

# GENERAL EDUCATION & ALVERNO ABILITIES

Students are best prepared for the future when they understand a variety of subject areas — like the arts and humanities, the sciences and social sciences.

General education is concentrated in the first several semesters, but extends throughout the college career. The balance of time is spent in concentrated coursework for a major and minor and in elective courses that correspond to their special interests. In all courses, the student finds ideas that are timelessly true, questions that are forever ponderable, and information that is as up-to-date as Alverno faculty can make it.

But as valuable as it is, this knowledge alone is not enough. Woven through all classes are learning experiences designed to help students advance to successively higher levels of sophistication in each of eight abilities. A science course, for example, helps a student develop problem-solving, valuing, and communication abilities. The eight abilities give backbone to Alverno's curriculum, uniting it with a common purpose for teaching and an organizing framework for learning.

Students choose a course for both the subject matter and the abilities it offers. At each course's beginning, a student "contracts" to advance in several of the eight abilities.

Faculty have defined six levels of sophistication for each of the eight abilities. To graduate, a student must achieve the fourth level in all of them. In addition, every student must fulfill the requirements for a major and two support areas. These requirements vary somewhat from department to department, but they generally involve the fifth or sixth level of competence in those abilities that are most closely related to the student's selected major and support areas of study.

## General Education Program

At the start of their Alverno education, a student can look ahead to these areas of learning:

1. General Education (Gen-Ed), where students acquire basic knowledge, including the eight Abilities students must and develop and master
2. Major, Minor, Specializations that add knowledge and abilities related to students' interest, civic responsibilities, and career plans.

Students explore each of these areas, taking a wide range of required and elective courses. In the first few semesters, students begin building the foundation by concentrating primarily on the general education curriculum.

### The General Education Curriculum

Students acquire broad liberal arts learning and master the eight abilities that form the core of Alverno's ability-based education. To accomplish this goal, General Education allows students to gain a broad range of knowledge, ability to use technology, and systematic practice and critique.

Professions such as business, education, and health care, for example, count on basic insights about human motivation gained from a general knowledge of psychology, history, and philosophy. Decision makers in corporations or community groups rely on values formed in the study

of the arts and humanities or analytic skills developed in mathematics and science. Such fields as biology and chemistry increasingly depend on other areas of knowledge to establish the context and significance of their discoveries.

Although all undergraduate students take these general education classes, the specific requirements are tied to the student's major and/or minor. These requirements are built into the program and are available on the student's academic evaluation. Please visit the specific major (<https://catalog.alverno.edu/weekday-college/majors/>) or minor (<https://catalog.alverno.edu/weekday-college/minors/>) page you have in mind to find which set of general education requirements is associated with that program. This broad base of general knowledge also becomes the foundation upon which a student adds the specialized knowledge associated with their major and support area.

The distinctive, ingenious aspect of Alverno's curriculum is that all courses have been structured so that as students acquire this essential general knowledge, they also practice and master the eight abilities. Knowledge and the abilities to apply it are learned simultaneously, one reinforcing the other.

While a student's general education continues throughout college, it is concentrated in their first few semesters. Since the general education program is the foundation for all the knowledge a student acquires and the specialized abilities they develop, it is a vitally important time in their education.

### General Education in the First Year

In their first year, a student becomes familiar with Alverno's approach to learning knowledge and developing abilities hand-in-hand through disciplinary first-year courses.

A student takes two introductory arts and humanities courses that explore the ideas and viewpoints that have shaped history, philosophy, English literature, religious studies, and the visual and performing arts or fine arts. In them, they also begin developing their communication, analytical, valuing, and aesthetic engagement abilities.

In all their courses, students take assessments to help gauge their progress. Assessments enable a student and their professors to judge whether they meet the criteria established for each level of the eight abilities. But assessments are also an integral part of the learning process. They serve as checkpoints that help the student understand what they know and what they need to know.

