A Report based on an Invitation from the President, the Provost and the Chair of the University Faculty Senate to Examine General Education – August 2012

Preface

General education in North America is today in a state of intellectual ferment. Newton’s first law predicts that an object at rest stays at rest. The identification of thoughtful general education curricular ideals is robust, but faculty ideas have outpaced academic transformation at colleges and universities across the country. General education curricular change at most institutions is stagnant.

The report that follows began with a December 12, 2011 invited colloquium at Penn State entitled, General Education’s Ideas and Ideals. It was initiated by the Office of Undergraduate Education, The University Faculty Senate and the Penn State University Press. Colleagues from Harvard, University of Southern California, University of Michigan, and Portland State University described their institution’s general education program and commented on the national general education landscape. Five elements of agreement emerged:

- A singular, all-encompassing definition of general education does not exist. It never has.
- Few universities provide a cohesive general education curriculum capable of transcending vague calls to give students well rounded educations that produce critical thinking and good communication and numeracy skills.
- College and university programs serve students best when they represent the academic strengths of the faculty and provide clear, explicitly defined learning goals.
- Ethically-based decision making and citizenship are longstanding general education goals. They continue to be primary elements -- perhaps the primary elements -- of nearly every general education wish list. Yet today, their implementation is submerged beneath the menu-based sprawl of cafeteria style breadth requirements that most institutions have adopted. Generally, there are few explicit connections in broad menu-based curricular aggregations to either the academic understanding or the practice of citizenship and ethically-based decision making.

Concurrent with the colloquium, the President, Provost and University Faculty Senate Chair issued an invitation to a small group of faculty members to meet as a seminar for one semester and then to share their observations. The faculty were asked to take into account the technological, social, and student changes that have emerged since Penn State’s last general education review in 1997 and to consider the acceleration of calls by government, accrediting agencies, the public, and especially our own scholarly community to clearly justify the relevance and fit of a general education program that accounts for as much as one forth of every student’s undergraduate education. A separate analysis by the Office of Undergraduate
Education is included in this report to: (1) place general education in the 21st century into historical, contemporary, national and local contexts; and (2) provide a snapshot of general education at Penn State.

The seminar voiced consensus that many current Penn State general education goals are worthy, that they are not always fulfilled, and that interest in raising the general education bar at Penn State is timely and essential. The seminar also noted that meaningful change will require effort and a willingness to embrace organizational transformation and creative intellect.

The challenges to Penn State’s understanding of itself and to its clarity of mission since November 2011 echo and underscore general education goals present in nearly all national and sister institution discussions, yet rarely implemented with specificity. General education should provide an intellectual foundation capable of helping students to develop moral and ethical principles that will them guide through complex, sometimes wrenching decisions long after graduation. Freeh Report Recommendation 1.1 (3) calls on the university to “establish values and ethics-based decision making as the standard for all university faculty, staff and students.” Higher education’s recognition of the importance of ethics-based decision making is not new. It remains at the core of national discussions of general education, though it is rarely at the center of what a general education curriculum actually does and the means of accomplishing such a goal was not an element of the seminar’s discussions. Integration of ethics-based decision making into the Penn State general education curriculum could acknowledge challenges set by national discussions of what general education should do, as well as provide a meaningful academic response to the Freeh Report.

The following is presented in three parts.

**Part I** provides a brief survey of the general education landscape in the United States and a bibliography of relevant readings prepared by the Office of Undergraduate Education.

**Part II** is a snapshot of our current general education program at Penn State based on preliminary data collected in 2011-2012.

**Part III** consists of a set of principles and challenges developed over the course of the Spring 2012 semester by the seminar cohort. Meeting as a study group the cohort focused on first principles and challenges. Their findings and recommendations represent a collegial accord, but not necessarily unanimous agreement on specific approaches or requirements.
The study group was comprised of:

- Cynthia Brewer, Professor of Geography, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences
- Jeremy Cohen, Professor of Mass Communication and Associate Vice President and Senior Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education
- Caroline Eckhardt, Professor of Comparative Literature and English, College of the Liberal Arts
- Tanya Furman, Professor of Geosciences, Assistant Vice President and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education
- Cynthia Lightfoot, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Penn State Brandywine.
- Thomas Litzinger, Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Director of Leonard Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Education
- Mark Munn, Professor Ancient Greek History, Greek Archaeology, and Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies, College of the Liberal Arts
- Mary Beth Williams, Associate Professor of Chemistry, Associate Dean of the Eberly College of Science.
Part I The General Education Landscape

General education is a term widely used to describe university requirements that lay outside of a student’s professional or disciplinary concentration. A well rounded education that nurtures critical thinking and habits of life long learning, along with a degree of competency in communication and numeracy, is frequently emphasized as the raison d'être for general education curricular requirements that consume a fourth or more of baccalaureate education. References to global understanding, citizenship, moral grounding and diversity also are common.

There are, however, substantial flaws in the notion that contemporary general education curricula and practices are sufficient to create good habits such as critical thinking and moral grounding that colleges and universities explicitly promise. “Habits are just habits, and those that require any effort tend to succumb to inertia in the absence of principle,” writes philosopher Susan Neiman. If students are to adopt meaningful principles and actions based upon enlightened understanding of the sciences and humanities, as well as excellence in communication and numeracy and full awareness of themselves and others, then it stands to reason that a purposeful curriculum relevant to the development of explicit intellectual outcomes is necessary to break the undisciplined decision making habits that all students bring with them to the university.

For many years, general education was intended to provide students, not with a vague concept of menu-based breadth, but with an explicit grounding in the liberal arts. John Stuart Mill (1859) suggested that we look at: “national education, as being, in truth, the peculiar training of a citizen, the practical part of the political education of a free people, taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness, and accustomed them to the comprehension of joint concerns—habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives, and guide their conduct by aims which unite instead of isolating them from one another.” Mill’s work set a foundation for the general education and citizenship programs that emerged in the 20th century.

Louis Menand, a Harvard professor of English and American Literature and Language, is adamant. “Knowledge is social memory, a connection to the past; and it is social hope, an investment in the future. The ability to create knowledge and put it to use is the adaptive characteristic of humans. It is how we reproduce ourselves as human beings and how we change – how we keep our feet on the ground and our heads in the clouds.” Menand doesn’t question the value of the disciplines and professions. Rather, the outcomes he describes speak to the need to bring context and salience to students equal to the understanding they develop within their major concentrations.

The recognition that undergraduate education should provide new knowledge and understanding is hardly limited to Menand’s optimistic tenets.
"The dominant pedagogical aim," democracy and law philosopher Ronald Dworkin wrote in 2006, "must be to instill some sense of the complexity of these issues, some understanding of positions different from those the students are likely to find at home or among friends, and some idea of what a conscientious and respectful argument over these issues might be like. The dominant pedagogical strategy should be an attempt to locate . . . [cultural, social, political and scientific] controversies in different interpretations of principles the students might be expected themselves to accept: for example, the . . . principles of human dignity that I believe are common ground in America now." For Dworkin, such an education is an imperative. "We cheat our children inexcusably if we allow the nation to continue only to masquerade as democratic," he says.

The literature suggests that the most common general education pedagogy in the United States in the 21st century falls short Dworkin's call for contextual grounding and intellectual critical thinking. Often, general education curriculum is both too broad and too narrow. It consists of a broad menu of lower division introductory courses that meander across wide swaths of classes. It is too narrow in that general education courses often correspond to contracted faculty research interests or are taught as elementary disciplinary classes rather than as integrative challenges that inspire students to think across the disciplines and professions. Additionally, general education curricula usually have few and often no commonly required courses. A student may well have three science courses, yet the seemingly limitless choices available challenge any notion of a shared understanding of either scientific values or of science as a tool for informed decision-making by humanists as well as by scientists.

Students today select classes on their own from scores of electives in order to meet breadth obligations in the arts, social sciences, humanities, math, physical and natural sciences, and occasionally, in technology, global studies, and diversity. Breadth advocates suggest that in addition to developing a well-rounded understanding and familiarity with multiple ways of knowing, optimizing choices enables students to discover disciplines and fields that otherwise would never have entered their consciousness. There is scant evidence to support these claims.

