

Core Competencies Frequently Asked Questions

This set of questions is meant to provide some basic information regarding the competencies section of the core curricular proposal.

1) Why are we focusing on competencies in the core curriculum?

Actually, the focus on competencies is not new, not even to our own curriculum. Our current core lists several “indispensable competencies” as a means of identifying critical skills that we expect students to acquire during their USD education. Across the nation, much attention is paid to the ways in which many universities have initiated curricular revision to help highlight competencies embedded in their programs to explore how these are achieved. However, it is inappropriate to think that competencies are the primary focus of any curriculum, including the core. The following excerpt from Neem (2013) discusses the importance of competencies perceived beyond just a set of outcomes:

The goal of a liberal education is to transform a person by offering him or her serious and diverse intellectual experiences....A good liberal education is not just about learning to write well or to think critically, or any other specific outcome or competency. Instead, it is also about putting students into contexts in which they are exposed to new ideas, asked to chew on them, and to talk or write about them. One hopes that students will be disturbed and fascinated—and even thrilled—by what they learn....Fostering students’ curiosity about the world requires that they be immersed for a part of their lives in an environment that treats intellectual inquiry—not demonstrating competence—as the highest goal. Competency-based education can improve the quality of college education by helping colleges and disciplines identify some of the specific skills and knowledge that they want their graduates to exhibit, but it will always be just a part of the overall picture. A good collegiate education also offers intellectual experiences not available elsewhere that can change a life and last a lifetime.

In addition to the other components of our model, competency areas will help us to focus and integrate our efforts not just in the boundaries of one class, but through practice culminating in the award of the degree.

2) Why did we select the competencies that we have?

We have selected the following competencies: critical thinking, information literacy, communication (written and oral), second language, mathematical reasoning and quantitative reasoning. These particular competencies are among our list of 12 learning outcomes that we approved for the undergraduate curriculum in Spring 2011, with the exception of mathematical reasoning listed only as quantitative reasoning in the original list. However, multiple discussions have helped us distinguish what is meant by both terms, and so these are both recognized as separate competencies. All but oral communication, information literacy and quantitative reasoning are among our current list of competencies. We recognize that these are considered essential by many peer institutions and by our accreditors. We intend to focus on these in the core, since they provide a **foundational set** of skills that we hope students will have the opportunity to develop and master throughout their undergraduate education.

3) **The word “competency” implies a skill that can be mastered. Can students enter USD having mastered the competencies listed without completing any coursework?**

In our current core, we do have guidelines for stipulating where and when competencies can be met prior to USD or through testing at USD. We would expect that we would need to develop a similar set of guidelines for this new set. We must keep in mind that students should “pass” competencies at levels expected when they exit the university, not when they enter as first-year students.

4) **Why are the competencies flagged throughout the core?**

Most current thinking on learning theory proposes a scaffolded curriculum in which students are intentionally provided many opportunities to practice the indispensable competencies. For anyone who has taught a course in writing or second language or math, it should be clear that one course alone is insufficient to help students reach a mastery level. We have identified three points in the curriculum where such practice might occur: foundation, pre-capstone, and capstone. We would expect that this series would be piloted at all levels, but particularly at the pre-capstone level, to assure effective integration into the curriculum (e.g., selection of courses, faculty development, curricular support through tutoring, etc).

5) **Why are some competencies embedded and others are in stand-alone courses?**

In an effort to combine various components of the core (e.g., breadth and competencies), we looked for ways to embed these into the curriculum so that we would not be adding courses beyond those we currently offer. Thus, competencies should not equate with courses. We embedded competencies that were most relevant without overloading the course. Too many embedded competencies would have created serious workload expectations and issues for instructors of core courses. The two that still retain single course assignments are recognized widely as foundational with intense workload expectations. These still can be integrated and work within the core structure.