## Gen Ed Req

### General Education Requirements 25-26 Catalog

Code	Title	Credits
<b>ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS - 6 Credits Required</b>		
AC-151	Initial Social Interaction Assessment	0
ADV-299	Intermediate Level Event	0
FSS-125	First Semester Seminar	2
PPS-229	Career & Internship Planning <sup>1</sup>	1
or A-193C	Art in the Professions	
or ED-201	Exploration in Teaching, Learning, and Assessing	
or N-120	Introduction to the Nursing Profession	
or MUY-129	Music Preprofessional Seminar	
or BU-100	Introduction to Business	

Choose One Globally Effective Citizen Course: AHS-409, GEC-302, GEC-307, GEC-312, GEC-314, GEC-315, GEC-317, GEC-320, GEC-324, GEC-328, GEC-333, GEC-398 <sup>7</sup>		3
CM-120	Communication Seminar 1	4
CM-125	Communication Seminar 2	3
CM-225	Communication Seminar 3 <sup>6</sup>	3
or BU-279	Business Communication	
QL-122	Quantitative Literacy in Modern World	4-3
or BU-151	Personal Finance	
QL-156	Mathematical Connections <sup>2</sup>	3
or BU-279	Business Communication	
or MT-256	Probability and Statistics	
<b>FINE ARTS &amp; HUMANITIES REQUIREMENTS - 12 Credits</b>		
FA-110	Intro to the Arts	4
HUM-150	Express/Interpretn Human Experience	4
HFA-210	Humanities & Fine Arts Elective <sup>4</sup>	2
HFA-310	Humanities & Fine Arts Elective <sup>4</sup>	2
<b>BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE REQUIREMENTS - 5-6 Credits</b>		
BSC-215	Working in Diverse Groups <sup>5</sup>	2
or A-193C	Art in the Professions	
or N-120	Introduction to the Nursing Profession	
or MUY-129	Music Preprofessional Seminar	
GLS-200	Introduction to Global Studies	3-4
or POL-225	American Politics	
or PSY-110	Life Span Development	
or SW-200	Intro to Social Work	
<b>SCIENCE REQUIREMENT</b>		
BI, CH, PH, or SC Course With Lab		4
<b>Total Credits</b>		<b>44</b>

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions for PPS 229: A (Art) AE (Art Education), AET (Art Education & Therapy), AT (Art Therapy) majors complete AHS 409

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions for QL 156:

- Business majors complete BU 279
- Natural Science majors complete MT 256

<sup>4</sup> HFA 250 counts as one HFA 210 course and one HFA 310 course  
Exception for HFA requirement:

- A (Art), Art Education (AE), Art Education & Art Therapy (AET), AT (Art Therapy) majors complete AHS 252

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions for BSC 215:

- A (Art) AE (Art Education), AET (Art Education & Therapy), AT (Art Therapy) majors complete A 193C
- Nursing majors complete N 120
- Music Therapy (MUY) majors complete MUY 129

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions for CM 225:

- Business Majors complete BU 279
- Nursing majors are not required to complete CM 225

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions:

- For the GEC Requirement, A (Art), AE (Art Education), AET (Art Education & Therapy), AT (Art Therapy) majors complete AHS 409.

## Ability-Based Education

People everywhere devote significant amounts of time daily to analyzing problems, finding solutions, sharing ideas and information, making decisions, reaching agreements with others, and determining what is ethical and what is not. Such actions are the bedrock of being an informed and responsible person. The goal of learning is to do them as well as possible.

Every college hopes that its curriculum helps a student develop these abilities to highly sophisticated levels. No college takes this development more seriously than Alverno, where mastery of them has been the heart of the curriculum and the explicit goal for every student since 1973. Because of this unique emphasis, Alverno's curriculum, like that of other colleges in many ways, is quite distinctive in others.

Like every college, Alverno believes that a student is best prepared for the future when they understand a variety of subject areas — like the arts and humanities, the sciences and social sciences.

This general education is concentrated in a student's first several semesters, but extends throughout their college career. The balance of their time is spent in concentrated coursework for their major and support area (minor) and in elective courses that correspond to their special interests. In all courses, the student finds ideas that are timelessly true, questions that are forever ponderable, and information that is as up-to-date as Alverno faculty can make it.

