

EDITORS' NOTES

Bringing about any change in higher education is difficult. Curricular change is particularly challenging. The time-worn adage is that it is more difficult to change a college curriculum than to move a graveyard. And then there is general education. General education gets defined in different ways—philosophically, historically, structurally, or relationally.

General education curriculum is an integral part of the American undergraduate education course of study. Its heritage as a formal academic program began with William Rainey Harper's founding of the Junior College at the University of Chicago and the founding of the General College at the University of Minnesota (Ratcliff, 1997a). Over the years, there have been periodic examinations of how general education has been organized, conducted, and changed. In roughly ten-year intervals, Dressel and De Lisle (1969), Blackburn and others (1976), Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989), and Gaff (1991) examined general education across American higher education institutions. Since the Gaff (1991) study, however, no national study of general education had been conducted. Here we take a practical, operational view of general education as a formal component of undergraduate education outside of the major, specialization, or discipline all students are required to take (Conrad, 1978; Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen, 1989).

This volume is about changing the general education curriculum—in big ways through significant reforms and, more frequently, incremental ways—to accomplish purposes better, to connect with students better, and to provide a more engaging and intellectually and emotionally compelling common collegiate experience. The chapters in this volume present the results of a recent national survey on change in general education curriculum; four case studies of institutions that have undertaken change (how they did it, what the constraints were, and most important, what the results were); and concluding discussions on the unfinished agenda of curricular coherence and the nature of change and when and how to bring it about.

General education is that ill-defined portion of the undergraduate curriculum that belongs to nearly everyone and is the sole province of no one. Although it may be the component of associate and baccalaureate degrees with the largest number of student enrollments and the greatest number of faculty members enlisted in its teaching, it frequently lacks its own organization, budget, and dedicated faculty. In a recent reaccreditation report to the Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools, a university (which shall remain mercifully anonymous) stated that although it had general education courses that all students must take, it had no general education

program; rather, various departments offered the courses, and their impact on student learning was therefore difficult to assess. If general education is an overt component of a degree program and students are required to complete courses to fulfill that component, then the university has a general education program. Nevertheless, it is often the disciplinary departments that supply the instructional corps of general education, and it is most often those same departments that are fiscally rewarded for their success in servicing this central piece of the academic pie. General education frequently is governed by a revolving cadre of faculty drawn from the various disciplines contributing courses to its requirements. The faculty committee that oversees the general education curriculum, if the institution has one, tends to draw those interested in internal institutional service and those committed to preserving the resources accruing to their departments from the general education program. An associate provost, dean, or director frequently administers a program taught by borrowed faculty who seldom, if ever, convene to discuss the aims, organization, and outcomes of general education. More often, such faculty governance arrangements become the venue for determining which courses are approved to “count” as meeting general education degree requirements, thereby ensuring the offering departments and their faculty fully-enrolled, full-time-equivalent revenue-generating courses. Such subsidies have little to do with the aims, purposes, and assessments of student learning in general education. Thus, general education comes to the institutional planning and budgeting process as a stepchild and an afterthought. If change in higher education is complex and change in curriculum is especially thorny, then change in general education might be thought to be nearly impossible.

In fact, change and innovation in general education is not only possible but also prevalent. Under the auspices of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University, we undertook two surveys in 2000—the GE 2000 survey of directors of general education and the CAO 2000 survey of chief academic officers—of baccalaureate-granting institutions and found a majority to be engaged in general education change and innovation (Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff, 2001). Here we report trends and findings from these surveys pertinent to changing the general education curriculum. In addition, we invited case studies of institutions that have planned and implemented general education curricular change. These cases add context and variety to the notion of general education change. What we learned about change and about the unfinished agenda of curricular reform is reported here, as are the cases of four such institutions that undertook their own journey to change general education. In charting what changed, we have come to regard a curriculum as a key representation of knowledge, culture, scholarship, and perspective from which students of various backgrounds, interests, and abilities experience, discover, and gain understanding (Ratcliff 1997b).

In Chapter One, we describe and summarize what we learned about change from a decade of general education reform and revision. The GE 2000 and CAO surveys provide a broad-stroke picture of the activity, the changes, the organization, and the future of general education as we crossed into the new millennium. Like most other portraits, however, these surveys give a snapshot in time. To put this picture into perspective, we compare and contrast with two prior studies. Ten years earlier, Gaff (1991) surveyed chief academic officers, and Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) conducted a detailed and comprehensive examination of general education as reported in college catalogues. Taken together, the GE and CAO 2000 survey results and the comparisons with studies a decade earlier provide a picture of how change in general education is accelerating, what has motivated that change, and why. Far from the impossible, general education reform, revision, and redesign is not only possible but is found widely throughout higher education today.

