

The 2018 Westmont College General Education Senior Survey

In the spring of 2018, all graduating seniors were invited to complete a survey regarding their experiences with the General Education program. A total of 158 students, which constitutes 48% of 327 graduates, completed the survey. Amazon gift cards were used as incentives for completing the survey and were given to ten randomly selected students.

In order to make sense of the responses to some questions, the Committee solicited assistance from faculty in Philosophy, Religious Studies, History, and Kinesiology. They received the results relevant to their departments in the summer of 2018.

Following departmental meetings dedicated to the analysis of the survey results, the chairs of these departments met with the GE Committee to present departmental interpretations of the results and answer the Committee's questions. Comments and explanations offered by the department chairs are included in this report.

Demographics

In order to verify that the responding sample represents the graduating class as a whole, the respondents were asked to identify their major(s), and whether or not they came to Westmont as a transfer student. The respondents represented all college majors except for Data Analytics, English-Modern Languages, European Studies, French and Physics (Engineering Physics seniors did, however, complete the survey). Eighteen percent of respondents identified more than one major. Major distribution of the survey participants is presented in *Chart 1*, which includes double and triple majors:

Chart 1. Distribution of Majors among students who took the 2018 GE Senior Survey

Characteristics	Survey percentage	Class percentage (graduated)
Economics & Business	13.3	12.9
Kinesiology	12.0	11.2
Psychology	12.0	9.6
Biology	11.4	9.1
English	11.4	5.7
Communication Studies	8.8	7.4
Liberal Studies	8.2	3.0
Art	4.4	5.9
Sociology	4.4	3.7
History	3.2	3.7
Computer Science	3.2	2.8
Mathematics	3.1	1.3
Music	1.9	2.0
Philosophy	1.9	1.1
Religious Studies	1.9	2.8
Spanish	1.9	2.0
Theatre Arts	1.9	1.4
Social Science	1.3	1.0

Engineering Physics	1.3	1.7
Art History	0.6	0.4
Music Education	0.6	0

If we look at divisional representation, it would appear that the humanities were slightly overrepresented, while two other divisions were fairly represented in the survey. It would also appear that transfer students were slightly underrepresented in the survey.

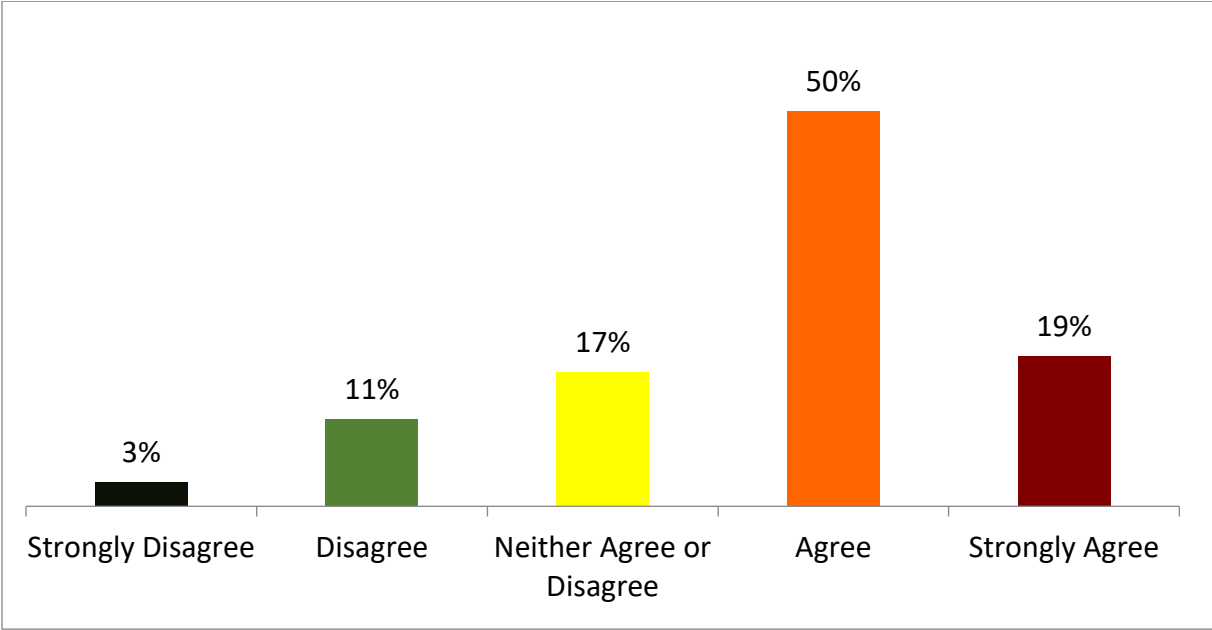
Characteristics	Survey Percentage	Class percentage
Humanities	33.9	28.7
Social Sciences	30.4	29
NBS	43	42.6
Transfer students	11.4	15.6

Based on the major and divisional representation, it is possible to conclude that the responding sample reasonably represents the graduating class as a whole.