But as valuable as it is, this knowledge alone is not enough. Woven through all classes are learning experiences designed to help students advance to successively higher levels of sophistication in each of eight abilities. A science course, for example, helps a student develop problem-solving, valuing, and communication abilities. The eight abilities give backbone to Alverno's curriculum, uniting it with a common purpose for teaching and an organizing framework for learning.

Students choose a course for both the subject matter and the abilities it offers. At each course's beginning, a student "contracts" to advance in several of the eight abilities.

Faculty have defined six levels of sophistication for each of the eight abilities. To graduate, a student must achieve the fourth level in all of them. In addition, every student must fulfill the requirements for a major and two support areas. These requirements vary somewhat from department to department, but they generally involve the fifth or sixth level of competence in those abilities that are most closely related to the student's selected major and support areas of study.

## An Active Approach to Learning

The emphasis on knowledge with the abilities to apply it changes the way students learn and the way teachers teach. Classes contain fewer lectures and more discussions, projects, and other experiences aimed at more actively engaging students in their learning. Outside class, a student generally finds that they are memorizing less and developing their understanding more.

Some learning takes place off campus in the professional world. Every student takes part in at least one internship, where they have a chance to match their knowledge and ability against on-the-job demands. Some students also use "travelships" — grants to help defray the cost of travel

— to participate in workshops, seminars, and courses around the United States and abroad.

Ability-based education also encourages more student-teacher interaction. Because the faculty's role is to help each student learn and to apply what they learn effectively, teachers generally spend more time with students on an individual basis.

## Ability-Based Education: Knowledge with the Abilities to Apply It Throughout Life

When Alverno faculty planned a new curriculum in the early 1970s, they began by questioning what a college education should do for students after they graduate. What will best enable them to succeed in their careers? What insights will most enrich their lifetimes? What abilities will make a lasting difference in their homes, families, and communities? What will equip them to continue as independent learners able to adapt to and grow with a fast-changing world?

Gradually, faculty reached common agreement on what students need most for success after college. Knowledge with the abilities to apply it became the primary goal of their teaching. Working as a group, faculty restructured the entire curriculum from start to finish to assure that every course helped students advance that goal. To unify their teaching, they organized the entire curriculum around eight abilities that require a broad range of knowledge and a great deal of practice.

## The Eight Abilities

People everywhere devote significant amounts of time daily to analyzing problems, finding solutions, sharing ideas and information, making decisions, reaching agreements with others, and determining what is ethical and what is not. Such actions are the bedrock of being an informed and responsible person. The goal of learning is to do them as well as possible.

Every college hopes that its curriculum helps a student develop these abilities to highly sophisticated levels. No college takes this development more seriously than Alverno, where mastery of them has been the heart of the curriculum and the explicit goal for every student since 1973. Because of this unique emphasis, Alverno's curriculum, like that of other colleges in many ways, is quite distinctive in others.

### 1. Communication

The effective communicator makes meaning by interacting with people, ideas, texts, media, and technology. They integrate a variety of communication abilities (reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as information technology and quantitative literacies) to meet the demands of increasingly complex communication situations.

### 2. Analysis

The competent analyzer is a clear, critical, and independent thinker. They combine data, experience, reason, and expertise to make and reexamine judgments.

### 3. Problem Solving

The competent problem solver defines problems and integrates a range of abilities and resources to reach decisions, make recommendations, or implement action plans.

### 4. Valuing in Decision Making

The responsible decision maker is reflective and empathic in approaching the value issues in their life. They habitually seek to understand the moral dimensions of their decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of actions taken in all facets of their life. They understand and are sensitive to a variety of perspectives and experiences that impact decision making.

### 5. Social Interaction

The capable interactor works well with others to achieve goals, manage conflict, and build relationships. They understand how context and culture influence the ways in which they choose to interact. They actively engage in one-on-one communication and in small- and large-group discussion, and effectively use conflict-management skills.

