Defining Features: Introductory Courses

Key Features

The primary purpose of this course type is to introduce essential skills of literacy (e.g., information gathering, reading, and writing), language, (e.g., oral communication and language and culture other than English), numeracy, and sciences to prepare for continuing work in any field of higher education. These types of courses introduce the nature of a field, the broad range of topics and disciplines therein and lay the foundation for upper-division coursework to begin development of analytical thinking and theoretical application.

Key Design Considerations

When designing introductory courses, it is typically assumed that the students taking the course will have little or no previous knowledge of the course content; introductory courses are often designed with this in mind. When embarking on the design process, some assumptions must be made regarding the level of preparedness of students taking the courses. These assumptions will inform the scope and sequence of the course material. Foundational content required for successful progression in the discipline is identified and sequenced in a way to ensure acquisition by students taking the course. While often envisioned as large classes, particularly at the undergraduate level, research indicates that the standard practice of lecture may not provide students adequate skill practice or specific knowledge of tools and materials required in some fields to be successful in later coursework. Consideration of both content to be included and methods of content delivery allow for attainment of the skills and tools important to the major. While sometimes used for the same purpose, introductory courses are not the same as survey courses (see survey courses defining features) in that introductory courses are typically designed with discipline majors in mind, rather than students who are exploring a discipline; this is a considerable design consideration.

Contextual Variations

In graduate degree awarding institutions, there may be graduate and undergraduate introductory courses, the function is the same. It is often the case that these courses are designed for larger classes, particularly at the undergraduate level. Introductory class sizes vary widely depending on the discipline.

Selected Resources

Doran, M. V., & Langan, D. D. (1995). A cognitive-based approach to introductory computer science courses: lesson learned. ACM SIGCSE Bulletin, 27(1), 218-222.

Egger, A. E. (2009, October). Defining and developing geoscience expertise at the introductory level. In Geological Society of America Abstracts with Programs (Vol. 41, No. 7, p. 250).

Strawderman, L., & Ruff, L. (2011). Designing introductory industrial engineering courses to improve student career efficacy. International Journal of Engineering Education, 27(5), 1019.

University of Arizona. (January 1998). [Course] Catalog. Retrieved from https://catalog.arizona.edu/policy/course-numbering-system