Notable Findings

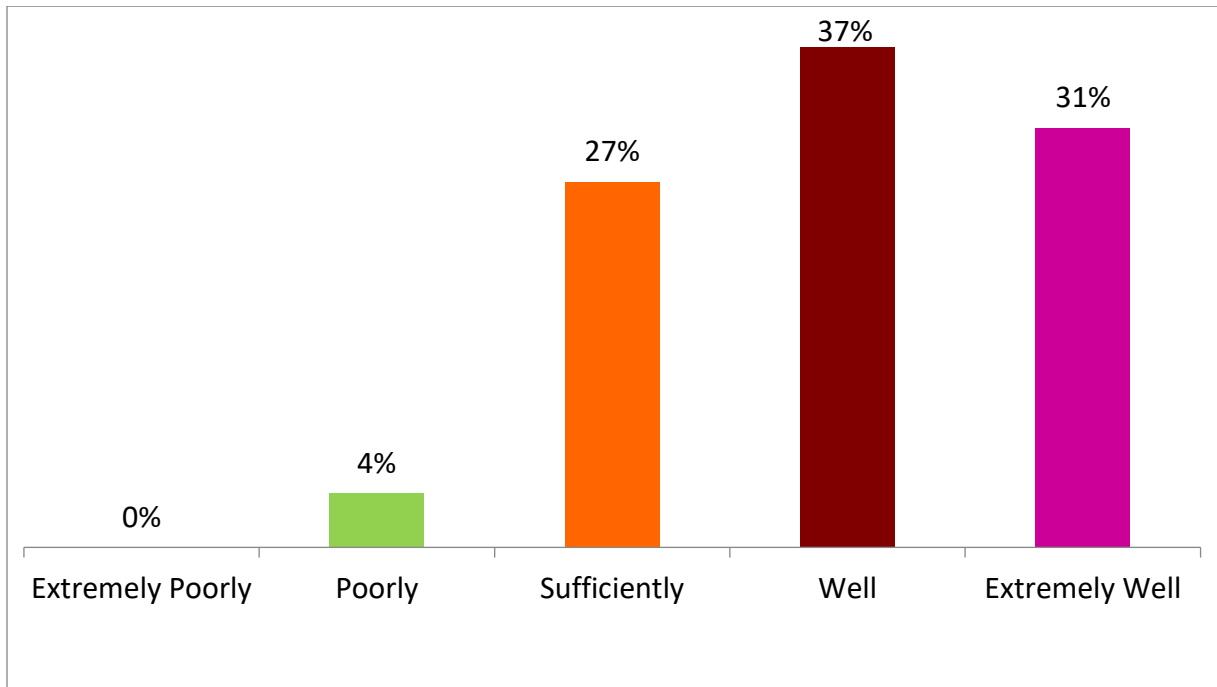
Finding 1. Overall, graduating seniors demonstrated positive views of our General Education curriculum. A strong majority of students (69%) agreed or strongly agreed that skills and competencies acquired in the GE program supported their major studies (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. In our catalog, we say that skills and competencies you acquire in the GE program will support your major studies.



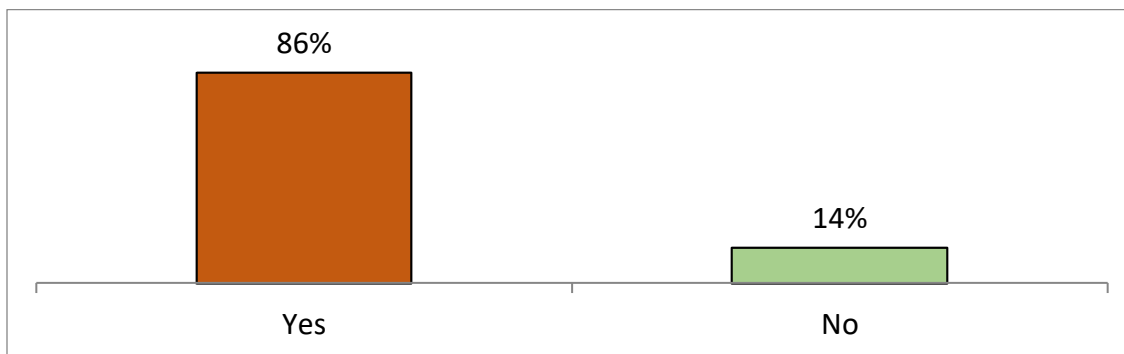
Finding 2. The Committee was also pleased to learn that 68% of respondents indicated that courses fulfilling the General Education Writing Intensive requirements equipped them well or exceptionally well with the ability to write when asked to rate their experience on a five-point scale (see *Table 2*).