The exploratory function was addressed by a recent multi-year examination of undergraduate education at Harvard. General education courses, the Harvard faculty now tell students and others, "aim not to draw students into a discipline, but to bring the disciplines into students lives . . . in ways that link the arts and sciences with the 21st century world that students will face and the lives they will lead after college."

The recommendations of the University of California "Report on General Education in the 21st Century" take the menu system to task. Rather than "the sprawl of cafeteria style breadth requirements - we recommend the creation of structured interdisciplinary bundles on timely intellectual and applied issues, made available to students as discrete, named sets and identified as such on student transcripts," the
state-wide report concludes. Ohio University, a public research university, has instituted "learning communities" as a related and pragmatic response. In both the California and the Harvard statements there is recognition that general education is more than the sum of its parts; that general education should help students to place their disciplinary and professional scholarship into a meaningful context; and that it is important to help students learn to see general education as salient beyond vocational preparation.

The idea of an integrated general education as an antidote to broad, unlimited choice menus envisions curriculum built upon a purposeful scholarship that moves beyond introductory discovery. Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) neatly summarized the distinction between disciplinary discovery and scholarly integration by identifying the types of questions posed in each element.

Those involved in discovery ask, "what is to be known? What is yet to be found?" Those engaged in integration ask, "What do the findings mean? Is it possible to interpret what’s been discovered in ways that provide a larger, more comprehensive understanding?" Questions such as these call for the power of critical analysis and interpretation. They have a legitimacy of their own and if carefully pursued can lead the scholar from information to knowledge and even, perhaps, to wisdom.

A majority of institutions continue to implement general education as a nearly unlimited menu of course choices. The choices appear to be evermore inclusive of narrow faculty interests and/or departmental attention to filling seats to justify otherwise under-enrolled elective courses. There is scant evidence that such unrestricted breadth bares any relation to oft-stated goals such as critical thinking, a foundation sufficient to support sustained learning after college, or decision making in the face of the clashing claims of science, politics, and cultural allegiances.

The financial burdens implicit in college education is another element in many discussions. Rising tuition costs have led to student loan debt that reportedly now outpaces credit card debt in the United States. What part does general education play? Do obese menus of general education requirements and curricular choices strain the ability of universities to offer affordable education taught by permanent faculty? To paraphrase Ronald Dworkin’s concern for the sustainability to democracy, *We cheat our children inexcusably if we allow general education to continue only to masquerade as successful.*

Taken as a whole, national discussions of general education have found it useful to identify and distinguish among four curricular types with attention to purpose, and often, as to what makes for an appropriate pedagogy.

- **Fundamentals** are tools necessary to scholarship and to successful university engagement. Fundamentals include the ability to communicate
orally and in writing, to search out accurate information in a context that gives it meaning, and the capacity to apply basic numeracy principles. Fundamentals are not, per se, necessarily elements of general education. The question is nowhere whether or not students need to develop fundamental competencies. It is whether those competencies should be required of all students, but distinguished from the outcomes goals of a general education curriculum.

• Majors are concentrations of courses and sometimes additional requirements that enable in-depth saturation and focused entry into disciplines, fields and professions.

• Electives are opportunities to explore wherever the intellectual and creative spirits beckon. Electives are not limited by discipline and can be found throughout the arts and sciences and in many professional schools. Electives are often available as specialized disciplinary or field courses. Increasingly, electives are being seen in thematic contexts such as health policy, global studies, civic engagement, sustainability, and entrepreneurship, to name just a few.

• General education can be viewed as an explicit curriculum that integrates the whole – that is, a purposeful collection of courses and experiences that help to generate an understanding of the arts and sciences and the relations they engender among a variety of human arenas, including: individual character, democratic and civic engagement, global understanding, informed analysis, ethical decision-making, and a meaningful ability to adapt to the 21st century’s rapid pace of social, political, cultural, economic, technological, workplace, and environmental change. “By integration,” Boyer wrote, “we mean making connections across disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating nonspecialists, too. In calling for a scholarship of integration, we do not suggest returning to the ‘gentleman scholar’ of an earlier time, nor do we have in mind the dilettante. Rather, what we mean is serious, disciplined work that seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research.”

A review of the literature identifies four general education models:

• The Cafeteria Style Breadth model practiced by Penn State and most other institutions;

• The Open Curriculum model in play at a few schools, such as Amherst College and Evergreen College, in which students have nearly unlimited authority to select courses outside of their major concentrations. In effect, students create their own general education.

• The nearly extinct Fully Prescribed Curriculum model for which the St. Johns (Annapolis and Santa Fe) classical curriculum is known; and

• The Core Curriculum approach at Columbia (and a modified hybrid at Stanford) in which students must enroll in common themes (Stanford) or courses (Columbia) during their first year and then engage in a distributed menu system thereafter.
Detailed descriptions of the general education landscape could run on for many pages. The paragraphs and bullets above do not do the topic justice. They are intended, perhaps ironically, to offer an introduction to the breadth of the general education discussion currently taking place and to encourage thinking about alternative paths and expectations. Toward this end it is useful to include within an appendix two relatively short chapters. The first, authored by Michael Schudson, the co-chair of the “General Education in the 21st Century” report noted above, is titled, “The Problem of General Education in the Research University” (2011). Next, is a chapter titled, “New Dimensions for General Education” written by the late Virginia Smith, former president Vassar College. Together, they provide an valuable examination of general’s education’s potential and the barriers that prevent general education from greater success. Also included is a bibliography of relevant readings. While not exhaustive of general education scholarship, the bibliography provides a useful body of literature that should be of use to scholars interested in the development and implementation of general education ideals.
II. A Snapshot of General Education at Penn State

Lack of Familiarity with Learning Goals A recent survey conducted in both large- and small-enrollment general education courses found that often, neither the students nor the instructional faculty were familiar with the learning goals for individual knowledge or skills domains. Students generally had favorable views of their courses overall, yet they often felt less favorable about their courses at the end of the semester. First-year students had more favorable views than students further along in their academic work. Very few faculty members surveyed were able to recall the domain-specific learning goals for their courses. Some were unaware that their courses were part of the General Education curriculum.

Confusion Distinguishing Course Types A recurring problem in the existing general education curriculum is the structural confusion between lower-division survey courses that provide a foundational introduction to a major course of study and introductory courses that provide an overview of disciplinary thinking and knowing. This difficulty is endemic within the STEM fields, where GN and GQ courses are completed as part of a student’s major, enroll a fairly homogeneous disciplinary audience, and are reputed to serve as barriers to student success rather than vehicles for student learning. Students who take lower division courses to fulfill requirements within their major are more likely to have favorable views than students who take the same course to fulfill General Education requirements. This problem is less pronounced in the humanities and social sciences, where hierarchical curricula are less common, but across the curriculum students who take course only to fulfill General Education requirements anticipate a lower degree of goal fulfillment than those for whom the course is a curricular requirement.

Heavy Reliance on Non-Standing Faculty Another significant concern is that general education courses are not consistently taught by the permanent faculty. Outside of University Park, roughly one-third of the large-enrollment courses are taught by FT2 employees. At University Park FT2 instructors teach about 15% of those same courses. Policy makers should be wary of giving kudos to University Park based on these findings. Only about 10% of University Park large-enrollment courses are taught by standing faculty members. Roughly one-quarter of such courses are taught by standing faculty at non-University Park locations. These figures are not intended to cast aspersions on any group of instructors or students, but only to highlight the inconsistencies in general education instruction and to make clear that the “Penn State experience” differs widely across the institution.

Questions About General Education Course Rigor We have looked beyond the abundant anecdotal evidence that students and advisers approach general education course selections as opportunities for low-challenge options that simply fulfill university requirements. Grade distributions in large-enrollment general education courses are heavily skewed towards high values, with over 70% of all
enrolled students receiving grades of A or B (e.g., AM ST 105, CAS 100, ENGL 015, GEOSC 010, HDFS 129, PHOTO 100, WMNST 103). This trend is not observed in GN and GQ courses that fulfill major requirements (e.g., MATH 140), where pass rates around 60% are more common, and less than 40% of students receive A or B grades.

