

Foundational Course Initiative

A Draft Proposal Building on the REBUILD Initiative

Background and Goals

The University of Michigan course catalog contains more than 9,200 entries. They are diverse by every measure, varying in size from 1 to 2,200 students, in level from naïve to expert, and in subject matter from anthropology to zoology.

This proposal seeks to focus on one set of courses at U-M. In particular, we focus on large courses that introduce students to a major or field of study. Often these are the first courses students encounter, and their experiences in them have important consequences for the choices they make about their educational path through the university. This is an important time to step back and reconsider these introductory courses. There are opportunities to seize: new techniques and technologies that can help make large courses much more inclusive and engaging. There are also challenges to face: developing courses aimed at an increasingly large and diverse student body, appropriately assessing all students' learning, and responding to what we learn about students' successes and struggles in these courses.

We propose to address these issues directly: to establish new, 21st century approaches to designing and delivering foundational courses. Recognizing their special needs, this Foundational Course Initiative will provide a flexible model of contribution and support to the teams assembled to create and sustain these essential courses. Our aim is simple. By 2025, University of Michigan foundational courses should be nationally recognized as a model for delivering essential introductions to core disciplines at scale. The existence of this program should play an important role in recruiting a diverse student body, supporting them all equitably, and creating the inclusive University of Michigan community we aspire to for our third century.

Attributes of Candidate Courses

What makes a course a good candidate for Foundational status?

- Most people in the course's home department share an understanding of course goals which evolves slowly. This sense will often be shared by the discipline more broadly.
- The course is offered very regularly. Usually it will have a long history of regular offerings.
- The course has large enrollments.
- The course serves students with especially various backgrounds.
- The course serves students with especially various interests and goals.
- The course regularly changes instructors, perhaps being taught by more than one instructor per term, whether sequentially or in parallel.

Attributes of Foundational Courses

What elements would a course awarded the Foundational label include?

- Faculty generated learning goals, reviewed regularly as a part of an annual cycle.
- A coordinated approach to instructional staffing, with overlapping, multi-year commitments.
- Instruction delivered by a well-supported, coordinated, multi-generational team, most often including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff members.
- Professional support for instructional design, so that progress toward learning goals developed by the faculty can be supported using the best engaging, inclusive, evidence-based methods.
- Professional support for the use of digital tools, so that the best possible array of tools can be used to make the course more personalized, engaging, and effective.
- Professional support for supporting a diverse array of students, understanding and improving classroom climate, and working to achieve equity.
- Professional support of continuous analysis and assessment, including:
 - A system for reporting on the background and goals of all students prepared for the instructors at the beginning of each course. Special notice should be taken of changes in the population of incoming students over time.
 - A system for measuring and representing student growth toward the course learning goals, for example pre and post-testing using a conceptual inventory, or the creation of a final product representing the learning of each student.
 - A system for monitoring and reporting on the impact of course elements on student success. This should include a thorough summary of relationships between student background, engagement with course elements, and performance.
- Professional support for the pursuit of external funding for reform, so that resources necessary to support innovation and excellence are available
- Good coordination between the instructional team and other on-campus student support mechanisms like the Science Learning Center, the Sweetland Center for Writing, and the University Libraries

Departmental Commitment to Foundational Courses

What would a department have to do to have a course declared 'Foundational'?

- Work with the Foundational Course team to create a transition plan
- Commit to the creation of explicit learning goals for the course
- Commit to a staffing plan for the duration of the transition process and first year of foundational offering