Table 2. Have the writing-intensive courses you have taken inside and outside your major equipped you with the ability to write well?



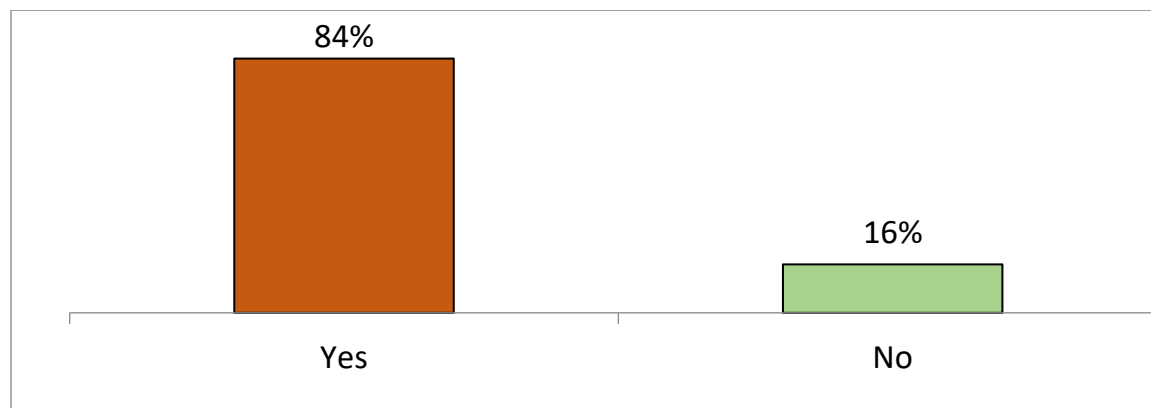
Finding 3. Students appeared to be content with the Liberal Arts curriculum in general as 86% of seniors responded that they would choose a Liberal Arts college if they had to do undergraduate education again. The most common comments of those 14% of students who responded negatively included inadequate job market preparation, lack of specialization, and burdensome GE courses (see *Table 3*).

Table 3. If you could do college again, would you still choose a Liberal Arts college?



Finding 4. Approximately the same number of students or 84% responded that they would choose a Christian liberal arts college again. The most common comments of those 15% of students who responded negatively include a judgmental and restrictive environment, not being a Christian, interest in an alternative experience, and dissatisfaction with Religious Studies courses (see *Table 4*).

Table 4. If you could do college again, would you still choose a *Christian* liberal arts college?



Finding 5. Regarding the content of our GE program, 39% of respondents stated that no General Education areas should be dropped, and 46% noted that nothing should be added.

The remaining students designated particular courses a “waste of time.” Yet there were few areas of consensus on what courses constituted such a “waste.” Indeed, individual responses varied so widely that almost all of the GE courses or content areas were mentioned.¹ Three courses or content areas did have somewhat more representation than the others. These were Philosophical Reflections/Philosophy courses (15% of 148 responses to this question), Fitness for Life (12% of responses), and Physical/Life Science courses (9% of responses).

We have highlighted a sample of students’ critical narrative responses, sorted into categories. (It should be noted that these quotes were drawn from all of the responses, not only those areas listed above.) As is obvious from the category designations alone, these responses sometimes offered direct contradictions.

Advanced content/Difficulty:

- It covers too much ground and requires too much for a GE class;
- I believe the content should be made simpler if the class is to remain a GE;
- the hefty amount of material for something you are not particularly interested in;
- [...] required classes seemed extra difficult for no reason.

Easy content:

- It seemed like a pathetic shadow of the [...] course I took in high school;
- [...] was a pointless class for me. It was really easy, and at the end of the year I wasn’t clear on what I had just learned.

Irrelevance:

- [...] not related to my life at all;
- [...] it is something that is not applicable to everyone.

¹ The list of all General Education areas was provided in the body of the survey for reference; however, not all survey respondents named the GE areas properly in their responses, i.e., they may label “philosophical reflections” as “philosophy” or “perspectives on world history” as “history.” The Committee did not collapse those results into one category.

Pacing of the material:

- [...] had way too many topics to be covered in a short period of time, that I felt very rushed;
- it really felt like beating a dead horse.