**Preliminary Conclusions** The current general education requirements are vested principally in a small suite of courses that enroll a substantial fraction of undergraduate students across multiple Penn State campuses. These lower-division courses vary in scope and approach, but consistently involve no integration across disciplinary boundaries and scaffold no longitudinal increase in rigor or content depth. These difficulties result, in part, from a lack of clarity in the vision and mission of general education for faculty, students and advisers. In sum, Penn State’s current General Education curriculum fails to deliver on the promise of a coherent intellectual, civic and scholarly curriculum for all students. While the size and geographic complexity of the institution present their own suite of difficulties in implementing any program, the current state of general education appears to suffer less from institutional size than from challenges related to structure, delivery and conceptual clarity.

The current General Education course offerings do not define a curriculum and thus the question must be raised as to how well this large component of the undergraduate curriculum serves students, advisers or faculty members.
III. Principles and Challenges by the Invited Faculty Group

A. Curricular

- **Require a greater level of academic rigor** Students have described some general education courses as requirements to get out of the way, as read-and-test, and as grade boosting. Some students report college meetings in which advisers outlined the easiest paths through general education and warned against taking difficult classes that will not directly contribute to the major. Responding to the issues of salience and rigor, a student said, My gen ed classes could not compare to the 400 level courses in my major that challenged me and that were built on earlier courses.

- **Generate a realignment of student expectations by providing an explicit transmission of clearly defined general education purpose that faculty view, and that students learn to view, as a central and salient component of an undergraduate education** Despite phrases such as “the development of critical thinking and lifelong learning skills,” there is little to suggest that either students or faculty in general have a clear sense of general education’s purpose or what purpose a broadly distributed cafeteria menu curriculum serves. Why am I being forced to take a courses in science and math if I’m majoring in . . . ?” is not an uncommon student sentiment. Many students appear to have little understanding of the salience of university general education study. They worry that general education is a detour, rather than an employment on-ramp. Students find little meaning in the vague reassurance that they will become “well rounded.”

- **Provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum that spans the first through senior years** General education should engender increasingly integrative and intellectually demanding challenges that build upon and nurture habits of discovery, analysis, integration and thoughtful decision-making. At present, an exclusively lower division course model severely limits the potential for intellectual growth and rigor, particularly as students take 100 and 200 level courses in their senior year.

- **General education in its current form often strips the sciences, humanities, social sciences and professions of meaningful context** Whether the discipline involved is biology, psychology, math or art history, a general education course should be more than an introductory survey of a discipline. The rudiments of a disciplinary body of knowledge and methodology are, when standing alone, often insufficient to generate an understanding of the interactions among the humanities, sciences and social sciences, particularly as they involve the complex 21st century problems we face as individuals, citizens, and family members.
• Utilize timely interdisciplinary thematic clusters as one of what can be multiple ways of meeting requirements. Thematic approaches can help students to discover the relevance of a multiplicity of scholarly approaches. Clusters can enable students to select themes with compelling personal salience such as the environment, civil rights, health, poverty, or other topic or area studies that are of personal interest as well as timely.

• Help students to discover who they are as individuals and as members of communities, which are global as well as local, and heterogeneous as well as homogeneous, through informed consideration of what it means to live in a world in which there are others Such an approach stresses the value and the pedagogy of considering Big Questions of purpose and policy rather than focusing alone on introductory course matter better suited for those who need the elementary knowledge and skills necessary for engagement in a particular major.

• Discontinue as appropriate the use of traditional general education program terms such as critical thinking and lifelong learning and replace such otherwise positive visions with more clearly defined and attainable outcomes priorities. As outcomes-goals, global citizenship, critical thinking and lifelong learning are difficult to describe, appear to defy assessment, and lack meaning or salience to those who most need to embrace them -- students.

B. Faculty and Program Administration

• Distinguish Penn State through its general education program as a first tier public university with and academically superior learning pathways Many, perhaps most institutions offer general education menus cut from a single cookie cutter mold. Penn State's undergraduate experience should distinguish it from other schools and should provide a compelling reason for students, parents, faculty and others to make this university their university of choice.

• Align general education curriculum development authority and responsibility with the Senate and Administrative curricular policies that apply to all other academic programs The general education curricular process should mirror the programmatic expertise utilized in physics, history, business, and all other academic units. A general education program faculty, rather than a broadly representative ad hoc committees, should develop the next general education curriculum and submit it for program approval to the University Faculty Senate and the Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education for approval in line with existing Senate Curricular Policies and Academic and Administrative Policy and Procedure implementations. Only with a dedicated faculty can a program be developed under first principles of general education scholarship and without being fettered to traditional department and college desires for a
share of FTE budgeting that enables the offering of otherwise undersubscribed electives.

- **Identify and nurture a university-wide general education faculty with the authority to act as a recognized academic program community** Faculty selected should have particular expertise in the theory and practice of general education programs and goals. They should hold academic homes in tenure and disciplinary colleges as well as membership in a recognized General Education faculty cohort. Lacking the nurturing, voice, and on-going opportunities for professional deliberation that exist within such a community, a cohesive or integrated curriculum is unlikely to thrive.

- **Create academic administrative leadership** Every other academic program has an academic administrative officer with authority and responsibility. A program that provides 25 percent of each student’s undergraduate academic experience should have a dedicated academic officer, such as a university associate dean for general education. This individual should have membership on ACUE, the Administrative Council for Undergraduate Education and other relevant bodies. As with all other academic programs, general education requires expert academic administrative leadership and a place at the table with the disciplinary and professional deans and other senior level administrators. It is not practical to produce and maintain strategic academic program planning based on the formulation of ad hoc committees once every 15 years, or with the ad hoc approval of a transient senate subcommittee.

- **Operate under a budgetary model that does not confound the separate roles and pedagogical necessities of service, required disciplinary, and general education courses** The lure of FTE should not influence general education decision making.
General Education Supplements

1. Recommended Readings Toward the Consideration of General Education.


Recommended Readings Toward the Consideration of General Education

AAC&U Member Innovations. *Innovation, Inquiry Key Outcomes of New General Education Program at the University of Maryland, College Park*, 2008.


Fineout, Gary. “Reviewing Standards for a College Diploma.”


Hanford, Emily. “Rethinking the Way College Students are Taught.” American Radio Works, 27 January 2012.


The Problem of General Education in the Research University

Michael Schudson

Tenured and tenure-track faculty members at research universities lead multiple lives. Each one has not only a professional life and a private life, but also multiple professional lives. They live in a national or global world of scholarship in their own discipline or subdiscipline, but they also live a local, territorially situated life at a particular university. And there they are often engaged in a range of activities that their professional colleagues around the world will know little or nothing about. One part of this somewhat cloistered, practically clandestine professional experience concerns teaching — and, for a significant minority of the faculty, this includes teaching outside their own department in courses and programs known as “general education.”

“General education” refers to a specific set of programs in American higher education intended to offset students’ focus on a disciplinary “major.” The related term, “liberal education,” refers to an educational ideal with roots in an older tradition of gentlemanly education once offered in European and American universities, normally based on a study of classical languages. General education refers specifically to aspirations institutionalized in twentieth-century American universities to preserve the spirit (although not the content) of a liberal education in the face of the decline of a common collegiate curriculum and a vocationalization of higher education.

To put this another way, a tension has arisen in colleges, and especially in universities, between a college ideal, in which the faculty are dedicated to “transmitting to young adults knowledge of the past so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future,” and the research ideal, which takes the university to be about “creating new knowledge with the aim of superseding the past.” The two sides in this combat are not equally muscular forces; the research ideal dominates the college ideal in all so-called “research universities” — including every single one of the most prestigious universities in the USA. The minority of faculty at these institutions who try to keep the flame of the college ideal burning feel beleaguered. As Columbia’s Andrew Delbanco writes, “On a campus mainly devoted to research and graduate training,
considered it “a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.”

In this context, there could be no winning for general education. By the 1920s, most institutions had settled on concentration and distribution requirements as a brake on the elective principle, but they did not embrace any particular content. Efforts to create a core curriculum or a common body of study for all students achieved partial success in the notable programs at Chicago and Columbia. But it is a rare institution that approaches the Columbia or Chicago models, and even these stand as a kind of temporary moratorium on the elective system and the focus on the major.

