

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF GENERAL EDUCATION?

The Interstate Passport is built around the general education core because that is the part of a degree that most colleges and universities have in common.

That commonality is no coincidence. Lengthy discussion over time among educators, employers, and others have led to agreement that today's "general education" plays a critical role in preparation for students' major programs of study, as well as for life as employees or entrepreneurs and as citizens of our communities and our country. How does general education do that? And is it the same everywhere?

First, general education courses and credits are not the same everywhere. Typically, general education is about half of an associate (two-year) degree and about one quarter of a baccalaureate (four-year) degree. But colleges and universities have somewhat different courses, course patterns, and requirements, depending on how each of them has built a coherent and effective program to utilize the expertise of its faculty and meet the needs of its students.

Even though the courses may not all be the same, the goals that institutions are trying to attain through general education and the learning *outcomes* they want their students to achieve turn out to be very similar across a great many colleges and universities. Here are some of the central goals that institutions most endorse:

General education builds foundational skills that students will use throughout their education. Learning to write and speak coherently and persuasively – to select, analyze, organize and share information – is one of the most important skills for success in any major, as well as in every work and civic setting. Equally important is being able to understand and use mathematical concepts, whether it's the calculus for engineers, statistics for political scientists or nurses, or basic math literacy for some of the liberal arts – each math pathway supports specific majors and all are relevant for understanding the larger world.

Employers are clear that they want to hire college graduates who understand and can work with a wide variety of people, who can work in teams, who are versatile and flexible, and who are creative problem solvers. Some understanding of scientific concepts and the scientific method will be needed by everyone in the future world of work and to engage in important policy conversations. Likewise, scientists with no understanding of history or psychology will be less effective in relating their work convincingly to others. And an artist who starts an art-related business will quickly discover that communication, mathematics, sociology, and psychology are important for marketing, accounting, hiring, selling, and customer relations. The broad areas of general education – sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts – support and enhance each other and produce graduates prepared to succeed in our multi-dimensional and rapidly changing world.

But beyond the learning required in these broad areas, the very presence in general education classes of students with a variety of backgrounds, interests, and career goals provides the laboratory for the kinds of experiences that are so valuable in career and in community. And, for a four-year degree, most of the last two years will be spent with similar students in classes in their major field of study. In contrast, general education classes in both two-year and four-year institutions are comprised of students heading for many different majors and careers, with a wide diversity of interests, skills, and values.

By focusing on the general education goals and learning *outcomes* that colleges and universities have in common, the Interstate Passport supports both the unique character of each institution and the importance of general education for students' success in college, in work, and in life.