Pedagogy:

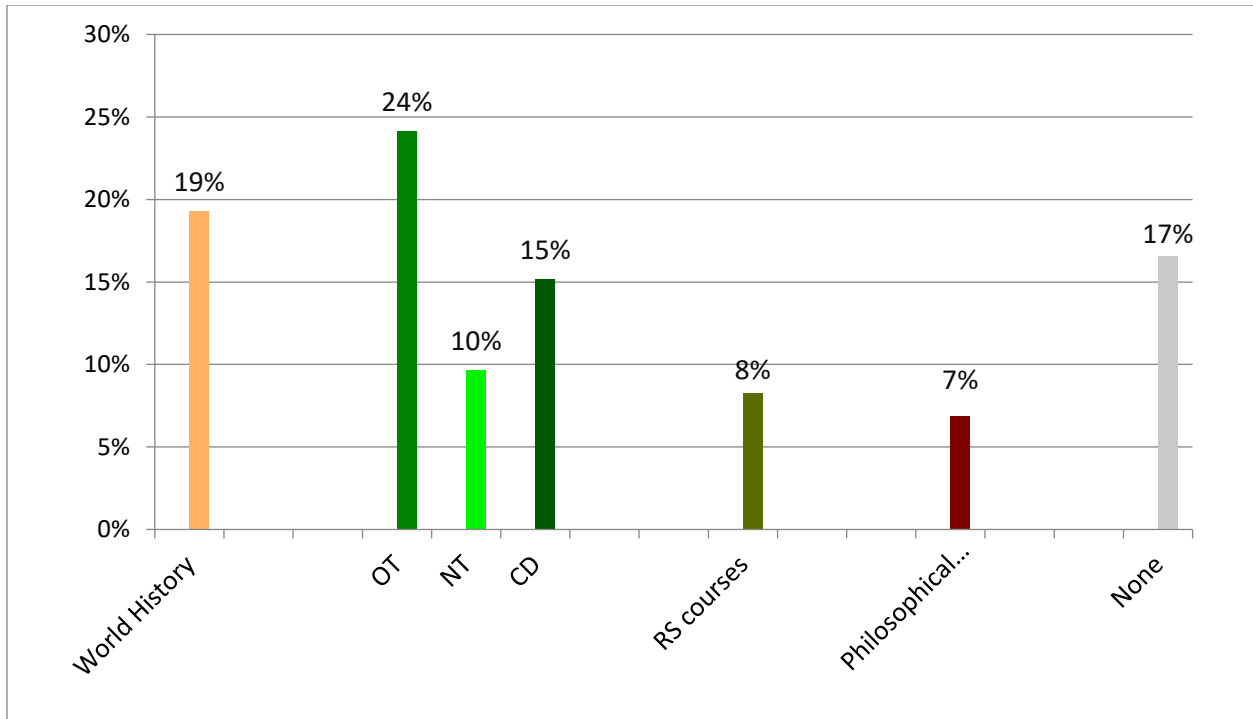
- it was all about rote memorization [and] dull;
- more worthwhile applications would help;
- [...] was not taught with enthusiasm and didn't offer application for today.

As mentioned in the report introduction, the GE Committee solicited meetings with the departments responsible for the classes with the highest concentrations of critical responses. While meeting with the General Education Committee, the chair of the Philosophy department, Mark Nelson, stated that those results were a little disappointing for the department faculty, but not unexpected given the national trend away from humanities enrollments. He also noted that the respondents might well give a different answer in five years or ten years, when they have matured and the value of philosophical education might have become clearer.

The chair of the Kinesiology department, Gregg Afman, informed the committee that two years ago the department revamped the Fitness for Life course and the overall PEA requirement within the GE. The students who took this survey likely had the older version of Fitness for Life when they were first-year students or sophomores and would not have benefited from the course revamp. One of the comments in the senior survey was that students felt like the course was a repeat of information they already knew. The Kinesiology department tested this by developing a 25-point pre-assessment quiz on information covered in the revised Fitness for Life course. As students scored less than 50% on the quiz, the department is confident that this course is, indeed, necessary.