The second revolution was never claimed by the professoriat itself with the same moral fervor as their own academic revolution, but has nonetheless been transformational: it is the democratization of access to higher education — and, with it, a shift in the emphasis in universities from an identification with a genteel tradition of education to a practical-minded, vocational model of education, and an accompanying shift from a humanities-centered curriculum to one in which engineering, computer sciences, business, and other professional or pre-professional fields became the primary concerns for a majority of students.

In the face of the academic and democratic revolutions in higher education, general education was squeezed to little more than a set of paper requirements, not a distinctive set of curricular offerings. Most universities are willing to reduce general education to a set of distribution requirements and to provide little or no independent funding for it. Advising about general education is left to the student grapevine or to untrained staff advisers, whose job is simply to help students through the administrative paperwork of registering for courses. The survival of general education as a set of distribution requirements is visible nearly everywhere; the charge to our Commission was realistically to assess what could be done to nurture this general education and advertise its value effectively.

Members of the Commission all agreed that general education is, in its aspirations, very valuable indeed. General education, to make one last effort to define it, usually refers to the effort to introduce students to ways of knowing, appreciation of historical context, and common themes of human experience, social responsibility, civic (global and local) engagement, and the development of practical skills and reflective habits of mind. But no single understanding of general education is pervasive, and when one looks at the practical incarnation of the lofty ideal, it is apparent that a common understanding will be hard to locate. A negative definition may be the best: general education is the catch-all phrase that educators use to refer to educational aspirations that are not claimed by departments and disciplines. And it is this negative definition that most clearly identifies the problem for the university — general education may very well be that aspiration, closest to the college ideal, that makes alumni grow dewy-eyed when they think back, hazily, to their undergraduate days. It may be the element drawn on most frequently when the dean addresses freshmen or the chancellor speaks to the graduating class, but it also turns out to be that feature of higher education that no-one is in charge of, or responsible for. And the more
those of us who focus on college teaching sometimes feel like Jonah in the belly of the whale.²

Advocates of general education may seek to transmit knowledge of the past to their students, but often they avow that their aims cannot be attained by any particular course content — only by habits of mind that students acquire. More general education programs teach Shakespeare than deconstruct Bugs Bunny, but what counts, according to some advocates of general education — whether studying John Milton or J. K. Rowling — is an ability to read critically, to read between the lines, to recognize how rhetoric and argument are deployed, and to appreciate but also to resist the power of narrative or a tale well told. Faculty hope students will learn to generalize from one course or topic to the next, to write fluently and critically, to master a body of material, and to take a step beyond. They hope to teach students to communicate logically about a common body of evidence and common rules of inference, orally and in writing, and to link together scientific or humanistic materials that, at first, seem distant from one another and remote from contemporary civic and social issues.

I have long been among those members of the faculty (first at the University of Chicago, and then for three decades at the University of California, San Diego) who invested time in and directed attention to general education. At UC-San Diego, I briefly served as the head of one of the undergraduate colleges where, among other things, I supervised general education.

It was in that capacity that I noticed that the college’s general education requirement in the natural sciences enjoined every student to take one course in physics, one in chemistry, and one in biology. I wondered if it might not be more valuable for students to take three courses in one of those fields, rather than one course in each of the three. About that time, a newly appointed dean for the biological sciences came to see me, and I raised this question with him. He replied, “Three courses in biology would be a very good requirement!” Naturally, I thought he was joking, spoofing his own chauvinistic preference for biology over physics and chemistry. But, no, this was no joke. He argued that general education was all about education for citizenship, and that an informed citizen these days should know some biology to have the background to consider public policy issues about genetically modified agricultural crops, genetic testing, abortion, cancer screening, and other matters. The well-informed citizen did not need even a smattering of knowledge of chemistry or physics.

What I realized at the end of this conversation was that I did not know if the dean was right about the knowledge needed for citizenship. Worse still, I did not know if general education should focus on providing students with general information to serve them as practical participants in the public and political affairs of their world, or if it should provide some knowledge of how thinkers in different fields think, what they count as evidence, how they make inferences, and how much authority we should grant to their conclusions.

After this conversation with the dean, one thing led to another, and in 2005 a University of California Commission on General Education in the Research University was established, with Neil Smelser, professor emeritus of sociology at the
University of California, Berkeley and I as co-chairs. My remarks draw largely on the work of that Commission.\textsuperscript{3}

The problem of general education in the research university today is the product of two great waves of social change in higher education. The first is what Christopher Jencks and David Riesman termed “the academic revolution.”\textsuperscript{4} This can be dated to 1876, when Johns Hopkins University began with its emphasis on a science-based graduate education as central to its mission. Harvard, in the same period, initiated, and other colleges and universities quickly adopted, the elective system as a basic curricular principle for undergraduate education. And by the early twentieth century – in reaction to the shapelessness of the elective system – most institutions adopted a blend of concentration (or a “major”) and a required set of “distribution requirements” across the curriculum. Even so, the elective principle never died. Its central value is that faculty should have the freedom to teach what they want, and students should have the freedom to take the classes they prefer; this has remained fundamental in US higher education to the present.

Indeed, this basic structure became the new moral center of higher education in a world where Christian-based moral philosophy was no longer unrivaled for defining the college experience and the human experience. Now different fields of learning could claim to represent the central moral element in college education. The sciences claimed that there was a moral discipline in the critical mind, the skeptical intellect, and the intense difficulty of a set of concepts that required mental and moral discipline to master. The appeal of science was linked to democracy and to an absence of prejudice or preconceived ideas. The social sciences claimed not only to inform students, but to equip them with tools to determine how society’s problems might be solved. They offered to reintegrate academic knowledge around a principle of morality, a loosely Christian concept of social reform on behalf of the people least advantaged in society. And, by the 1910s and 1920s, the humanities made a moral claim – that, in a world where science and social science insisted on the neutrality of fact and the detachment of inquiry, only the humanities continued an education of character through directly examining the moral life of the human being. Historian Julie Reuben emphasizes that the humanities developed an identity “closely related to the efforts to find a secular substitute for religiously-based moral education and to the adoption of the idea that science was morally neutral.”\textsuperscript{5}

But while the flame of the humanities’ candle still flickers, the notion that there is a moral center to higher education is not the sort of thing most academics spend much time thinking about. What became the moral center, if anything, was the aspiration of the faculty to independence from interference with their autonomy in the classroom and the laboratory. This was the heart of what Jencks and Riesman meant by the “academic revolution” that increased the professors’ control over higher education at the expense of the college presidents and the college trustees. Institutionally, the academic revolution created a world of extreme decentralization that institution- alized faculty allegiance to a specific discipline and department. As for a unitary model of a university, Robert Maynard Hutchins at Chicago described the university as a set of schools and departments held together by a central heating system, and Clark Kerr
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prestigious the university, the less its faculty want to teach the freshmen, or do any teaching that is not training future stars in their own discipline.

But the members of the Commission were not committed to nostalgia for imagined colleges of the past. We were prepared to accept historian Richard Hofstadter's portrait of the "old college" as sectarian, paternalistic; under-funded; interested in character at the expense of intellect; resistant to teaching science, social science, and modern languages; endlessly devoted to recitation as a method of teaching that "could deaden the most interesting subjects and convert faculty men of genuine intellectual and scholarly distinction into drillmasters." And this, of course, was all in the service of educating the children of the wealthiest families and cultivating future political, clerical, and community leaders.

So the Commission's recommendations were aimed not at securing a victory for general education, but at consolidating a safe niche for it, some accommodation from the department- and discipline-based system to keep a spot in the game for general education. We recommended doing this by adapting to some political and human realities. The first is a political reality: if there is no office or dean charged with responsibility for general education, someone who has the ear of the highest academic officers at the university, general education will be at the bottom of everybody's list and at the top of no-one's. We urged that it be at the top of someone's list. At the University of California, on every campus over the past ten or fifteen years, a new dean of undergraduate education or assistant vice chancellor of undergraduate education has been carved into the administrative structure — with good results. We praised this development and, it appears, not a moment too soon. In response to the current economic crisis in California, the Berkeley campus has already abolished the office. Members of the Commission collectively protested this move but, so far, to no avail.

