The Contextual Significance of General Education in Higher Education

GENERAL EDUCATION IS widely touted as an enduring distinctive of higher education in the United States (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Boyer, 1987; Gaston, 2015; Zakaria, 2014). The notion that undergraduate education demands wide-ranging knowledge is a hallmark of U.S. college graduates that international educators emulate (Blumenstyk, 2015; Rhodes, 2010b; Tsui, 2012). The veracity of this distinct educational vision is supported by the fact that approximately one third of the typically 120 credits required for the bachelor’s degree in the United States consist of general education courses (Lattuca & Stark, 2014). Realizing a general education has been understood to be central to achieving higher education’s larger purposes, making it a particularly salient concern.

General Education’s Interconnection With Higher Education’s Purpose

General education’s significance is evident in recent calls to reinvigorate higher education (Bok, 2005, 2013; Delbanco, 2012; DeMillo, 2011; Keeling & Hersh, 2012; Keller, 2008; Menand, 2010; Roth, 2014). General education overlaps with foundational queries as to why students attend college,
including whether higher education is essentially about gaining knowledge, developing skills, or advancing democratic outcomes (De Vise, 2011; Menand, 2010). Assumptions regarding the purposes of higher education are vast and various; the point here is that general education is entangled with divergent assumptions regarding higher education’s purpose. This intersection not only complicates general education but also lies at the center of why it matters.

General education is at the epicenter of a critical firestorm facing higher education. General education is implicated in critique regarding the quality of what college students learn (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Donoghue, 2008; Hacker & Dreifus, 2010; Selingo, 2013). Keeling and Hersh (2012) relate the discontent regarding college learning on the whole to general education specifically:

> [C]ollege learning is advanced and strengthened by exposure to the greatest possible diversity of ideas, people, and learning experiences, inside and outside the classroom. The much-maligned general education programs required of most undergraduates might address this opportunity if they were far more carefully designed, implemented, and assessed: as it is, most general education is disconnected, unchallenging, and boring. Neither students nor institutions invest much in it. No wonder students so often hate it, and no wonder it so seldom achieves its goals (p. 47).

Keeling and Hersh (2012) illustrate just a few of the wide range of expectations for general education: General education is expected to expose students to a diverse array of ideas, incorporate curricular and cocurricular experiences, provide a space of connection, offer intellectual challenge, and be exciting to boot.

Differing interpretations open general education to various evaluative contexts. Some argue that it is about introducing “basic subjects,” such as literature, history, mathematics, and foreign languages. From this vantage point, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2010) has voiced a strong critique giving three out of five institutions a C or worse in general education. Another standpoint is that college graduates should hold in common certain “fundamental skills.” Related to this perspective, Arum and Roksa (2011)
have brought widespread attention to general education by bemoaning inadequacies in college learning in “critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication” (p. 121). Another viewpoint is that of “essential texts,” such as great books or great ideas. Lewis (2006) has argued that higher education falls short in its responsibility to ensure that students attain “common knowledge” and “shared experience” that inform a “particular point of view from which they will have all seen the products of civilization” (p. 61).

General education is also implicated in much of the broader criticism facing higher education. Critiques revolve around the lack of attention to questions of meaning (Kronman, 2007). Concerns have also been voiced regarding fragmentation within the educational experience as well as a disconnect between the academy and the societal context (Taylor, 2010). These concerns also imply the expected contributions of general education and influence viewpoints regarding general education’s value.

In addition to being interwoven with higher education broadly in terms of educational content, general education has widespread significance in that it impacts colleges and universities at many levels. General education is implicated in systemic-level and educational policy debates. It crosses institutional contexts (Allen, 2006; Finkelstein, 2005; Penn, 2011b; Shoenberg, 2005). All six regional accrediting bodies identify standards for effectiveness in general education (Higher Learning Association, 2015; Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006; New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2011; North Central Association, 2015; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2012; Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013). Finally, general education impacts and is impacted by tenure and promotion policies, academic and student affairs collaboration, and educational ethos. These broad influences open general education to a wide range of opinion regarding its purpose (or lack thereof).

There is grave concern regarding the state of general education, although such apprehension is not new. Concern regarding general education has been raised at multiple points in higher education’s history (Carnochan, 1993; Kanter, Gamson, & London, 1997; Rudolph, 1977). Ernest L. Boyer (1988) decried general education to be the “neglected stepchild of the undergraduate experience” (p. 2); he pointedly characterized it as the “spare room of academic
life” in that it is “chronically in a state ranging from casual neglect to serious disrepair” (Boyer, 1981b, p. 3). Johnson and Ratcliff (2004) referenced coherent general education as an “unfinished agenda” (p. 85). While the reality that general education faces daunting challenges is not new, the particularities are new with each era.

The various evaluative and pragmatic contexts that influence general education make it vulnerable to confusion in times of stability. In times of rapid and consequential change, general education faces even greater attention to concerns of purpose (Fong, 2013).

General Education and the Current Context

Higher education in the United States is enmeshed in a time of radical change and considerable unrest (Fong, 2013; Selingo, 2013; Taylor, 2010). The forces that dominate higher education in the present are centrifugal (Delbanco, 2012; Taylor, 2010, Wells, 2015b). That is to say, social forces are pulling colleges and universities in disaggregated directions and “unbundling” the very idea of higher education (Selingo, 2013). These forces have real implications for general education.