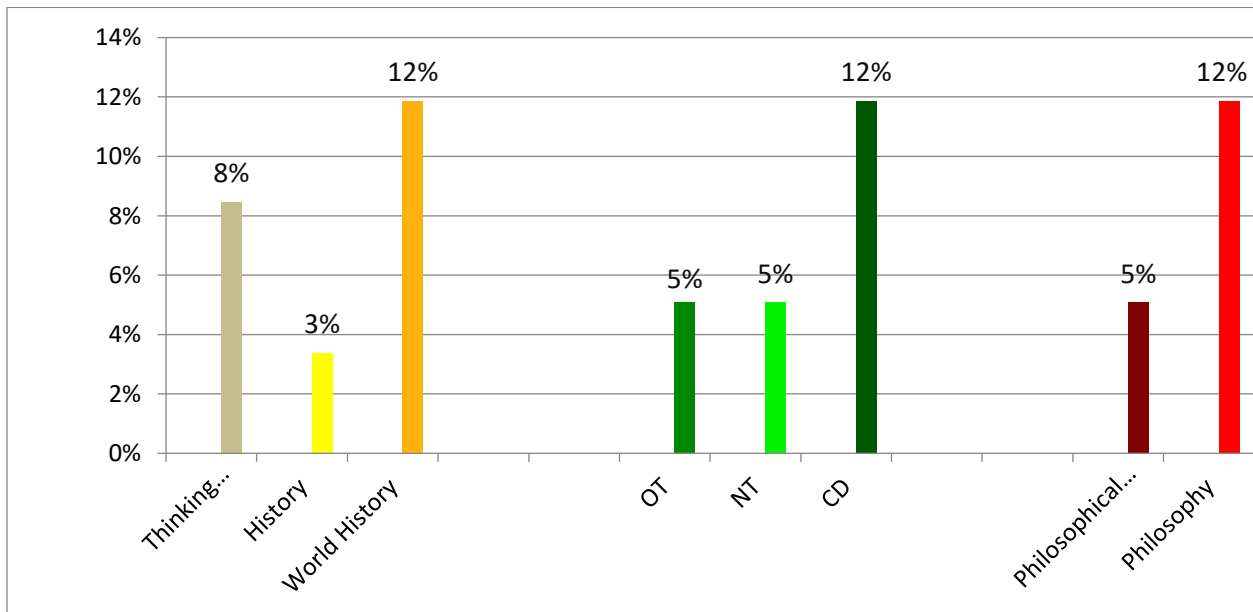
Finding 6. Survey respondents identified Common Contexts courses as unreasonably difficult (see *Table 5*). Students expressed concerns that those GE courses are more time consuming than their major courses, predominantly due to the amount of information and reading or writing assignments that make it “hard to keep up.”

Table 5. Which GE courses, in your opinion, were unreasonably difficult? (n=145)



Finding 7. Additionally, Common Contexts courses were perceived as courses that seemed more geared toward prospective majors than to the education of students not planning to major in that field (see *Table 6*).

Table 6. Did you ever take a GE class that seemed more geared toward prospective majors than to the education of students not planning to major in that field? (n=59)



Finding 8. Significantly, these courses were also recognized as the most valuable GE courses (see *Table 7*) or the favorite courses taken outside of a student's major discipline (*Table 8*).

Table 7. Which GE courses, if any, stand out in your mind as particularly valuable? (n=146).

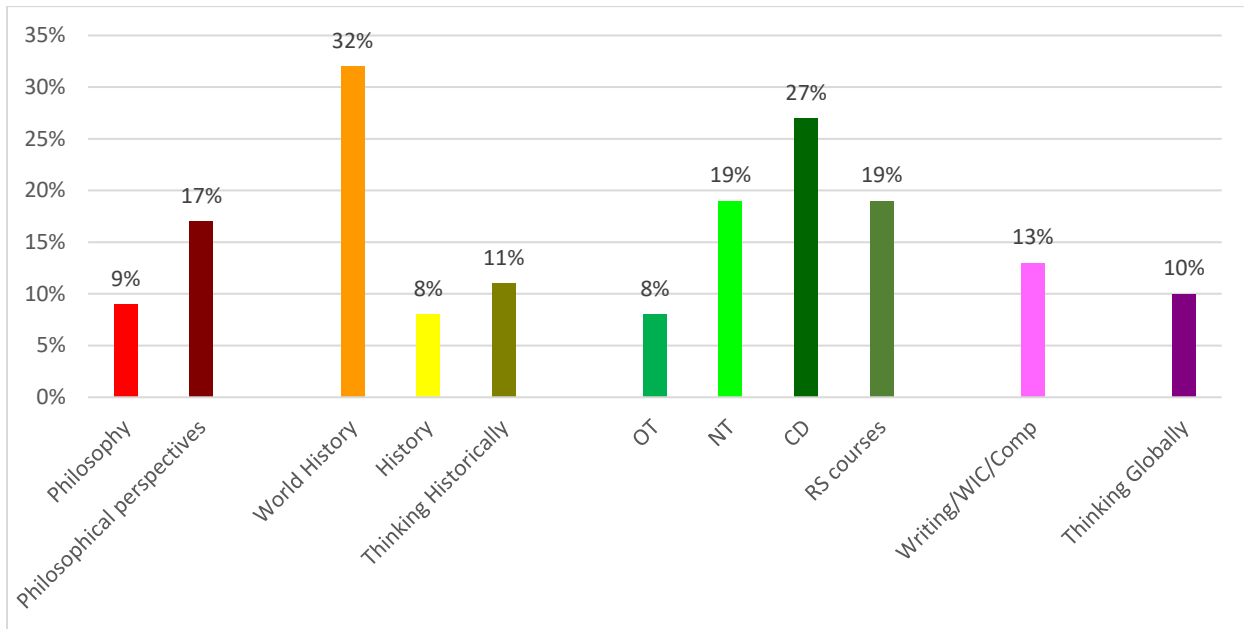
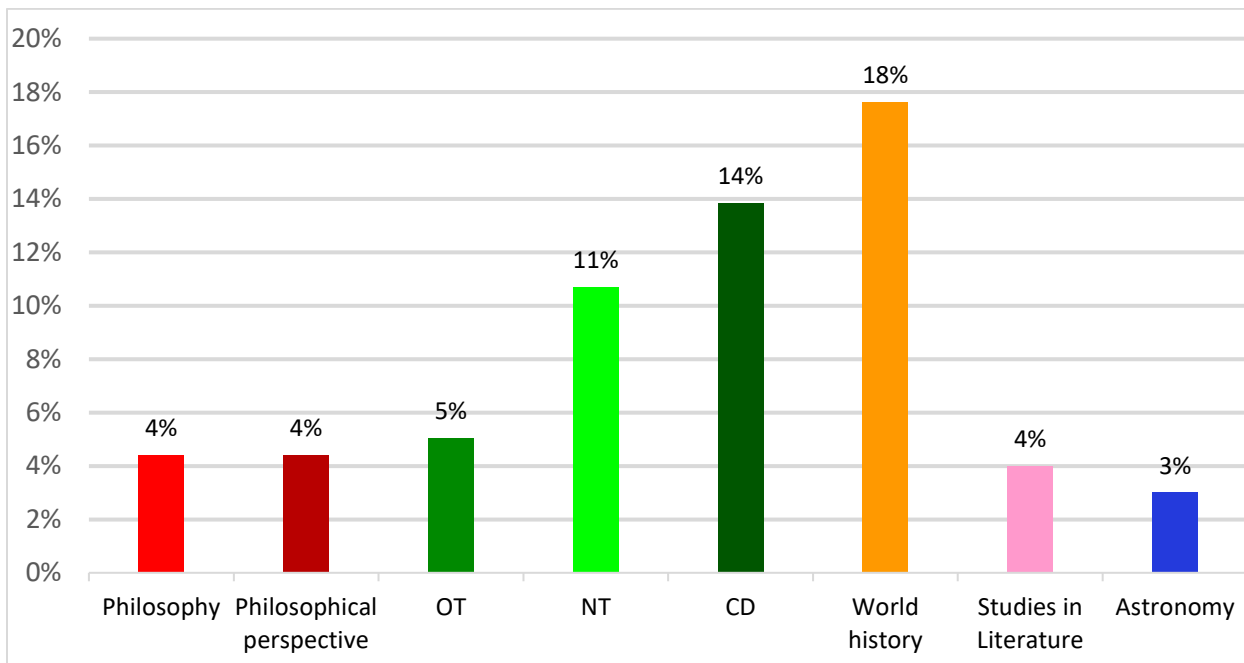