Four case studies of changes in general education at different types of institutions add context to the survey results. The first of our case stories, the development of the general education program at Franklin Pierce College, chronicles a quest to create a distinctive curriculum—one that would differentiate this small New Hampshire liberal arts college from its competitors and one that reflects a commitment to long-term, deliberative planning. The story is one of success in overcoming faculty inertia and budgetary limitations to achieve in 1990–91 a major overhaul of the general education program. The Pierce Plan exemplified some of the major curricular trends found in the GE 2000 survey and best practices in program design found in the literature. It provided interdisciplinary seminars in each of the four years of study, including a first-year seminar, the “Individual and Community,” and a capstone senior liberal arts seminar. Sophomore general education courses, such as “The Ancient and Medieval World,” integrated history, literature, the visual arts, music, philosophy, and religion into an interdisciplinary framework rather than requiring course work in each of those separate subjects as is found in a conventional distribution general education plan. As Sarah T. Dangelantonio recounts in Chapter Two, this was a curricular revolution followed by a decade of evolutionary fine-tuning. In the process of refining, many of the unique features were improved and embellished, while others fell into disfavor and were threatened with discontinuance. The original curricular overhaul was not informed by data on student learning or formal reviews of the program; it was an imaginative creation of the faculty and academic leaders to articulate the mission and values of the college. The refinements and modifications are now informed by students’ assessments and program reviews and stimulated by the standards of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, of which Franklin Pierce is an institutional member in good standing. Today, program evaluation and student assessments, together with systematic planning, guide the evolution of general education.

The second case, presented by Haig Mardirosian in Chapter Three, examines the general education reforms at American University in Washington, D.C. Here a new general education program began in 1989 following discussion, design, and planning over the preceding two years. Like the Pierce Plan, American University sought to create a distinctive curriculum that fit the international and cosmopolitan character of its students and distinguished it from its competitors. A second and equally important motive was to improve the coherence of the curriculum, convey its value to students, and overcome the sense among students that general education was “a knot of requirements” difficult to navigate. Six objectives for general education were derived from institutional mission and values. Five curricular areas addressed these objectives through the provision of clusters of courses organized by themes, a strategy used in many other institutional reforms of the decade. A ceiling of 150 courses was established for all of general education so that the clusters needed to be created from a constrained (rather than ever increasing) bevy of subjects. The reforms at American University illustrate a problem that general education faces at many institutions: the intersection between the expectations of professional fields on general education and the competition for curricular space between major and general education course work. As at Franklin Pierce, the general education program at American University was the creative work of the faculty and academic dean and originally was not informed by program reviews and student assessment. In 1999, the program was revisited more formally as part of the strategic planning process, the presidential discussions on the future of the university, and the application of revised standards during the reaccreditation visit of the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. Thus, again, the tools of evaluation and assessment, the structure of strategic planning, and the influence of regional accreditation conspired to prompt further refinement and reform.

Our third case story, Cascadia Community College, presents a very different situation. Many who have labored at general education reform wish that they could wipe the slate clean and not be bound by departmental politics and the vested interest of faculty members who take offence when it suggested that the course they have taught for countless years will no longer be part of the new general education curriculum. Cascadia is a new community college in Washington State, and its leaders were challenged with creating general education from scratch. Yet as Victoria Richart notes in Chapter Four, Cascadia’s initial curriculum was designed within a web of constraints. The college was to share facilities and provide programs that made for easy transition for students to the University of Washington, Bothell. The curriculum needed to address the Direct Transfer Agreement of the Higher Education Coordinating Board and the statewide articulation agreement of the public institutions of higher education, and it had to meet candidacy requirements for accreditation by the Northwest Association of Colleges and Schools. Thus, the educational, social, and political context in

which the college undertook its initial curricular design created a gravity toward the conventional and safe—perhaps a distributional plan. However, the campus leadership boldly adopted the principles of a learning organization, derived four broad goals for the educational program from the mission statement, and developed interdisciplinary courses organized as learning communities to enable students to achieve these aims.

At the same time, the same goals concurrently guided faculty development through the Teaching and Learning Academy and employee development through the Employee Learning Institute so that the entire campus community—faculty, administration, staff, and students—worked toward common goals as a learning organization. Each goal in the common core of learning competencies was steered by a learning outcome team comprising faculty, staff, and administration and charged with the fulfillment and refinement of the goal. To ensure the ongoing connection and relevance of the curriculum to business and industry, major employers as well as many of the area institutions receiving Cascadia transfer students served on advisory groups that contributed to the review and evaluation of the programs. Cascadia embedded conventional general education subjects found in the articulation agreement into the learning community course clusters. Cascadia not only illustrates how one college designed general education from scratch using available literature on best practices in undergraduate education but did so imaginatively and without succumbing to the conventional credit distributions expected by articulation agreements.

The final case story comes from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. If Cascadia is the youngest of general education programs presented here, then Hamline is the oldest. The Hamline Plan, instituted in 1984–85, gives the longest look at change in general education curricula reported in this volume. There was a sense then that the conventional “two-of-everything” distributional curriculum was out of date, was not connected to the mission of the university, and provided no distinctive basis on which applicants might select Hamline over the other colleges and universities in the metropolitan Twin Cities area. As Garvin Davenport relates in Chapter Five, general education before the reform was seen as something for students to “get out of the way for the major.” Its purpose was “opaque” and its relation to the major and the professional fields was “uncertain and unexplained.”

