

Common Curriculum FAQs

- **How is a common curriculum different from a core curriculum or a general education curriculum?**

A core curriculum, in its strictest form, requires all students to take the exact same set of courses. Some institutions, for example, employ a “Great Books” curriculum. Others require a shared set of basic “101” courses in foundational topics like math, writing, and so on.

A general education curriculum requires students to choose among designated courses in various disciplines such as science, history, literature, etc. One widely used variety of general education curriculum follows a “distribution” model, where students take a certain number of credits in broadly generalized areas—like social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, arts, and so on.

A common curriculum, in contrast, engages students in common themes, skills, methodologies or values that the institution deems important for the development of its undergraduate student population. Typically, a common curriculum isn't a prescribed set of courses, but instead represents a set of integrative values or learning outcomes that are addressed within the curriculum and assist the students in exploring connections between academic work and life outside of the university. Examples might include “civic action and reflection,” “innovative thinking,” “ethical reasoning,” and “logical analysis,” among others.

Developing a common curriculum will help to define each of our students—beyond their success in completing a major—as a CU Boulder graduate; will expand a student’s educational environment from navigating a discipline, to exploring a broader community; and will facilitate student self-discovery and enrichment through contact with different ways of learning, knowing, and communicating.

- **Does this mean our students will all be required to take things like math, science, etc. in a lockstep formation?**

No; that is one thing that we have heard both from the work done by the [Academic Futures](#) initiative and in conversations with various departments and faculty. A lockstep curriculum is not indicative of a CU Boulder education and may not be beneficial to our students. The hope is that we as a university community will be able to identify a set of shared themes or skills that we think best exemplify the CU Boulder learning experience. Two different kinds of courses could then fill these requirements: either new courses that specifically teach to these themes or skills, or existing courses that explicitly weave these themes or skills into the syllabus.

It’s possible that a common curriculum would include one or more core courses, if it turns out that such a course would best achieve one of the learning outcomes that we’ve identified as crucial to a CU Boulder undergraduate degree. But we will start by determining the learning outcomes first, and then determine what kinds of courses will encourage that kind of learning for our students.

- **How many classes or credits will this common curriculum be?**

We don't know at the moment—that's something that the steering committee will recommend. Generally speaking, common curricula tend to be somewhere between 5–15 courses (15–45 credits on the semester system).

- **Will my program have to change its curriculum?**

The curricula of specific majors, minors, and certificates won't need to change, but the overall requirements of the CU Boulder undergraduate degree will require some changes. Again, this is a common curriculum: all undergraduates, regardless of their major, will have to fulfill the requirements.

- **Don't we already have a general education curriculum for all of our undergraduate students? I remember voting on one a few years ago.**

Each of the colleges and schools at CU Boulder that offers undergraduate degrees has its own requirements; there is not a single set of common requirements across all colleges and schools. See the requirements in the CU Boulder catalog for the [College of Arts and Sciences](#), the [Leeds School of Business](#), the [College of Engineering and Applied Science](#), the [Program in Environmental Design](#), and the [College of Media, Communication and Information](#). The [School of Education](#) and the [College of Music](#) have different requirements for each of their undergraduate degrees.

- **Will my college/school's general education or core curriculum have to change in response to a campus common curriculum?**

One of the things that will be examined in closer detail are the various general education curricula that are being currently followed across the university, what they have in common as well as how they differ. Will these ultimately be disrupted? We don't know, but again it is safe to assume that there will be some changes to most undergraduate programs on campus based on the structure and themes deemed important. Each college and school will retain the right, however, to determine its own core or general education curriculum in addition to (and perhaps overlapping with) the university common curriculum.

- **Are there common curriculum models we can follow from other universities?**

There are as many models of a common curriculum as there are colleges and universities in the United States. Each institution has a unique common curriculum or general education program that was designed to echo their institutional mission and values for the students they serve. CU Boulder's common curriculum will do the same.

If you have seen or know of an effective and interesting common curriculum program and think it would be a good resource, please send it to us at commoncurriculum@colorado.edu.