Table 8. What was your favorite GE course outside your major discipline? (n=158)



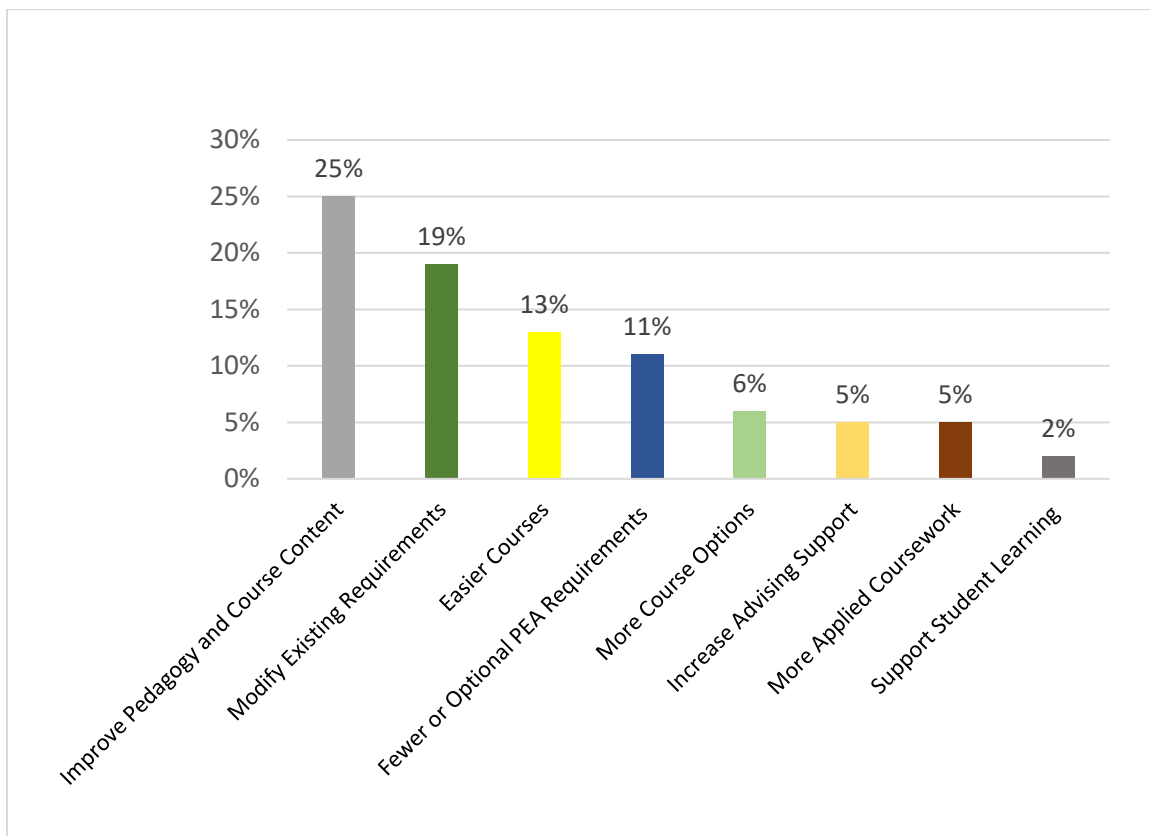
In their comments, students praised courses that were “intellectually stimulating,” “engaging,” and “challenging.” Students also valued courses that “invited the students to participate,” “exposed [them] to new ways of thinking,” helped them to “reassess the ways they view the world,” gave them a “basis for learning more about the world, not just the West,” and applied to “current, real-life experience.”