But the problem of general education pre-dates the economic crunch, and the barriers to effective general education concern not administrators so much as faculty and students. The problem, in a word, is this: faculty do not want to teach content outside their research specialty (that they cannot, in any case, agree on) to students who do not want to jump through the hoops of educational breadth for purposes they do not understand. One hears regularly from undergraduates that they just have this or that course to "get out of the way" and then they will have completed their "GB" requirements. They can thereby move on to what they obviously accept as the more important task of working through their major. The only recognition a student can achieve in general education is to have finished it. In every other domain of students' academic careers — and even of their extra-curricular careers — they can win a varied set of gold stars for distinguished work. Why not in general education?

What we proposed is that faculty design a set of related courses — a cluster, or package, or bundle — within general education, that becomes a kind of named general education minor. A music major might have a general education minor in "environmental studies" that includes: a literature course on writings about nature; a social science course on social movements that centers on environmental activism or a political science course on bureaucracy and policy-making that focuses on
environmental issues; and a science course in environmental studies concerned with climate change. The student’s transcript would not simply indicate that distribution requirements had been fulfilled, but that the student had achieved an “environmental studies” general education minor.

My own sense, from talking with undergraduates about such matters, is that they are very attentive to distinguishing themselves and having their distinctions formally noted in the bureaucratic record. We did not judge this as good or bad, only as a part of the students’ psychological reality. And we saw in it an opportunity to help develop in students an approach to general education that would be more engaged than just “getting it out of the way.”

To recapitulate: general education represents a minimal construction of a curriculum that seeks to direct students to the knowledge that educated men and women should have as they embark on their adult lives. That it is a residual feature of higher education is the product of two revolutions — revolutions that happily disposed of the nineteenth-century college, whose passing should not be mourned. The “academic revolution” produced a research-centered culture in universities, especially after World War II. Supported by federal dollars, by the globalization of international academic competition during the Cold War and after, and by the rapid growth of the professoriat itself, it swept all before it, and has only grown more entrenched in recent decades. It gives primary responsibility for courses and curriculum to academic departments.

Second, universities increasingly brought independent professional schools under their wing, expanding curricular offerings in agricultural, technical, and pre-professional programs to cater to new generations of students who saw college primarily as a road to jobs with white collars, and jobs with higher pay, and jobs that represented social mobility for them.

Third, a consensus (perhaps never very solid) about what constitutes necessary general knowledge for educated men and women disintegrated. From Harvard’s elective system in the 1870s onward, there was a shift from a view that education transmits specific content to a view that schooling teaches processes, methods, and attitudes in the acquisition of knowledge. From that point, the most commonly adopted model of general education was the cafeteria model, in which students choose courses from among a wide range of possibilities in a set of categories representing large groupings of different bodies of knowledge.

A fourth trend, which affects public universities more than private institutions, is the growth in the number and percentage of students who enter as transfer students. Transfer students generally complete general education requirements at community colleges or four-year state universities before transferring. So the problem of general education today is this: faculty do not want to teach content outside their research specialty — content that they cannot, in any case, agree on — to students who do not want to jump through the hoops of educational breadth, growing numbers of whom got general education “out of the way” before arriving at the research university in the first place.

The research university has been very successful at producing research. Society has been very generous in rewarding research. There is no way that this overwhelming
priority is going to change. Practical political and economic reasons are aligned against change in these patterns. Intellectual trends are no more favorably inclined. Consensus on what knowledge is most worth knowing is weak and variable. And there is a strong argument that this is just as it should be in a pluralistic, globalized society. So is anything to be done at all?

Following the commission’s recommendations, there are a few things that count. First, one person, commanding a staff and a budget, should be in the cabinet of the president or chancellor, with his or her primary responsibility defined as undergraduate education, especially the features of undergraduate education that transcend the interests of departments. Every research university should have a chief undergraduate education officer to coordinate, oversee, communicate, and keep an eye out for new opportunities. The existence of such an officer is a structural condition that helps increase the universities’ capacity to offer and innovate in general education. In a perfect world, general education would be on the agenda of every department chair and every member of the teaching faculty. But I have not seen this Utopia and I do not expect to see it. In its absence, appointing an officer whose effectiveness is judged by how well general education is working is a valuable step.

Second, general education should receive symbolic and formal recognition so that students receive for it not just credit-hours, but transcript-worthy mention. The Commission proposed that general education requirements be not à la carte selections left entirely to the students, but _préfix free_ educational meals or “bundles.” On the student’s transcript there would be mention of his or her completion of a general education minor in environmental studies, or “politics and science,” or “the concept of nature,” or “the meaning of rationality,” or some other topic set by the faculty, around which students would choose a small set of courses from a limited menu that would offer a range of disciplinary approaches and would mutually inform one another. This proposal splits the difference between requirements and alternatives, between structure and openness, and between a principle of political impossibility and a principle of institutional cowardice.

Third, universities should make general education more congenial to students by educating various campus constituencies on the purpose of general education, encouraging in every part of a university community a culture that supports it. Faculty could receive salary bonuses for teaching general education courses; top graduate students could be rewarded for working in general education courses; parents, chancellors and presidents, and alumni, could all have the virtues of general education urged upon them.

Our Commission never defined what knowledge is most appropriate to require of students in the twenty-first century. We did not produce a statement of principle about what general education should achieve. We operated with a consensus that research universities should educate young people toward familiarity with, and appreciation of, a range of fields of knowledge, but we did not dare precision about this. Some of us would have insisted on foreign language training but not mathematics through calculus; others would have declared calculus necessary but not foreign language training. And whatever we might have agreed on would be likely to change within a few years.
I would like to see research universities where more of the research-oriented faculty recall how some freshman course first whetted their appetite for study. I would like to see a faculty that demonstrates to students that they think the unexamined life is not worth living, a faculty that does not act as if it is perfectly acceptable to leave life unexamined except for that tiny portion of it that corresponds to their professional research output. I have the greatest regard for modern research universities. These are dynamic institutions, serious about quality control, trying as best they can to satisfy the legitimate desires of a flock of contrasting, and even conflicting, constituencies (students, donors, legislatures, alumni, faculty, local communities, staffs, accrediting boards, etc.), and achieving more in the creation of new knowledge, both theoretical and practical, than colleges and universities before 1945 could have ever dreamt of. At the same time, the animating force of intellectual curiosity and an acquaintance with the historic treasures of human wisdom (and the historic record of human folly) is too often neglected. It is important to redress the balance. It will take some imagination, some effort at renewal, and some practical intra-university politicking to make this happen.

The university itself is one of the greatest communication technologies ever invented. It is certainly one of the oldest. Elements of its basic form pre-date even the printing press. We who study the technologies, industries, processes, and influences of the mass media invariably look outward to a variety of institutions that we admire, or whose products fascinate us, or whose apparent influences distress us. It is rare that we look inward at the complicated, large organizations that pay our salaries, encourage our inquiries, and often win our emotional allegiance. Rarely do we turn our critical skills to analyzing how these institutions operate themselves as devices for, or sometimes against, communication. Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of a conference about higher education at the Annenberg School for Communication is that it exists at all.

Notes

1 Andrew Delbanco, “The college idea,” Lapham’s Quarterly 1(4), Fall 2008, 184.
2 Ibid.
5 This whole historical account is indebted to Julie Reuben, The Making of the Modern University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
Curricular issues that dominated the 1980s and promise to play a major role in the 1990s relate to that portion of the undergraduate experience outside students' majors or fields of specialization—particularly that portion most commonly referred to as "general education." During the eighties, majors in the undergraduate curriculum increased, separated, formed new unions, and generally responded both to the explosion of knowledge and to market demands. Clearly, some majors declined in importance. Classics disappeared from a number of curricula, as did geography. Fewer students majored in the humanities, and concerns increased about the decline in foreign language enrollment. While these issues and the range, scope, and quality of majors received some attention and discussion, the national debates and campus improvement efforts of the last decade focused, for the most part, on what else besides the major is represented by a baccalaureate degree.

