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Contact: Mike Keckler
208-332-1591 (office)
208-866-5734 (cell)
Mike.Keckler@osbe.idaho.gov

Boosting Student Support on Idaho’s College Campuses

By Dr. Linda Clark, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The early years of college can be overwhelming for new students. Many don’t yet know what their major will be so they focus on general education courses like first year writing, college algebra and introduction to biology, which for some can feel like barriers to progress. “Instead, we like to think about general education as a way to help students become life-long learners,” said Dr. Heidi Estrem, the State Board of Education’s associate academic officer. “General education offers students space to be curious about subjects they care about and also time to grow to be curious about subjects that they did not expect to learn.”

The Board’s academic affairs team recently traveled across the state meeting with general education faculty representatives at all eight of Idaho’s public community colleges and four-year institutions. “It really gave us a great sense of what things are like on the ground in the classroom, Dr. Estrem said. “It was very positive overall and there is a lot of energy at every single campus around general education. Honestly, it was pretty inspiring.”

An overall goal of the statewide general education framework, which was originally developed by the Board over 10 years ago, is to encourage students to view general education classes as opportunities to expand knowledge and develop

core ‘durable skills.’ [As Board Policy III.N.](#) states: “General education curriculum prepares students to use multiple strategies in an integrative manner to explore, critically analyze, and creatively address real-world issues and challenges...General education helps instill students with the personal and civic responsibilities of good citizenship, and prepares them to be adaptive, life-long learners.”

One of the ongoing challenges with general education is that it is hard for students to understand why they are required to take general education classes in the first place. They just want to get to their major classes as quickly as possible. “For me, the ultimate goal is to continue to get better at telling the story of education more generally and the story of general education more specifically,” Dr. TJ Bliss, the Board’s chief academic officer said. “Students need to understand why we require these classes and what the added benefits are.”

Learning so called ‘durable skills’ that can benefit students during their professional lives are the kinds of outcomes being emphasized in general education classrooms throughout the state. These types of skills, such as communication, teamwork, and the ability to work across disciplines, help students understand why these classes are important.

Durable skills are also part of the State Board of Education’s Complete College Idaho (CCI) recommendations for general education, which have been in place now for 10 years to help improve student retention and graduation rates.

Other [CCI recommendations](#) now in place includes proactive support for first year students, such as credit-bearing classes for those who need added help in subject areas such as math and English. Before CCI, struggling students often found themselves taking remedial courses and earning no college credit, feeling discouraged and stalled in their academic careers.

There was also a time when some faculty felt like they could use general education courses to weed out students who faculty felt couldn’t succeed in higher education. Those days are largely gone. “There has been a huge shift in faculty mindset on campuses across the state and they are really focused on helping students be successful in their majors and careers through robust general education offerings,” Dr. Estrem said.

Students and their families are making financial sacrifices to attend Idaho public institutions. Our faculty and institution administrators are committed to doing all

they can to ensure those sacrifices result in more than just certificates, and degrees – they are committed to ensuring all students develop the knowledge and durable skills needed to succeed and thrive after graduation.

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