The Hamline Plan focused on the “practical liberal arts,” drawing a connection to the university’s many career-oriented and professional majors. It implemented many of the innovations that were to become widely used in reforms of the 1990s: theme-related year-long first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses, and emphases on speaking, computer literacy, diversity, leadership skills, and internships. The courses incorporated and addressed more than one general education area, were team based, and stressed the development of problem-solving skills. Like Franklin Pierce and American University, the realization of the Hamline Plan was followed

by what Davenport calls “a second wind of change.” As with the initial redesign of general education, this second wind portends the future in general education reform: explaining the pedagogy of interdisciplinarity, exploring the mean of breadth in relation to the study of culture and diversity, reexamining the curricular conventions of time, course, and credit, and using assessment as an informative tool to spotlight what works and high-light agendas for further curricular change.

In developing these case studies, we asked each author to describe certain aspects of the changes at their institution. Rather than simply reiterating goals and requirements, we asked them to describe the forces and factors that led to the particular configurations they adopted; to profile how those changes were communicated to administrators, faculty, and students; and to assess how the changes had fared over time. These stories show how change is not only feasible but also achievable.

In Chapter Six, we take up one of the more elusive characteristics of the curriculum: coherence. In reviewing the data from the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys and the four cases, Kent Johnson and James Ratcliff note that most colleges strive to improve coherence, but most fall short of the mark. They examine why. Tensions are inherent in the general education curriculum and commonly are viewed as barriers to coherence. These tensions often are about what to teach and why, how to organize the curriculum, whether classic or contemporary texts should prevail, and to what extent personal development or communal and civic goals should prevail. There are tensions between general education and the major, the professional fields, and graduate education. Also, general education is the source of debate relative to social relevance and purpose of the undergraduate curriculum and to who gets to decide (the institution, the system, or the legislature) what general education should be provided. Conventional approaches to changing the curriculum emphasize the resolution of such tensions as a first step, usually through consensual decision making in a task force or committee. Johnson and Ratcliff assert that such an approach may inhibit rather than facilitate change and present an alternate view of these tensions as integral to progress toward coherence. The authors offer four criteria for planning for the improvement and evaluation of curricular coherence, describing it as a great unfinished agenda in general education reform. They find that increased curricular coherence improves public understanding of general education and provides new vitality and shared understandings of the program by students and faculty.

The increasing prominence given to changing the general education curriculum in the 1990s was paralleled by the adoption of more rigorous planning, budgeting, and evaluation systems in colleges and universities. This second trend altered the first; how general education curriculum is changed has changed, argues James Ratcliff in the seventh, and concluding, chapter. Changes to general education over the decade clarified goals; limited student course choices; and refocused programs from the introduction

to disciplines to interdisciplinary groupings around themes, clusters, and learning communities. In addition, courses on diversity widely became part of most programs. By and large, these changes were not necessarily a result of strategic plans, program reviews, or student assessments, yet increasingly colleges and universities vet general education change within the larger context of mission, strategic planning, and evaluation policies. Ratcliff asserts that the current processes of academic planning and evaluation, now so firmly entrenched, may have limited utility when change is directed to the improvement of quality or coherence in general. The conflicting and sometimes contradictory nature of program quality has practical consequences for curricular change and specific implications for the use of the planning and evaluation paradigm.

The quality of general education is influenced strongly by formal and informal communication. While the university catalogue may put forth lofty goals, faculty advisers may tell students to avoid a course or get it out of the way, redefining its expectations and importance. Communication engenders understanding, conveys the values, and helps define the quality and coherence of the program. Through communication with one another, people articulate multiple and often opposing viewpoints. Thus, discussions of general education become unfinished, ongoing social discourses. Discussions about curricular quality and coherence emerge from tensions endemic to the concepts themselves and therefore are not simply solved. Contradictions and tensions are inherent in general education, such as the prescription or election of courses, disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, and learning organized by cohorts of students and that arranged by sequence of subjects.

Contradictions, Ratcliff asserts, are the basic drivers of both incremental and transformative change. Concepts derive their meanings from one or more opposing concepts. The idea of the capstone course emerges from the lack of synthesis among disparate courses. The marriage of curriculum concepts with opposing ones fosters the social dynamics of change that may have both-and rather than either-or attributes.

Ratcliff examines certain key question in the change process, such as whether the focus should be on the improvement process itself or a set of desired outcomes and how to regard curricular churning relative to progressive, cumulative change. He finds that change has involved more than merely stating an educational goal around which faculty teach and students learn; it also attends to how that goal is discussed, understood, and redefined by faculty and by students and how that continuous re-envisioning becomes manifest in the program.

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James L. Ratcliff
D. Kent Johnson
Jerry G. Gaff
Editors

JAMES L. RATCLIFF is president and senior consultant, Performance Associates Postsecondary Consulting, Pueblo West, Colorado.

D. KENT JOHNSON is director of assessment services at the Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

JERRY G. GAFF is senior scholar, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C.