- **What common themes, skills, or methodologies will be required, or are being considered?**

At this time everything is still being considered. We're still in the listening phase—listening to what matters to the students and faculty and staff of CU and understanding what we all mean by the phrase "Be Boulder." Once the steering committee has been formed, they will take the lead on winnowing all the suggestions and ideas and tying them to the university's mission and values.

- **Is it possible that the themes that eventually become part of the common curriculum could also be integrated into the disciplines across the colleges as well as integrated into non-discipline-specific courses?**

Yes that is certainly something that will be explored.

- **Who will determine the learning outcomes for the common curriculum? How will we assess them?**

As the Common Curriculum Steering Committee (AY 2021–22) and Implementation Committee (AY 2022–23) undertake their work, they will develop learning outcomes and assessments in tandem with the common curriculum. They will work with faculty and learning assessment experts across campus to define those learning outcomes and implement best practices for assessments.

- **Who will be on the steering committee?**

The exact composition of the steering committee is still being determined, and nominations have not yet been opened. The committee will be made up of faculty, who have primary responsibility for designing curricula, along with administrators and staff who have expertise in this area. Student representation will also be included. The provost will announce procedures for nominations sometime during the spring 2021 semester.

- **Will the common curriculum be spread over the four years of a student's undergraduate career?**

Based on preliminary conversations and assumptions, yes. Assisting and allowing the students to weave the skills and themes into their major courses and electives throughout their studies at CU would be the ideal. This configuration was one of the main recommendations of the Academic Futures discussion of a common curriculum.

- **Will the common curriculum require students to experience elements of diversity, equity and inclusion both in Boulder and in the wider world?**

Absolutely. This is a crucial value for our university, and diversity, equity, and inclusion will be woven in as a major value in the common curriculum at CU Boulder.

- **Does the proposed common curriculum require a capstone?**

There is no proposed common curriculum at the moment. Capstones have been brought up in several discussions, but only in the general sense of the idea. If you have ideas on how a capstone could be used in a common curriculum, please send comments and ideas to commoncurriculum@colorado.edu.

- **Will the First-Year Experience be part of the common curriculum?**

Several people have brought up the idea of bringing the two together, but there is still much to be reviewed and evaluated about what we already do at the university before that can be decided. Your ideas around the use of a First-Year Experience in a common curriculum would be welcomed at commoncurriculum@colorado.edu.

- **What about transfer students or students who internally transfer between colleges/majors? How will they be affected?**

Just as transfer credits work now, students who wish to transfer credits into the university can potentially have a course applied to common curriculum requirements if it is determined to be a direct equivalent to a course at CU Boulder already tagged as a course or theme in the common curriculum.

A common curriculum will also ease students' transfer between colleges/schools at CU Boulder, assisting them in completing their degrees on time.

- **How will this all be funded?**

The exact funding model for the common curriculum will depend to some extent on its final configuration. However, the university is committed to funding a common curriculum centrally as needed, separate from the budget model for schools and colleges.

- **What are we hoping to gain from this?**

Ultimately, the common curriculum we design should assist students in their personal, educational, and emotional growth by ensuring students receive education that spans beyond the major. A common curriculum will help create a sense of community for our undergraduates that is not only social but also academic and intellectual.

- **Why do we have to do this?**

A common curriculum was a primary recommendation of Academic Futures, the campus-wide visioning process for academic priorities for CU Boulder. In addition, following the December 2019 visit of the evaluators from our accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), [the Commission found](#) that contrary to the [Criteria for Accreditation](#) (3.B), there was no "evidence that CU Boulder has a unified approach to general education for all undergraduates," and that the university has not "articulated the purposes, content, and intended learning

outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements." By not complying with HLC's *Criteria for Accreditation*, the university runs the risk of losing access to federal financial aid (Title IV). Following the HLC findings, [Chancellor DiStefano expressed CU Boulder's commitment](#) to carrying out the Academic Futures recommendation to create and implement a common curriculum. In academic year 2023–24, the university is required to report to HLC on its progress.

How can I submit ideas or feedback?

We would love to hear from you and get your thoughts on the common curriculum planning process, potential topics or content areas for a common curriculum,, or examples from other colleges or universities that you think should be reviewed. All comments or suggestions may be sent to commoncurriculum@colorado.edu.