HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICE: COMMON INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCES (CIEs)

General Considerations

This is the least specific and perhaps most difficult to define of the HIPs, in part because:

1. It can take many forms, ranging from an extracurricular common reading program (e.g., One Book, One Denver) to a set curriculum, for instance a fixed slate of general education courses required for all incoming freshman.

2. It overlaps with multiple other HIPs: First-Year Seminars, Learning Communities, and Collaborative Assignments & Projects all are CIEs. Thus this HIP must refer to all other forms of CIEs than those.

Here is the Association of American Colleges & University’s (AAC&U’s) cursory definition:

The older idea of a “core” curriculum has evolved into a variety of modern forms, such as a set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community. These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options for students.

CIEs are shared by a cohort of students, faculty, and staff; they build community, interactive engagement, and co-learning, typically also involving negotiation of different views. Of the “Eight Key Elements” that distinguish high-quality HIPs, they typically involve at least four:

- Interaction with faculty and peers about substantive matters;
- Experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar;
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning; and
- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications.

Examples of CIEs

Virtually every university course is itself, in toto, a CIE. Individual courses may include multiple specifically designed CIEs, such as shared assignments, teamwork projects, etc. The curriculum of a major may be designed to be a CIE, in part to the extent that a cohort of students progresses through it together.

Perhaps the most common form of the CIE is the common reading program. That may in part be because it is both the simplest, in terms of the number of moving parts (one book), and the most inclusive: potentially everyone on a campus or in a city could participate.

Indiana University offers each year a Them-es-ter program, an umbrella of centrally funded and organized events, speakers, readings, etc. in which individual courses and programs may participate.

Highly developed examples of CIEs on the CU Denver campus include the University Honors and Leadership Program and the BA/BS-MD Program. Those programs are intentionally and comprehensively designed for cohorts of students. Other examples include first-year and/or senior-year required curricula, for instance in CAM or CEAS.
The general-education Core might qualify as a CIE, but less so to the extent it becomes a menu of courses from which students pick, sometimes on the criterion of scheduling, without any linkages either between those courses or between the students who take them.

How might one design an undergraduate Core such that it is a CIE? One answer may be to move away from a “distribution model” core to themes that link diverse learning experiences or competencies that bridge general education, majors, and co-curriculum. The San Francisco State University website on CIEs states in this regard:

> At present, common intellectual experiences are reflected in the more flexible and broad concept of core course requirements that are often organized around themes. A university, for example, might require that all students must satisfy general education requirements in a number of domains and do so for the purpose of meeting institutional commitments to see that students are familiar with certain knowledge, such as civic organization and government, digital technology, quantitative reasoning, or composition.

In a similar vein, Texas A&M emphasizes that the keys to CIEs are integration of learning across multiple experiences and reflection by students upon their learning and the integration of those diverse experiences. Their website states:

> **What are the characteristics of common intellectual experiences?** The key characteristics of common intellectual experiences include: combining broader themes, linking learning across different courses, and encouraging students to think holistically about several different issues beyond individual.

> **Why should reflection be used to facilitate this high-impact practice?** . . . Integrating reflection activities that will prompt students to identify what they have learned, both explicitly as well as implicitly from their positive and negative course learning experiences, will prepare them for addressing future challenges they will likely face as they advance in their careers.

Such approaches point toward the role in creating a comprehensive CIE of shared cross-curriculum learning outcomes, such as the Essential Learning Outcomes.

### Dimensions of CIEs

Three dimensions of CIEs may provide structure in thinking about how to work on building them into curriculum:

1. Level of inclusion or scale, whether the assignment, the course, the degree or the department, the school/college, or the entire undergraduate curriculum.

2. Number of components: Is it a single shared experience or event or is it comprised of multiple components, e.g., multiple courses, co-curricular events, etc.?

3. Degree of integration: What are the expectations of faculty, staff, and students to synthesize learning, methods, or themes across courses, events, co-curriculum, etc.?

Thus a group conversation about CIEs might need to clarify these questions:

- What is the cohort of students for whom we want to build a CIE? At what scale do we want to work; what level seems most appropriate to our interests or the interests of our group?
• How many educational experiences do we want to include in this CIE? To what extent is interdisciplinarity appropriate, desirable, and feasible?

• If multiple educational experiences are included, to what extent might they be formally integrated, rather than simply paired? What are the mechanisms for integration and synthesis of learning? What would faculty, staff, and students need to do to create this integration?

• To what extent might we link in co-curricular reinforcement and application?

• Have we considered equity of access and, potentially, content in the CIE?

• To what extent do we want this CIE to engage community-based learning or employer-oriented learning and to what extent might it generate solutions to real-world issues and needs?

• To what extent might we link in co-curricular reinforcement and application?

A CIE may be a single event for a small cohort of students and have significant value to those students. Or, it may be designed specifically for the students within a major, perhaps also linking to general-education goals, for instance in scaffolding a writing-in-the-disciplines course as a continuation of Core Composition. Or, it may be a large, integrated program that brings together all undergraduates and integrates learning across multiple disciplines, general education, and co-curriculum, with synthesis as a primary objective.

The most ambitious definition of a CIE might be something like this:

**Common Intellectual Experiences**: An intentionally designed group of learning experiences (e.g., courses, co-curricula, community-based activities), in which learning in one experience is developed and strategically applied in a linked experience. This includes the horizontal integration of several courses by a shared “big idea” theme or vertical integration, as in scaffolded curriculum, either within a major or linking gen-ed core courses to more advanced applications in major courses. These experiences frequently are multidisciplinary and team-learning-based.