General Education: The Human Community

Program Philosophy

General Education: The Human Community is the core academic program of James Madison University. It is required of all students regardless of their major or professional program. JMU’s general education program seeks to educate students in ways that have been fundamental to higher education and to thinking people for centuries. The philosophy of the program promotes the cultivation of habits of the mind and heart that are essential to informed citizens in a democracy and global community. The program is committed to helping students develop their ability to reason and make ethical choices; to appreciate beauty and understand the natural and social worlds they live in; and to recognize the importance of the past and work toward a better future.

By providing a strong foundation of knowledge, skills and experiences expected of all educated people, The Human Community prepares students to become flexible thinkers and life-long learners. This core of knowledge, skills and experiences transcends every major and professional program and is essential for successful and rewarding careers and lives. The program encourages students to become active in their own education and deliberate in making good choices for themselves and in connection with others.

In a rapidly changing world, it is increasingly important that students learn how to create knowledge out of the vast amounts of available information and place that knowledge in its appropriate contexts. The role of general education is to introduce these concepts, so students understand that knowledge seldom develops in isolation, but rather within larger interactive, often competing contexts.

As students study intensively in their chosen field, they also take The Human Community courses in which they can come to understand how distinct disciplines look at the world from different vantage points, using different methodologies, different tools and different kinds of answers, reasons or evidence. Thus, the General Education Program and the major or professional program complement and complete each other; together they are integral and essential components of a student’s full and proper education.

Mission Statement

The mission of The Human Community is four-fold.

- To graduate students who will be informed citizens, well prepared to participate in public life and public decision-making.
- To provide students with critical skills in reasoning, communication and information literacy that build a strong foundation for course work at JMU as well as for their lives and careers after college.
- To introduce students to core areas of knowledge that are central to the history of western civilization, including its interactions with other traditions within the global community.
- To invite students to know themselves intellectually, emotionally and physically and to consider the connections between values and behavior.

Structure: Course Work in each of Five Clusters

The Human Community provides fundamental knowledge and skills across the breadth of traditional disciplines so that students learn how to do the following:

- Think and communicate effectively (Cluster One).
- Appreciate the arts and humanities as an essential component of the human experience (Cluster Two).
- Recognize the relevance of science and mathematics in the world they inhabit (Cluster Three).
- Identify ways in which political, social and economic forces shape American and global experiences (Cluster Four).
- Understand themselves both as individuals and as members of various groups in society and the global community (Cluster Five).

In each of these five clusters, students choose and complete a multidisciplinary grouping of courses. These courses together challenge students to make connections among disciplines while satisfying all of the learning objectives of each cluster. Every grouping of courses forms a coherent and integrated body of knowledge, and students must be consistent in completing the course work of each cluster.

Because Cluster One provides the necessary college-level skills of critical thinking, information literacy, writing and speech, all students must meet Cluster One requirements during their first year. It is strongly recommended that all students complete Cluster Three: The Natural World by the end of their second year. If students need to defer completion of the Cluster One course work, they may request a deferral from the Dean of General Education.
General Education Requirements  Credit Hours
Cluster One  9
Cluster Two  9
Cluster Three  10
Cluster Four  7
Cluster Five  6
41

General Education Program Goals

Knowledge
Students acquire knowledge of past and present achievements of our own and other cultures in the arts, letters and sciences; of the impact of people, institutions and communities involved in the creation, preservation and transmission of culture and of the distinctions and interconnections among disciplines. This includes knowledge of the following:

- The world’s great literary, philosophical and religious traditions.
- The historical and social context of major political, intellectual, religious, economic, scientific and cultural developments.
- The evidence, ideas and models needed to understand how people relate to each other, to institutions and to communities.
- The evidence, ideas and models to make informed and responsible judgments about the physical world.
- Major achievements in the fine arts of our own and other civilizations and the cultural, social and historical context in which they were created.
- Values, ethics and legal issues in a free society.
- The wellness issues involved in encouraging lifestyle choices necessary for sustaining health and well-being.

Skills
Students learn the skills of perception, research and investigation; the critical analyses needed to cope with problems and find solutions and the written, oral and electronic communication skills requisite to shaping ideas and transmitting them persuasively. These skills include the following abilities:

- To communicate purposefully through reading, writing, speaking and listening effectively and through the use of appropriate technology.
- To use the investigative, analytical, quantitative and critical thinking skills needed to examine alternatives and make decisions.
- To perceive and make informed aesthetic choices and analyses about the artistic use of sound, movement and images.
- To identify, locate and evaluate information sources in both traditional and electronic forms.
- To interact effectively in interpersonal and intercultural group situations.

Experiences
Students will actively engage in reflection about aesthetic and ethical concerns and the diversity of human values through experiences that transcend the limits of specialization. This is evident when students:

- Become independent, creative and self-directed learners.
- Gain an understanding of the academic community and its application to broader communities.
- Cooperate and collaborate when working with other people.
- Examine the influence of culture on one’s own perceptions and treat others with dignity, respect and civility.