

Task Force on Undergraduate Education

What Washington University Undergraduates Should Know and Be Able to Do

Goals

We believe that the goals of higher education should be expressed, in the first instance, in terms of abilities, attitudes, values, and habits of mind that students should acquire. These include certain fundamental skills that every college and university will want students to possess:

- The ability to write well and to read and understand a complex text
- The capacity to speak well and explain things clearly
- A facility with quantitative methods as modes of inquiry
- A habit of reflection, contemplation, and critical thinking generally.

At the same time, the range of abilities and habits of mind that students should acquire is broader than this familiar list and includes what might be described as *metacognitive* skills and attitudes:

- An ability to think and act creatively
- The ability to engage in both individual and collaborative research
- An understanding of how knowledge is created and transmitted
- A capacity for filtering and assessing the relevance of information to a task, but also a sense of perspective that allows the student to see connections among ideas and integrate knowledge from several domains.
- Resilience and the ability to adapt to change
- The intellectual curiosity and courage that is needed to explore fields that lie outside those pertinent to one's major or career or that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries
- Practical insight, acquired by experience through independent studies, internships, undergraduate research, participation in workshops, discussions with scholars and professionals, etc., into the demands and rewards of the academic and professional fields of interest to the student.
- A facility for making normative assessments as well as with establishing matters of fact; specifically for moral, political, and aesthetic judgment based on the kinds of reasoning appropriate to those domains.

In addition, students should have acquired abilities and attitudes that encounters with particular bodies of knowledge provide:

- An ability to engage with the history of ideas, both within and to some extent beyond the bounds of their major, and to evaluate arguments that have been given in support of the ideas.
- A capacity to use the basic principles of science to understand and act in the natural world
- The perspective on humanity, human behavior, and society that a study of the liberal arts – social sciences, performing and creative arts, and humanities – can provide.

Finally, an important aim of higher education is to foster personal qualities and attitudes that will serve the student well as she or he pursues larger life goals. Students should have:

- The will to provide leadership and to exercise moral and aesthetic judgment where it is needed and the ability to recognize when it is required.
- The belief that what they have learned is important for them as individuals and for society and the view that learning will continue to be essential throughout their lives.
- A sense of responsibility for the choices they make individually and as citizens of both their own culture and, to some degree, of the world, along with a willingness to cooperate in common endeavors.
- The understanding that they are members of traditions, intellectual communities that reach back thousands of years and that will continue into the future.
- An appreciation for the diversity and complexity of such traditions and an abiding curiosity about other cultures.

At Washington University

Although a number of these goals can be pursued at other institutions, there are opportunities for achieving them that distinguish Washington University. We are an excellent research university that takes seriously its teaching mission and emphasizes the importance of education in the liberal arts. Thus our students have the best of both worlds. They have access to first-rate research facilities and opportunities to work directly with senior researchers and scholars, who are often engaged in cutting-edge interdisciplinary research. At the same time, it is our tradition to treat students as individuals and to respect their interests and views. We also value and encourage collaboration, which our size and administrative structure promote. As a result, we have a strong sense of community. This sense is reinforced by a beautiful campus in which many buildings and spaces have been designed to provide opportunities to interact; for instance the University Center, Holmes Lounge, and the Village. The

University is located in a major urban center with a diverse population and a rich history, on the banks of the Mississippi, a geographical and cultural confluence. Directly across from the campus is Forest Park, the third largest in the United States, home to museums and centers for art, science and history and site of the 1904 World's Fair. As a consequence of these features, our students can have memorable experiences in the classroom, the laboratory, the studio, and the field, experiences that can reflect on each other and be seen as integrated in important ways. These take a number of forms:

- Exciting special academic programs, some of which reach beyond school boundaries to the professional schools such as Law, Medicine, Engineering, Social Work, and Business; for instance, Focus and other multi-semester programs on Medicine and Society, Minds-Brains-Behavior, Entrepreneurship, and Pathfinder for environmental issues.
- Many small collaboratives, such as reading groups and workshops, in which faculty and students from diverse disciplines come together informally.
- Opportunities to engage with the community to address important issues, such as health, race relations, employment, energy, and the urban environment.
- A vibrant and accessible arts community, with several excellent museums and collections, most of them free; a highly regarded symphony, two opera companies, and many venues for jazz and blues; a rich literary scene; and important arts centers and activities on the campus itself: the Edison theater for the performing arts, in particular drama and dance, the Kemper museum in the Fox School of Art and Design, weekly free jazz concerts in Holmes Lounge, classical music performances sponsored by the Music department.
- Unique courses of study and topics in the humanities and the sciences that are available because of our faculty research interests, special facilities, geographic location, and history. For instance: Cahokia, the burial mounds of an ancient civilization more than 4000 years old where we conduct archeological research; the archive of 'Freedom Suits,' the complete legal records of lawsuits in which slaves attempted to gain their freedom – the most famous of which was the Dred Scott case originating in the Old Courthouse, now part of the Jefferson National Memorial; the Mississippi river, the starting point of the Lewis and Clark expedition and a conduit for the fur trade; facilities for genome mapping, brain imaging, and plant studies; the archives of physicist Arthur Holly Compton and documentary film-maker Henry Hampton; a world class zoo and botanical garden each with its own leading research facilities.

What Washington University undergraduates should know and be able to do are thus identified as an important set of skills, abilities, bodies of knowledge, ways of knowing, attitudes, values, and beliefs, which are acquired through a rich, interwoven fabric of opportunities and pathways that we are particularly well-equipped to provide.