

GENERAL EDUCATION'S AMERICAN EXPERIENCE DOMAIN COURSEWORK AT JMU

THE PROGRAM

JMU is one of three public universities in Virginia with required general education coursework in the American Experience domain. All students are required to complete a 4-credit hour American Experience course (HIST225, POSC225, or JUST225), which provides students with an understanding of the major themes and concepts that structure American life today.

- HIST 225 does so through a contextual and document-based study of the American historical experience that emphasizes the interaction of people, ideas and social movements.
- POSC 225 focuses on the evolution and contemporary operation of the American political system by examining its fundamental principles and current dynamics.
- JUST 225 frames questions regarding historic and contemporary events in terms of issues of justice, highlighting how societal structures interact with individual lives and vice versa.

The American Experience domain requirement is part of [Cluster 4](#) in JMU's general education program.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students completing an American Experience course of Cluster Four will be able to identify, conceptualize and evaluate:

- Social and political processes and structures using quantitative and qualitative data.
 - Primary sources from diverse perspectives relating to American history, political institutions and society.
 - The evolution of intellectual concepts shaping American democratic institutions, including issues involving power, inequity, and justice.
 - The complexity and diversity of American politics, society and culture.
 - Intentions and consequences of America's engagement in global affairs.
 - How the historical exclusion of various social identities influences political, social, cultural and economic development.
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THE ASSESSMENT

The American Experience test (Version 4) is a 40-item multiple-choice assessment created by Cluster 4 faculty to assess the learning outcomes. The American Experience test is administered to a random sample of students twice during their academic career: once as incoming first-year students during an institution-wide Assessment Day in August (Pre) and again as students with 45-70 credit hours during Assessment Day in February (Post). Because the same students took the test twice during their undergraduate career, we're able to explore changes in scores across time for students who have and have not completed their American Experience requirement.

THE RESULTS

Responses collected from students¹ tested in August 2019 (Pre) and February 2021 (Post) were used to answer two specific questions.

¹ Only results from the FA19/SP21 cohort are provided in this summary. Students who completed more than 5 items per minute were excluded.

Do students learn or develop more if they have taken more cluster-related courses?

Students who had taken one of the American Experience courses scored higher than students who had not taken an American Experience course. Considering just the February 2021 (Post) data, 241 students had yet to complete the requirement and 350 students had already completed the requirement. Those who had completed the requirement had a higher average scale score² ($M = 506$) relative to those who had yet to complete the requirement ($M = 484$).

Do students change over time in school?

We expect that students who have completed a course in the cluster will perform better on the assessment in their sophomore/junior year (or whenever they have 45-70 credit hours) than they did as first-year students. Students who completed an American Experience course at JMU scored 24 scale-score-points higher than they did as first-year students, compared to a loss of 4 scale-score-points for those who had not enrolled in the American Experience requirement (students who had completed just under half the course gained about 26 points).

MOVING FORWARD

Faculty are pleased that students who have completed American Experience coursework show greater gains than students who have no coursework in American Experience. However, they have not discussed in depth whether the gains meet their expectations.

During the 2021-2022 academic year, the Cluster Four Committee revised the Learning Outcomes to incorporate more DEIJA³ language which reflects the diverse topics and issues that Cluster Four courses address. These revisions demonstrate considerable reflection and thoughtful discussions. In the next year, Cluster Four faculty will be reviewing the assessment to check alignment with the revised Learning Outcomes. Additionally, these outcomes will provide guidance as faculty endeavor to incorporate aspects of DEIJA into their existing courses.

² The scale for scale scores was chosen to have a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100 for incoming first-year students tested in the fall of 1999 and 2000 combined for the American Experience test. The newer tests (American Experience Version 4) has been equated back to this scale.

³ DEIJA stands for diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and access.