The State and Scope of General Education

In 1978, Arthur Levine opened his chapter on general education in his *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum* with the assertion that "general education is a disaster area" (p. 3). Several national reports reinforced this assessment either by roundly criticizing what existed on the nation's campuses or by urging improvements that suggested the widespread lack of
excellent programs. Indeed, the 1980s were studded with a whole galaxy of reports, not about the structure of our colleges and universities, not about governance, not about how to finance higher education, but about curriculum. Reports and discussions in the 1950s and 1960s about structure, governance, and finance were somehow clearer and in many ways less heated than those about curriculum. If recommendations about structure, governance, and finance meet with favor, at least some of them can be accomplished by higher education administrators or governmental agencies. But debates on curriculum go to the very heart of the enterprise, and— even more important—implementation of any recommendations on curriculum requires faculty involvement and often faculty initiative.

In his glossary of definitions, Levine equated *liberal education* and *general education*, saying that liberal education was the most frequent synonym for general education (Levine 1978, 525–528). In a book published a decade later, *The Meaning of General Education*, Gary Miller explored the historical roots of these two concepts and urged readers to understand their fundamental differences. He characterized general education as instrumentalist, with a focus on problem solving and acquisition of skills and abilities, and liberal education as rationalist, being more concerned with the life of the mind as the arena for learning. He described general education as psychological, with its interest in individual and social change, whereas liberal education, on the other hand, is basically logical, targeting on the mental processes involved in thinking through abstract ideas. And, perhaps most important, to Miller liberal education is essentialist: it seeks, studies, and tries to understand truths that are universal, that are essential (1988, 183).

Miller's comparison stated the distinctions in the extreme, but these extremes help us identify the differential effect of the two paradigms. Liberal education is less affected by changes in the society in which it exists; educationally, it operates as a conserving force. It relies more on the past than on the present and the future, whereas general education must take the present into account in terms of both the students that come to it and the society in which it operates.

Are these useful distinctions between liberal and general education? For Miller, the distinctions provided a way of characterizing the underlying assumptions in the reports of the last decade. He identified the report of the National Institute of Education's Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, *Involvement in Learning* (1984), as close to the general education model. The report of the National Endowment for the Humanities, *To Reclaim a Legacy* (Bennett 1984), was to Miller
more clearly a liberal education model, with its 50 Hours (Cheney 1989) being nearer to the general education model than the early endowment report but still essentially following a liberal education model. The Association of American Colleges published *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (1985), a hybrid, but the association’s subsequent report, *A New Vitality in General Education* (1988), drew more heavily on the general education model.

As analytically helpful as these two carefully contrasted models might be, Miller’s distinctions have not been widely used in current discussions on campuses about the nonmajor component of undergraduate education, nor have these distinctions been used in achieving the kind of consensus needed for improvements. It can be argued, in fact, that many campuses are not utilizing either model but have developed their curricular design to serve a purpose that is a relatively small element by itself in either perspective—that of simply providing some exposure to subjects outside the student’s major.

To achieve a better understanding of how campuses are approaching general education and what steps they are taking to improve their programs beyond the major, the Exxon Educational and the Ford Foundations have funded a study, “Exploring Good Practices in General Education,” that is sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education and directed by Virginia B. Smith, Lee Humphreys, and David C. Smith. The study has two phases: (1) a brief questionnaire about general education addressed to chief academic officers at each of the nation’s universities and colleges and (2) team visits to selected campuses whose general education programs received multiple nominations as admirable programs by academic officers at other colleges and universities. Specialized institutions such as Bible institutes and medical schools were not included in the first phase of the study.

Table 14.1 shows the response rate to the phase 1 questionnaire by Carnegie Commission classification.

In order not to limit the responses to any particular a priori view of general education, the survey did not provide its own working definition of that phrase. Instead, several questions asked the chief academic officers for their views about general education. Responses to these questions indicated that little consensus exists about the meaning, purpose, and content of general education, but the responses also provided substantial evidence for why there should be considerable variety in implementing general education programs.
Table 14.1 Rates of Response to the Questionnaire about General Education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Carnegie Class</th>
<th>Total Number of Coded Records in Class</th>
<th>Number in Class Responding</th>
<th>% in Class Responding</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive universities 1</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive universities 2</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate-granting universities 1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate-granting universities 2</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal arts colleges 1</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>62.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal arts colleges 2</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research universities 1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research universities 2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-year colleges</td>
<td>1,151</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Purposes of General Education

Although much of the national debate on general education has focused primarily on curricular design and the subject-matter content to be included in it, responses to the questionnaire established that many chief academic officers see curricular design as only one aspect of a much broader set of educational techniques and conditions that support and ultimately make up the resulting program of general education. From their open-ended responses to a question about the purpose of general education at their institution, we were able to distinguish six different purposes for general education.

1. *Heritage*: To provide a common core of great ideas or great books; to pass on a common western heritage
2. *Counterpoint*: To expose students to a broader range of subject matter than they would find in their majors; to achieve breadth—at its best, an enriching context for the major; at its worst, simple exposure to a series of fragments
3. Instrumental: To develop particular skills, such as writing, speaking, and critical thinking

4. Development or Empowerment: To develop the whole learner, in contrast to emphasis upon specific skills, particularly to develop the basis for becoming a lifelong learner

5. Social Agenda: To infuse the general education component with some social purpose or purposes such as global awareness, environmental sensitivity, preparation for responsible citizenship in a democratic society

6. Valuing: To perceive what values are operating in a situation, how values are determined, and at a few institutions even to inculcate certain values.

Most colleges use some combination of two or more of these purposes, with the particular combination of purposes varying from campus to campus.

At a recent Council of Independent Colleges Institute for Deans, the participants were given this list of six purposes and were asked to rank the importance or priority of each of the six purposes as demonstrated by the educational strategies used to accomplish general education on their campuses. Table 14.2 shows the resulting rankings.

The purpose most closely related to Miller's ideal model of "liberal education" we have labeled Heritage. Only 29 percent of the respondents put this in the top two priorities. Counterpoint, on the other hand, was placed in the top two priorities by 56 percent. A full paradigm for "general education" as developed by Miller would probably address the purposes of Skill Development, Empowerment, Social Agenda, and Values, yet none of these purposes except Skill Development, which was identified in the top two priorities by 69 percent, received high priority ratings by the deans.

There seems little question that the purposes of Counterpoint and Skill Development are the most common objectives of general education on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>A (Highest)</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F (Lowest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterpoint</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill development</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social agenda</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
American campuses today. The usual way of implementing these purposes is through distribution requirements. Given the organizational structure of most campuses, distribution requirements may be the only type of implementation that can be used for general education without making significant organizational changes.

The Organizational Status of General Education

Although most educators probably assume that general education is an important element on their campuses, in organizational status it is accorded far less importance than the lowliest discipline-based department. General education is the only undergraduate program that affects all students, but even the smallest discipline-based department has someone designated as chair (and usually that is that person's only academic administrative responsibility). The same is rarely true for general education; information from our 1987 survey shows that less than 3 percent of America's colleges and universities have a designated academic administrator whose sole responsibility is general education. Similarly, the chairs of discipline-based departments normally have a budget and hire faculty, and the faculty within each department design the curriculum for that department. Yet discussions in the field following up on our question of organizational status suggest that few colleges have separate budgets for general education, faculty are not hired to teach general education courses as such, and faculty members are seldom hired because of their understanding of or ability with reference to general education needs.

The lowly internal organizational status of general education did not seem to trouble the administrators responding to our survey. In response to a question about what they would do to improve general education on their campuses, assuming they had the resources to make such improvements, fewer than 5 percent said they would modify the organizational status of general education.

Whatever general education is on the nation's campuses, in most instances it is inappropriate to think of it as a program. It rarely has any of the structural or resource supports required for program development and maintenance. Instead, on many campuses general education is nothing more than a catalog construct: a construct sometimes made up of designated courses but more frequently made up of directions to take courses in certain designated departments. It is a construct whose shape is determined by putting together pieces of a curriculum usually designed for some other primary purpose (such as the lower-division courses in a major). The selec-
tion of the pieces is often the result of intricate faculty politics involving faculty slots and protection of turf rather than being a response to an identified educational purpose.

