

Proposal for a “Grand Challenges¹” General Education Requirement

Rationale

In local and global contexts our world faces grand challenges that lack clear solutions, proving to be complex and interdisciplinary in nature. St. Olaf graduates should be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to begin tackling these problems -- those that currently exist and those as yet unforeseen.

Through a “Grand Challenges” general education requirement, students will explore the many dimensions of a grand challenge, work collaboratively in diverse teams, and propose creative solutions. The “Grand Challenges” requirement addresses all three OLE questions, by guiding students to understand the world and their role in it (OLE Question 1), to develop skills to live a purposeful and meaningful life (OLE Question 2), and to prepare for the challenges facing a dynamic, global society (OLE Question 3). Additionally, this “Grand Challenges” requirement would allow for students to engage the world’s most compelling problems while also ensuring the GE stays nimble, relevant, and adaptable to contemporary issues. A “Grand Challenges” requirement will complement other disciplinary and skill-based aspects of the GE by encouraging students to: 1) participate in common experiences designed to foster community; 2) consider how different societies, cultures, traditions, and faith practices have understood and continue to understand local/global issues; and 3) design applied solutions for the common good. Overall, a “Grand Challenges” requirement will promote creativity and problem solving through an integrated, interdisciplinary lens true to the liberal arts. It will also garner excitement, innovation, and collaboration among our colleagues and our students.

ILOs

- Students will understand and make a personal connection to key features of one or more contemporary challenges
- Students will develop the ability to apply skills and knowledge from a range of academic areas to generate solutions for multi-faceted challenges in a creative process
- Students will recognize the complexity of contemporary challenges, in particular the ways individuals and/or communities affect the well-being of others, human and otherwise
- Students will develop the ability to work collaboratively within a diverse group

Ideas for Implementation

We envision the St. Olaf community will collectively select grand challenges representative of the major issues facing societies here and throughout the globe. Faculty will then develop courses around these interdisciplinary grand challenges, which could be offered across the curriculum (i.e. embedded in the First-Year Seminar; within a 300-level course within the major, etc). During their time on the Hill students might take 2-3 “Grand Challenges” courses, which could easily fulfill other GE at the same time. Some specific ideas for implementation include, but are not limited to:

- Every four years, faculty, staff, and students are invited to contribute topics for the next cycle of grand challenges. From there, either a student-faculty committee would recommend the top grand challenges or grand challenge options could be decided via a faculty vote.

[1] Note: We are excited about the intention behind the title of this proposed requirement, “Grand Challenges”. However, this title has also been used for other GE requirements, including a requirement at UMN. We are open to making changes to this title in order to make it more specific to St. Olaf.

- Grand challenge examples might include: “Global Climate Change,” “Gender and Sexuality,” or “Class, Power and Privilege,” and the like.
- The proposed “Power, Inequity, and Race” requirement could be embedded within a “Global Challenges” requirement. In this case the GE might ensure it remains a perennial challenge in all cycles and require it of all students. Alternatively, the GE may specify a particular timeframe for its completion (i.e. first year, by end of sophomore year, etc.).
- All faculty would be invited to propose grand challenges courses through a clear, simple process. Decisions would need to be made one year in advance to allow time for course development. Greater opportunities for faculty development would make this especially feasible.
- “Grand Challenges” could be taught by individual instructors or by interdisciplinary teams (preferred). Depending upon FTE constraints, multiple sections could be offered on the same topic wherein students gather for occasional joint lectures, guest speakers, and related activities.
- A College-wide grand challenge theme could be selected each year, allowing for community-building events, opportunities for civic engagement and student research, and guest speakers. Collaboration with College Centers and Institutes is a possibility to this end.
- In the case of a College-wide grand challenge theme, incoming first-year students could submit a project (e.g., artwork, film, writing piece, podcast, blog, etc.) on the topic, which could be displayed for an opening event during orientation or the first week of class. This could help cultivate community and enthusiasm before students even step foot on campus.
- With respect to the size of the GE, a “Grand Challenges” requirement could take up the aims of the current “Experiential Learning in Context” requirement. More thinking might be done on how to bundle a “Grand Challenges” requirement with other GE requirements. It ought to be possible to fulfill other GE requirements alongside a “Grand Challenges” course. Indeed, this approach may even enrich the student experience and lead to greater achievement of the ILOs listed above.

Examples of grand challenges and courses that currently exist in the curriculum

We fully expect and encourage that new courses will be developed; however, listed below are examples of courses that already exist around a few potential topics. We anticipate these courses may need to be modified to fulfill the Grand Challenges GE requirement. We also recognize that these lists are not exhaustive.

Example Grand Challenge 1: Power, Inequity, and Race

- RACE 121: Introduction to Race and Ethnic Studies
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- HIST 151: Slavery in African History
- HIST 165: Slavery in the Americas
- HIST 181: Civil Rights Revolution
- HIST 256: Slavery in West Africa: Ghana
- HIST 282: Topics in Native American History
- PHIL 255: Race and Social Justice
- PSCI 244: Race and American Politics
- WRIT 111 courses: Race and Power; Seeing Race in the 21st Century

Example Grand Challenge 2: Global Climate Change

- ENVST 381: Theo-ethics of Climate Change
- ENVST 381: Paleoecology and Ecosystem Change

- ES/PS 201: Global Environmental Politics
- FILM 230: Media and the Environment
- GERM 276: Green Germany
- HIST 245: Environmental History of Latin American
- NORW224: Nordic Nature
- WRI 111 courses: Climate Fiction; What the Eye Can't See: The Role of Emotions in Climate Change

Example Grand Challenge 3: Gender and Sexuality

- ART 277: Gender and Visual Culture
- BIO 124: The Biology of Women
- BIO 275: Biology of Reproduction
- ENGL 264: Topics in Gender and Literature
- FAMST 253: Human Sexuality
- MUSIC 346: Music, Gender, and Sexuality
- PHIL 245: Philosophy and Feminism
- REL 209: Introduction to Feminist Theology
- REL 264: Theology and Sexuality
- SPAN 250: Family/Gender Roles in Spain
- SOAN 235: Introduction to Islamic Feminisms
- SOAN 246: LGBTQA Lives and Issues
- SOAN 260: Marriage and the Family
- SOAN 261: Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective
- SOAN 264: Race, Class, and American Culture
- THEAT 298: Shakespearean Gender Performance
- WRIT 111 courses: Gender and Sports
- WMGST 121: Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies
- WMGST 399: Feminism and Masculinity
- WMGST 399: Black Feminist and Activist Thought