### 6. Developing a Global Perspective

Developing a global perspective involves gaining an understanding of multiple viewpoints through increasing knowledge of how questions and problems are informed by historical, political, economic, social, and cultural systems. A student demonstrates their global perspective by making informed judgments on issues of global concern, and by refining their own ideas using views and values held in diverse contexts.

### 7. Effective Citizenship

The effective citizen is an informed participant in civic life.

### 8. Aesthetic Engagement

The aesthetically engaged student makes informed artistic and interpretive choices. They integrate the intuitive and kinesthetic dimensions of their participation in the arts with broader social, cultural, and theoretical frameworks. They articulate the relationship between their aesthetic sensibilities and their experiences within and outside of the arts.

## Evaluation of Student Learning

Alverno's method of assessment is integral to learning in the Alverno graduate programs. This model is grounded in a philosophy that evaluation should not just assess what students know, but how well they can apply what they know.

The system of student assessment at Alverno College does not include reference to letter grades. In fact, one tenet of the College's educational philosophy is that the faculty do not evaluate students comparatively using letter grades. Instead, faculty establish criteria for effective performance in each course. In the graduate programs, these criteria reflect standards for achievement within the discipline and professional areas, which guide all courses in the specific program. As part of professional programs, graduate course assessments are designed to engage students within their disciplinary and professional contexts. Faculty then provide students with significant narrative feedback describing the quality of their performances relative to those standards. A student who does not meet these standards at the level defined in each course does not pass the course. As a continuous process in which the students themselves play an active role, assessment helps both the student and the faculty member judge the student's progress toward meeting criteria for a given course.

Due to the rigor of the curriculum, faculty can confirm that a student who has successfully completed a course is held in "good standing." Any student in good standing at the College has demonstrated the requisite understanding and practice of the disciplines for the courses s/he has completed. Faculty distinguish quality of performance by providing a written evaluation of the student's work that documents the specific way the student met or exceeded those standards.

The detailed profile of the student's strengths and course accomplishments become part of each student's permanent record. Because this method provides more information than a grade and fosters continuous learning, it is approved by accrediting bodies and accepted by graduate schools and employers. In fact, educators from across the

country and around the world regularly visit Alverno to learn about this innovative and effective approach to helping students learn.

## An Active Approach to Learning

The emphasis on knowledge with the abilities to apply it changes the way students learn and the way teachers teach. Classes contain fewer lectures and more discussions, projects, and other experiences aimed at more actively engaging students in their learning. Outside class, a student generally finds that they are memorizing less and developing their understanding more.

Some learning takes place off campus in the professional world. Every student takes part in at least one internship, where they have a chance to match their knowledge and ability against on-the-job demands. Some students also use “travelships” — grants to help defray the cost of travel — to participate in workshops, seminars, and courses around the United States and abroad.

Ability-based education also encourages more student-teacher interaction. Because the faculty’s role is to help each student learn and to apply what they learn effectively, teachers generally spend more time with students on an individual basis.

## Assessment: Judgment of Knowledge in Action

Alverno’s method of evaluating students, called assessment, helps a student and their teachers judge the quality of their learning, which includes subject matter integrated with the eight abilities. Unlike a test, an assessment does not just evaluate what the student knows. An assessment is a complex activity specifically designed for them to demonstrate what they can do with what they know. This is how they earn their academic credit, as they show increasingly sophisticated levels of ability.

The difference between traditional testing and assessment is best illustrated with an example. In American history courses everywhere, students are expected to understand the causes of World War II. An assessment at Alverno might ask them to assume the role of a U.S. senator in 1939 and deliver a speech explaining to other senators why events in Europe and Asia will inevitably involve America in a global conflict. This assessment requires understanding of the facts and their context, application of them in a specific situation, and demonstration of critical thinking and persuasive speaking ability.

Students tell us that assessment is a unique part of being at Alverno. Dozens of times on their way to a bachelor’s degree, a student has a chance to show how they are developing their knowledge and abilities by participating in assessments.