An analysis of the responses to our survey affirms the idea that general education on many campuses cannot be viewed as a curricular program. Indeed, in the survey, chief academic officers did not think about general education as only, or even as primarily, a curricular program. One survey question asked, "In your judgment what is the most notable aspect of your general education program?" About half of the responses to this question referred to features we would ordinarily think of as curricular design features, but the remaining half highlighted noncurricular design aspects such as a requirement for work experience, an emphasis on outcomes, cultural experiences outside classrooms, assessment, advising programs, the quality of the faculty, and skill development purposes within courses or across courses.

Whether general education is viewed as a curricular program or as a set of institutional responses to educational purpose might be seen simply as a question of semantics. What real difference does it make what name we give to the phenomenon? It makes a great deal of difference. The way we characterize general education determines the questions we ask about it, and the answers we obtain to those questions often pave the way for its evaluation. If a college is using a strategy far broader than a simple curricular design to achieve its undergraduate educational purposes, then rating that college's general education program on the basis of whether or not it has a core curriculum, asking questions about the content of the core, and determining if there is a sequence in the core completely miss the college's own way of responding to the educational needs of its undergraduate students. These questions might tell us whether the Heritage purpose is being served. By themselves, however, without reference to pedagogy, assessment techniques, or institutional support systems, these questions about "core" cannot satisfactorily tell us whether other purposes listed above are being served—purposes identified as important by many college and university academic officers.

Examples of Good Practice

Another question on our survey asked respondents to identify one or two colleges that had admirable general education programs. Over 826 citations were made, naming 344 colleges with general education programs considered admirable by at least one other chief academic officer. Analysis
of the citations revealed that 3 colleges received almost 20 percent of the citations; 13 colleges received almost 40 percent of them, and 27 colleges received over 50 percent.

The three colleges receiving 20 percent of the citations were Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Brooklyn College of the City University of New York; and St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New-Mexico. Alverno and St. John's are private, identify themselves as liberal arts colleges, and are both relatively small in enrollment. Brooklyn College is public and has sixteen thousand students, twelve thousand of whom are undergraduate. The current program at St. John's is the oldest of the three, Alverno's was developed in the early 1970s, and Brooklyn College developed its program in the early 1980s.

The three programs differ markedly from one another, but there are a few strikingly similar features in the programs of Alverno and St. John's, including the importance of assessing student achievement. A major element of Alverno's program is the carefully calibrated student assessments that are embedded in its curriculum. Its assessment system relates to the eight abilities that infuse the Alverno curriculum—communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing, social interaction, responsibility for the global environment, effective citizenship, and aesthetic response—and that shape the pedagogy and collegiate structure as much as do the academic discipline-based courses and departments. The Alverno catalog states (p. 2):

> Alverno's student evaluation method, called assessment, helps a student and her teachers judge her command of the subject matter and mastery of the eight abilities. Unlike tests, assessments evaluate not just what a student knows, but how well she can apply what she knows. . . . A student does not receive grades as a result of assessments. The validation she receives when she has successfully completed an assessment indicates that she has met the detailed, rigorous requirement set by the college.

In conversations with students at Alverno, we gathered that they feel that they learn much more from the assessment than from grades. They gain information about how to improve and what they do well, and they are judged against a standard rather than being ranked or compared with others by being given a score or grade that, in itself, yields little information and often provides neither motivation nor guidance on how to improve.

St. John's also has a unique approach to the assessment of student performance. Its catalog states (p. 34):
Within the College, the most important form of evaluation is the don rag. Once a semester, freshmen, sophomores and juniors meet with their tutors in the don rag. The tutors report to one of the seminar leaders on the student’s work during the semester; the students are then invited to respond to their tutor’s report and comment on their own work. Advice may be requested and given; difficulties may be aired, but grades are not reported or discussed. In the junior year, students may request a conference rather than a don rag. In that case, students report on their own work and then the tutors comment on that report. By the time students are seniors, it is assumed they can evaluate their own work and there is no don rag unless the tutor believes there is a special need for one. . . . The tutor’s comprehensive judgment of the student is reported to the Dean each semester as a conventional letter grade, A, B, C, D or F, where C indicates that the work is at a satisfactory level. . . . Within the College, grading is not of central importance. Students will be told their grades only on request. They are encouraged, however, not to work for grades, but rather to develop their powers of understanding.

In both of these colleges the assessment technique has a profound influence on pedagogy. Although quite different in detail, both of the approaches are similar in the key role that assessment plays in the educational experience and are also similar in the diminished value given to letter grades.

In our study, less than 5 percent of all colleges and universities indicated that they had developed comprehensive individual assessment systems other than the usual letter grades in courses. Almost all of the colleges that have developed such systems turn out to be among the twenty-seven colleges that received 50 percent of the citations for having admirable general education programs.

Alverno and St. John’s also place great importance on the fusion of the pedagogical approach with educational philosophy. At neither institution is the teaching approach left to the sole determination of the individual faculty member. The unified vision of educational purpose leads to concern for and, finally, some agreement on the most suitable instructional styles and strategies to accomplish the shared educational purpose, as well as some agreement on the most suitable assessment technique to evaluate achievement of this purpose.

The two colleges are contrasted, however, in terms of educational purpose. As the Alverno catalog states, Alverno’s purpose was reached by faculty asking themselves in the early 1970s:

What will best enable [our students] to succeed in their careers? What insights will most enrich their lifetimes? What abilities will make a lasting difference in
their homes, their families and communities? What will equip them to continue as independent learners who can adapt to and grow with the fast-changing world?

Gradually faculty reached common agreement on what students need most for success after college. Knowledge and the abilities to apply it became the twin goals of their teaching. Working as a group, they restructured the entire curriculum from start to finish to assure that every course helped students advance in both. 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 give backbone to Alverno’s curriculum, uniting it with a common purpose for teaching and an organizing framework for learning (p. 1).

St. John’s states its purposes as follows (p. 6): “Liberal education should seek to develop free and rational men and women committed to the pursuit of knowledge in its fundamental unity, intelligently appreciative of their common cultural heritage, and conscious of the social and moral obligations.”

St. John’s is close to Miller’s paradigm for liberal education, whereas Alverno is close to the paradigm for general education. For St. John’s, the most important unifying dimension is in the great books approach, although the development of liberal arts understandings and intellectual skills (discussion, translation, writing, experiment, mathematical demonstration, and musical analysis) are also given deliberate attention.

For Alverno it is the eight abilities and their assessments that provide the principal unifying dimension for the educational experience, but certainly the acquisition and understanding of knowledge is given substantial importance as well. The educational plans of both colleges, along with those of several other colleges in the group of twenty-seven receiving the highest number of citations, are highly integrated, requiring substantial active collaboration among faculty and also requiring that students understand the educational strategies of the institution.

Brooklyn College’s program requires continuing collaborative work by the faculty through an annual faculty/curriculum development seminar held each summer. That the core requires this constant attention and thus provides opportunities for studying integrative teaching techniques, for sharing a common purpose, is one of the core’s greatest strengths and, according to many faculty on the campus, has led to the revival of collegiality.

The core at Brooklyn defines one-quarter of each student’s work at the college. It represents an admirable model at a large university. Although often cited as a core that defines the general education knowledge each
student is expected to acquire, the Brooklyn program is also concerned with skill development, particularly methodological and expressive capabilities. Even in its core, the Brooklyn effort is not as integrated as the programs at Alverno and St. John’s, but it is far more integrated than the typical general education programs at most public universities and four-year colleges and at many liberal arts colleges. Implementation of its program has required supplemental organizational structures, including a standing committee on the core and core course coordinators appointed by the president.

Organizational structures at Alverno and St. John’s also differ from those at most colleges. At Alverno, every faculty member belongs not only to a department but also to an ability group. For instance, a faculty member might introduce herself as a professor of history and a member of the problem-solving group. Group membership may change from year to year, but what does not change is that patterns and networks of faculty collaboration are at least two dimensional. All faculty members have responsibility for teaching both knowledge and abilities and have numerous needs and opportunities to discuss both instructional and assessment strategies with other faculty members.