In sum, they widely appreciated courses that required critical thinking and contained discussions. Students commended many faculty members for their excellent teaching and mentoring.

Finding 9. The survey also included a series of questions about availability of the GE courses. 22% of students admitted that they had had to delay taking a GE class because the class they wanted was not offered during the year they wanted to take it, while 27% of students reported that they had had to delay taking a GE course because no space was available in any section of the class by the time they registered.

Finding 10. Finally, students were asked about possible improvements in the Westmont General Education program. Their responses are presented in *Table 9*.

Table 9. What changes would you suggest to improve the General Education program at Westmont? (n=128)



Departmental Responses to the Survey

Chairs from the departments of History, Religious Studies, Kinesiology, and Philosophy were invited to respond to the survey results. Rick Pointer, Caryn Reeder, Gregg Afman, and Mark Nelson respectively came to GE Committee meetings in the Fall of 2018 and presented the following reflections.

History. The History department was gratified by the number of students who identified Christian Perspectives on World History as a course that had a strong impact on them. They would hope that all of the Common Context courses would have a profound impact on student's thinking and living. They recognize that some of the students in the survey were dissatisfied with the course, but the department's overarching concern is whether they are offering and teaching a quality course. In this light, the department is not inclined to put too much weight in students' feelings or perceptions of the difficulty of the course. The job of the faculty is to set the standards for the curriculum within the major and within the General Education program. The History faculty are always modifying their courses to make them better. The department could take some time to determine if a recalibration is needed, but it is possible that the end result of that analysis would be that the course stays as it is currently offered.

In considering modifications to Christian Perspectives on World History, the department is focusing more on the findings from the 2016-2017 GE assessment of this area. The data from this assessment was based on multiple input types, not just student opinion. The department faculty admitted that the results of direct assessment of student learning in HIS-010 were also somewhat discouraging for them. Even though there was the increase in mean scores of student responses to 20 multiple choice questions, it was not significant—from 56% on the pre-test, to 66% on the post-test—while the department faculty would like 60% of students to score 70% or higher on the test.

History faculty, including those teaching HIS-010: World History, feel that they need to be more explicit about the workload that is expected in each course. If the campus culture has the sense that lower division GE courses should be easy, then students should be educated on appropriate expectations for their GE courses. The faculty also need to explain why the World History in a Christian Perspective and the Thinking Historically GE areas are separate and distinct requirements.

Religious Studies. The Religious Studies faculty were pleased to see that quite a number of students identified Religious Studies courses as strengthening student's personal faith commitment; foundational to a Westmont education, and helping in establishing an "adult worldview." These results are what the department faculty want for students. The negative evaluations of the RS GEs come from a significantly smaller segment of the total respondents. Overall, the findings were not surprising to the Religious Studies department as they have heard similar things from students before. The department is actively working to dispel the myth that students can't be successful in RS courses unless they have prior knowledge of the Bible. All of the faculty try their best to assume their students have no prior knowledge about the Bible as they are teaching, and work on appropriate pacing of the material through the course. There are still some pedagogical differences within the Religious Studies faculty that the department is aware of and is actively working on. The department faculty are currently engaged in conversations around the following issues:

- The first year Bible seminar as a way for students who fear the Bible to get a basic introduction before diving into the GE classes (and the possibility of making this available for upper class students)
- In-class educational strategies such as placing the students with some familiarity in groups with students who know little.