They may solve a problem in a science lab, lead a panel in a psychology class, or perform and analyze a prelude for a music history course. They may spend six weeks working on a project as an intern at a local firm or agency. They may spend six hours taking the role of a civic leader in a day-long simulation exercise. They may spend sixteen minutes presenting their point of view in a videotaped group discussion.

Sometimes a student’s assessments take place in the Assessment Center. More often, they occur right in their class or fieldwork setting. Always, they know long beforehand what they will be asked to do. They know the specific standards they are required to meet. Usually they also have opportunities for practice with assessments similar to the ones that contribute to their credits.

## Assessors and Individual Feedback

Each assessment includes individual feedback. The whole purpose is to enable the student to see what they know and what their abilities are, and how they can develop further. The student and their assessors go over their performance carefully. The assessors may include not only the student’s instructor, but also other faculty and staff members. In addition, Alverno has on call about 500 trained volunteer assessors from the Milwaukee area business and professional community.

All assessors, including the student themselves, make judgments on the basis of the specified standards. They cite specific, observable evidence. They look for strengths as well as areas that need developing. Over the course of their studies, each student becomes skilled enough to make self-assessment an integral part of their learning for life. The student’s ability to self-assess is carefully nurtured with practice and feedback throughout their academic program.

The system of student assessment at Alverno College does not include reference to letter grades. In fact, one tenet of the College’s educational philosophy is that the faculty do not evaluate students comparatively using letter grades. Instead, we establish criteria for effective performance in each course that are based on college-wide standards in addition to standards for achievement within major and minor programs of study. These standards include eight abilities—Communication, Analysis, Problem Solving, Valuing in Decision Making, Social Interaction, Developing a Global Perspective, Effective Citizenship, and Aesthetic Engagement—that all students must demonstrate in different areas of study. We then provide students with significant narrative feedback describing the quality of their performance relative to those standards. A student who does not meet these standards at the level defined in each course does not pass the course. As a continuous process in which the student themselves play an active role, assessment helps both the student and their faculty judge their command of the subject matter integrated with the eight abilities.

Due to the rigor of our curriculum, we are able to confirm that a student who has successfully completed a course is held in “good standing.” This means that any student in good standing at the college has not only demonstrated the requisite understanding of the disciplines they are studying but also the abilities that constitute the core of our curriculum. Faculty distinguish quality of performance by providing a written evaluation to the student that judges the specific way the student met or exceeded those standards. At the time of graduation, those evaluations are synthesized into an extensive narrative statement that documents the quality of the student’s undergraduate or graduate work. This narrative statement is an objective evaluation of the quality of the graduate’s performance in their program of study and is an integral part of each student’s official final transcript.

When a student has successfully demonstrated the required level of integration of knowledge and ability, they are awarded what we call a validation. The validations a student receives when they have successfully completed an assessment indicate that they have met the detailed rigorous standards set by the College. The record of courses taken, completed validations, and a detailed profile of the student’s strengths and accomplishments become part of each student’s permanent records. Because this method provides much more information than a grade and fosters continuous learning, it is approved by accrediting bodies and accepted by graduate schools and employers. In fact, educators from across the country and around the world regularly visit Alverno to learn about this innovative and effective approach to helping students learn.

Assessment may sound a little challenging. But along with the challenge comes support. In fact, students and faculty agree that assessment is one of the most powerful and helpful supports for learning they have ever experienced.

### **The Effects of Ability-Based Education After College**

Considerable research has been conducted to determine the long-range effects of Alverno's curriculum. That educational research, conducted by the college's Educational Research and Evaluation department, shows that graduates consistently develop the abilities that are the goals of Alverno's teaching. Moreover, graduates find that these abilities make a positive difference in all aspects of their lives: home, community, and career.

Annually, about 89% of Alverno graduates are employed within six months of graduation, and the vast majority put their degrees to work in areas related to their college studies. About 16% of Alverno graduates have been admitted to or are attending a graduate or professional school within six months of earning their baccalaureate degree. They find that their abilities equip them well for the challenges of independent research and learning that are part of graduate-level education.