The other twenty-four colleges that make up the most frequently cited colleges share in varying degrees the educational strategies described above. Examining the educational programs of all of these institutions in detail leads to the inescapable conclusion that colleges that are seen as having excellent programs have been quite idiosyncratic in working out their own purposes and strategies to address them. Furthermore, it would be impossible to obtain any real understanding of the genius of these programs by asking questions related only to curricular design. Many of the programs cited as good examples by the respondents to our survey do not even use the term general education with reference to their undergraduate programs, nor do they respond to the same educational purposes. Among the twenty-seven frequently cited are colleges that place substantial emphasis on cocurricular programs outside their curricular design. To judge the quality of those educational programs only by curricular design would be to fail to take into consideration very strong elements. In each case, the college implemented its educational purpose with an appropriate strategy, uses different unifying techniques to create an integrity in the educational experience, and evidences an understanding and acceptance of their purposes and strategies across constituencies on the campus, although not all have the same degree of success in these efforts. And in those cases where programs seem the strongest, there is evidence that either the administration and faculty have a fairly clear understanding of their students and their
learning needs or the mission of the college is so explicit that most of the students who come are good fits with the program.

Developments Affecting the Future

Certain emerging developments lead to optimism about the shape of the curriculum in our nation’s colleges in the twenty-first century. First, there is growing dissatisfaction, both on the campuses and in the public arena, with distribution requirements as the only or primary design for general education. It is true that distribution is an excellent strategy for responding to the Counterpoint purpose, but, in the light of all the purposes we would like undergraduate education to serve, this particular purpose increasingly appears trivial. Even the language often used to describe it seems weak and ineffective: “the exposure of students to a range of disciplines.” In most cases, when people talk about “exposure,” they hope that the person exposed doesn’t catch anything. In this case, educators hope that students catch something, but they seem willing only to specify the exposure and leave the rest up to chance.

Second, taking all of the information from our survey and site visits into account, it seems that many institutions are infusing their educational programs with techniques for improving skills, with more interdisciplinary courses, with specially designed freshman courses and senior capstone courses, with greater integration of off-campus learning into the educational experience, and with a movement away from relegating general education to an isolated block of the curriculum. There also seems to be some movement toward addressing common (non-major based) learning needs across the entire undergraduate education program both inside and outside the major and over all four years of the program.

If our faculties are actually led into real discussion of purposes, we may see in the twenty-first century greater cohesion and integrity in all of our undergraduate programs. Unfortunately, thus far much of the debate on the improvements has been limited to strategies rather than purposes. Watching the curricular debates in the last decade, both on campus and in the public arena, reminds me of the marvelous caricature of a discussion between the old and the new education in Aristophanes’ The Clouds. You may recall that the debate got under way with the old and the new hurling invectives at one another, somewhat reminiscent of today’s hot exchanges about what should be in a core curriculum or whether there should be a core. In The Clouds, when the debaters finally got down to their basic arguments, the old tradition of education based its claim on the fact that it
had educated the heroes who were needed to fight at Marathon—that it had inculcated in the citizens of Athens the necessary attitudes and qualities of character for them to take heroic action. But the new traditions saw the times and the needs differently, claiming that the need now was not for mental homogeneity or adherence to rules, but for intellectual agility. The societal need was not for heroes in the field but for political leaders and orators. The old and the new were agreed that the curriculum had some responsibility to serve the social agenda, but their disagreement was deeper than the curriculum and deeper than methods of pedagogy; this was indeed a conflict about the social agenda for Athens, about ends. Most of their explicit discussion, however, had been about means. Similarly, the curricular debates today have underlying tensions about inclusivity or exclusivity, about pluralism or amalgamation, even about a civil society or a civilized society and, increasingly, about the role of the United States in a global society.

Virtually every effort at improvement starts as a response to a perceived problem. Thus, the elective system of the late nineteenth century was a response to too much rigidity, while the emphasis on distribution requirements in the early twentieth century was a response to too much specialization. Today, one of our great concerns is too much fragmentation. It is natural, then, that there are demands for greater coherence in the curriculum. Preliminary to determining what strategy for coherence should be employed, we need to agree on answers to essential first questions—coherence for whom, and about what, and for what purpose? Many seem to want to find today’s coherence by using yesterday’s patterns let out a bit at the seams because we’ve grown a little, inserting a gore here and there to accommodate non-Western culture, including in the syllabus a female writer, but essentially keeping the same pattern.

If coherence is to be merely coherence of knowledge, then instructors feel that they can make the final determination on what knowledge is important and how it should be organized. The students are the receivers. Coherence organized in this fashion is essentially an authoritarian approach that can be modified at the periphery but hardly at the core. On the other hand, if general education is thought of as a way of organizing a learning experience and if the coherence sought is in the learning experience itself, then the student can be taken into account—indeed, must be taken into account—in designing the experience.

If knowledge and its organization are alone at the heart of understanding, then the pedagogy likely to be used will probably be didactic with the learner passive. This does not have to be the situation, but if the teaching
style is left to the individual faculty member, as it often is in most institutions, the didactic style will be used in many courses. Furthermore, the structure of many institutions, the evaluation processes used, and the size of classes also make it likely that the didactic approach will be the only logistically possible approach. If knowledge is the means and not the end of learning—a raw material along with the student in the learning experience—then the resulting pedagogy is far more likely to require active participation of the student.

As long as our questions on general education focus primarily on how many courses are required and what content is included in those courses, we will neither be able to develop appropriate remedies for fragmentation nor uncover the ways in which some colleges have developed unusually effective undergraduate programs. To suggest that the major purposes of general education can be achieved in a certain specified array of courses is unrealistic. The sweep of the recommendations made in two recent reports from the Association of American Colleges—A New Vitality in General Education (1988) and The Challenge of Connecting Learning (1990)—amply demonstrate both the desirability and the need to examine the undergraduate educational experience as a whole.

What should be the questions that we ask of colleges in the twenty-first century? At least four should be asked of every institution, with the first two concerning aims and outcomes.

1. What are the purposes of the undergraduate educational program?
2. What are the educational results of the program?

The combination of the answers to these two questions should provide the goals for the college with sufficient clarity to permit them to be used as a framework for developing curriculum, selecting instructional approaches, developing co-curricular activities, and identifying assessment needs.

The third question involves the means to ends and outcomes:

3. What are the essential unifying strategies that are used to provide coherence and essential meaning to the educational experience?

Unifying strategies need not reside only in the curricular design, although that is certainly a reasonable place to expect at least some of these strategies. The unifying strategies form the glue for the entire undergraduate experience. At Alverno, they are the framework of the eight abilities and their assessments. At St. John's, they are the consistent instructional approach and the great books. At Berea College in Kentucky, where the curriculum is very typical of many liberal arts colleges, some of the unifying strategies are outside the curriculum and are found in its work program, its compulsory convocations, and its strong links with Appalachia. At Col-
orando College, the block system is probably the pivotal force, and at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, the interdisciplinary one-course terms that create a working community of learners are a powerful unifying force.

The fourth and final question involves evaluation:

4. What assessment techniques are used to ensure that the purpose is well served, that the hoped-for educational results are obtained, and that the unifying strategies are working well?

Effective assessment systems at some stage require collaboration among faculty members. They should serve as aids for student and program improvements, not simply as ranking systems.

Answers to these four questions on each campus will be shaped by the history of the institution, the nature of its student body, and its physical and human resource patterns, but ultimately they will be shaped by the dominant values that underlie major educational decisions on that campus.

In the twenty-first century, it is anticipated that the answers to these questions—at least at independent institutions—will become more differentiated than in past decades. As economic pressures demand more effective use of resources and as competition for students demands more distinctive educational profiles, we may actually gain new dimensions to the diversity of higher education in the United States. If the campus responses to these questions lead to real diversity in the next century, then we might even see the emergence of multiple scales for excellence, scales related to the four questions above and not related primarily to selectivity of students enrolled or to richness of resources. The first few decades of the century could be a period in which all of us work more consciously, more deliberately, and more collaboratively on our campuses to understand the interplay between our values and the expression of them through our educational programs.

References