Philosophy. According to the chair of the Philosophy Department, Philosophy faculty do not think that the survey results require a major overhaul of PHI-006: Philosophical Reflections course but they are open to examining what they teach and how they teach it. They may wish to help students more to consider whether philosophy is "relevant" and (whether or not it is) whether perceived relevance is an appropriate criterion by which to evaluate the study of

philosophy. However, they could do more within their courses to explain the rationale of a liberal arts education in general and the role of philosophical thinking within the liberal arts, especially in a Christian liberal arts college setting.

The faculty are also open to exploring ways to improve their teaching methods but feel any changes would be reflective of individual issues rather than universal issues within the course. They could also examine the types of assignments they give to make sure the pace of grading and returning work to the students is at a rate that allows students to receive a benefit from the work on future assignments and exams. The faculty could compare syllabi to make sure that the amount and type of reading assigned across the professors teaching the course was appropriate based on the department's expectations for the course. Finally, the department agreed that it would be wise to continue (or even increase) some of their new measures for recruiting philosophy majors and minors and for generally raising the profile of the major among the student body.

Kinesiology. The department of Kinesiology was concerned that there were comments in the survey that physical fitness courses shouldn't be required at all. College is often thought of as a place to develop the mind, but development of the physical body may not be required. Based on the latest obesity and diabetes data, we are living a more sedentary lifestyle and this is taking a toll on our physical health and well-being. Students should be equipped with good habits and physical skills now, which is why the physical fitness GE requirements were maintained as a requirement within the current GE program.

In 2001, there was some talk of reducing the requirement from 4 units to 2 units. Instead, the decision was made to stay at 4 units and allow students to use up to 8 units of PEA credit towards their degree requirements. For changes to the PEA GE requirements, the department could see dropping from 4 required courses to 3, where one was Fitness for Life, one was a leisure activity and one was a physical activity course.

Future Responses

Overall, we thought the senior survey demonstrated the College's excellent General Education offerings, strong curriculum, and accomplished faculty. Although most of the feedback was quite positive, the Committee does want to pay attention to the critiques as these provide us with potential avenues for strengthening our program. Indeed, the senior survey is a component of the broader General Education program review, which is currently underway. We intend to complete the GE program review within the next two years.

As such, the Committee is asking, Should the institution consider the modification of the GE curriculum by reducing particular GE requirements and increasing others?

The GE Committee would like to hear from the Senate on these specific lines of inquiries. But we also want to hear from senators what additional key questions they think need to be included in the exploration of the quality of the GE program.

Supplementary Information

Westmont's high-unit majors.

BS in Biology (64 units)
BS in Chemistry (up to 69 units)
BS in Movement & Medical Sciences (79 units)
BA in Liberal Studies (up to 116 units)
BME (78 units)
BA in Physics (68 units)
BA in Political Science (68 units)
BS in Behavioral Neuroscience (64 units)
The recently approved BS in Engineering (89 units).

Peer institutions' maximum GE course loads (with no overlaps). An environmental scan in the fall of 2018 of the GE coursework at peer institutions revealed the following:

Westmont (22 courses)
Wheaton (20 courses)
Houghton (17 courses)
Gordon (16 courses)
Pomona (10 courses with 3 competencies that overlay)
Occidental (10 courses)
Swarthmore (10 courses)

Foreign language requirements. Westmont has the weakest language requirements of any of the comparison schools.

Azusa Pacific – 2 semesters
Cal Lutheran – 2 semesters
Pepperdine – pass one course as second-year level
PLNU – 2 semesters
Pomona – pass one course as second-year level
Swarthmore – pass one course as second-year level
Middlebury – 1 year with an additional proficiency requirement for study abroad
Gordon – 1 year

Physical education requirements. Westmont has the highest PEA requirement of 4 courses.

Occidental – 0
Houghton and Wheaton – 1
Swarthmore and Pomona – 2
Gordon – 3

Diversity: There were no questions about diversity in the GE curriculum, however, in response to the question “Are there any General Education areas that should be added?” 7% of respondents (n=129) requested classes “on race and ethnicity,” “racial social justice,” “gender studies,” classes like “Race and Theology,” or “Sociology of Race,” the latter being characterized as “an extremely important class that teaches basic knowledge and skills in terms of dealing with race and ethnicity, one of the most important issues of American history.” One

respondent made the following comment, "I don't feel like students have a whole perspective on Christianity until they have learned about its deep connections to the current racialized world." We recognize that only 9 students asked for more diversity education. While this doesn't appear statistically significant, we determined that it was meaningful given that students volunteered this information without being primed to do so.

We have several GE and major courses with the focus on Diversity and the list of those courses is available in WebAdvisor; however, there is no the Diversity requirement in our GE curriculum. As a result, in some majors students can graduate from Westmont without taking a single course with an emphasis on Diversity. We wonder how this issue might be addressed in light of our current GE program and our desire to create a positive learning experience for both students and the faculty teaching the Diversity courses.