to represent a range of majors and class years. One focus group was all seniors (9 participants), one was all first-years (4) and two included students across class years (6 and 8). Twenty-two majors were represented, most commonly Music, Biology, Philosophy, Sociology/Anthropology, and Women's and Gender Studies.

We asked for students' candid impressions of St. Olaf's curriculum in order to prepare a survey helpful to the process of GE revision. The specific questions evolved as we gained insights but they retained the same themes. Students had much to say, reflecting the importance of the topic, although not all of the data are helpful for GE revision. We then constructed a survey, in collaboration with Tom Williamson and Ryan Sheppard.

Seven themes appeared in the focus group (FG) data, along with some specific ideas for courses and pedagogy, included in the last item:

**1-Broadly informed critical thinking:** Many FG members want to understand and think critically about current events, history, the larger world, cultures, and topics in all of the college's divisions. They appreciate St. Olaf's wide range of course offerings and that the current GE system prompts them to take courses they might not have chosen but that are informative and sometimes introduce them to topics they pursue further.

**2-Communication and collaboration skills:** A number of FG members want classes that teach listening skills, collaboration, giving/receiving constructive criticism, and how to communicate respectfully.

**3-Interacting across different backgrounds, world views, and political views:** Many FG members want courses that help them understand diversity (race/ethnicity, gender, etc.), experience interaction across social categories, and learn to work effectively across differences. They also want courses that incorporate debates and opposition and thus teach them how to have difficult conversations while defending a given position and being respectful and open-minded. Students also noted their desire to implement change from this understanding of the world, or how to care for those within their communities.

**4-Challenges and risks:** Many FG members emphasized the value of taking courses beyond their initial choices. They said it's important to experience discomfort (outside their "comfort zone"), to learn to make mistakes, and to move beyond the St. Olaf "bubble" with experiences that engage current events and the surrounding community.

**5-Applying learning outside the classroom:** Many FG members emphasized the importance of internships, community projects, and off-campus study (while also stressing the need for access to all of these opportunities). They said they want to gain a greater understanding of how their liberal arts education applies outside the classroom.

**6-Involvement and action in the world:** A number of FG members want to experience community involvement and gain a sense of the world and their place within it. They also

want to be active in that world, gain a sense of purpose and intentionality, and learn to advocate for themselves and others and engage in protest and resistance to make changes in the world.

**7-Practical skills and approaches:** Many FG member emphasized the importance of gaining life skills, financial skills, and applicable knowledge for living on their own after college. They want to be skilled in time management and self-evaluation. They want to be aware of mental health issues and how to take care of oneself.

**\*Additional specific curricular suggestions:** FG members also made suggestions about pedagogy, the current array of courses, and the use of campus resources. Many of them want more experiential opportunities (internships, off-campus study, community projects), more partial-credit options (.25 and .50 credit courses), more team-taught interdisciplinary courses, and to have one religion requirement rather than two. They also want to be nudged to use campus resources (the Disco, the MakerSpace, Piper Center). Students also took issue with the western-centric approach of some required fields, such as religion and history, and expressed interest in expanded course offerings.

Based on these results, we constructed a survey of students' views about an alternative core curriculum. Questions address the skills they want to gain, ideas for increasing choice and flexibility, possible components of a first year seminar, ways to integrate curricular and extracurricular learning, tools for learning about specific core topics, and ways to increase student understanding of the core curriculum and its purposes.