New patterns in college attendance force colleges and universities to reconsider general education and its methods of delivery. Increasing numbers of students attend multiple institutions en route to the baccalaureate degree, either by transferring between institutions or through dual-enrollment programs in which students take college courses while simultaneously completing high school coursework (Allen, 2006; Selingo, 2013). A number of students enroll in college coursework at two or more institutions within the same academic year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). The dominant mode for completing an undergraduate degree is no longer the purview of a single institution in which students complete all their requirements at the same college over the course of 4 years.

Student mobility has implications for curricular policy (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). For example, if general education requirements are front-loaded in the first and second college years, the increasing number
of students who fulfill undergraduate requirements through transfer or dual-enrollment programs may sidestep the very experiences the institutions have articulated to be common to their graduates. New patterns in attendance also have financial implications, in that colleges and universities sometimes rely on the tuition income of general education course enrollments to offset the costs of other programs (Blumenstyk, 2015). When general education requirements are fulfilled through transfer credits, a source of tuition income is diverted as well. Beyond student mobility, general education is implicated in current concerns over the value and affordability of a college education.

As policy makers consider new ways to make higher education more affordable, the credits required for general education are scrutinized more stringently. Heightened attention to return on investment and economic utility places strict evaluative frames upon general education (Bennett & Wilezol, 2013). Three-year degree programs that often limit general education have gained attention (Gaston, 2010; Jaschik, 2009). Competency-based degrees, in which students are awarded credit for demonstrating knowledge of material as opposed to completing credit-based courses, also raise new queries for general education (Blumenstyk, 2015). As cost concerns take center stage, general education faces new challenges regarding its contribution to higher education’s purposes.

The movement toward greater accountability also raises questions about general education (Rhodes, 2010a). Colleges and universities face vociferous calls to clarify and fulfill their mission to individuals and to society (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The insistence from the public and accrediting agencies that colleges and universities specify their goals and document their achievement impacts educational practice (Schneider & Shoenberg, 1998). Institutional accountability concerns are exacerbated in a context where students devalue general education.

General education faces serious challenges in an environment where students see general education as something to get out of the way (Aveni, 2014). Attaining skills and knowledge for a career far outweighs gaining a “well-rounded general education” among students (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2014). Moreover, viewing general education as an unnecessary hurdle makes it at best a lost opportunity and at worst particularly vulnerable in
today’s resource-limited, accountability-laden context. Examining general education within broader concerns about higher education points to a daunting but opportune task facing general education in the present.

**General Education: Many Meanings, Multiple Functions**

One often-articulated ideal of general education is that there is something or some set of things that college and university graduates should hold in common; however, the basis for that commonness is anything but shared. Whereas some consider general education to mean skills and abilities, others endow general education with specific content. Still others equate general education with particular academic disciplines. Recent articulations have framed general education to be a set of learning outcomes (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, 2007; Penn, 2011a, 2011b). Differing perspectives not only make it challenging to consider the significance of general education but also open it up to a wide range of determinations regarding its effectiveness.

General education is made particularly complex by the various lenses that proponents and critics alike have used to frame its significance. Discussion regarding general education has long been “hampered by a pervasive sense of confusion over the meaning of the term general education” (italics in original) (Miller, 1988, p. 3). Bastedo’s (2002) assertion that there is “little consensus in higher education today on what general education is or should be” (p. 273) reflected a long history of confusion and remains true today. Lack of consensus further complicates the formidable challenge of general education renewal (Gaston & Gaff, 2009; Hanstedt, 2012).

Scholars and educational practitioners ascribe countless aims to general education and, in doing so, evoke a host of related but not entirely synonymous terms, including but not limited to liberal education, liberal arts, liberal learning, core curriculum, and common learning. Thus, any comprehensive examination of general education depends on some attentiveness to definition.
However, no unanimous term exists to guide comprehension of general education (nor a sense of whether we are achieving it) and in what ways it is distinct from or overlaps with various other curricular elements, such as the major and electives, and cocurricular programs. While consensus on general education is unrealistic, this monograph aims to clarify terms associated with general education in order to lend support to those seeking to advance both the conceptual and the pragmatic aims of general education.

In this monograph, I use the term “general education” to reference education that undergraduate students across academic disciplines share in common, both within and beyond institutional contexts. General education comprises a variety of philosophical ideals and is manifested in a variety of forms. As such, general education is an organizing concept that frames the fulfillment of mission and prescribes particular lenses for curriculum and pedagogy while simultaneously encompassing a wide variety of philosophical ideals, curricular models, and learning activities.

Lack of consensus, fueled by general education’s complex history, which is detailed in the next chapter, has influenced the widespread use of several related terms and concepts. Providing a basic idea of related terms is one avenue for enhancing clarity; in order to know what general education is, one must recognize how it differs from and overlaps with related concepts. An exhaustive determination of each of the terms related to general education is beyond the scope of this monograph. The point of illustrating several brief descriptions is to help readers differentiate general education from a host of closely related concepts but also to appreciate how closely these terms relate to general education. Clarity of terms combined with a deep appreciation for complexity is requisite to effectively navigating general education. The following terms exemplify the range of terminology that is typically uttered in general education–related conversations.

- **Liberal arts.** The term “liberal arts” finds its origins in the concept of *artes liberalis*, defined literally as the arts befitting a free human being. In the context of U.S. higher education, this ideal initially was composed of seven liberal arts. The first three, framed as the *trivium*, focused on cultivating an appreciation for language: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. To these
were added the *quadrivium* focusing on the mathematical-physical arts: geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (Glyler & Weeks, 1998; Roche, 2010). The connection of the idea of the liberal arts to general education stems from this inheritance but also relates to the manner of delivering many general education programs. In many colleges and universities, study of the liberal arts is synonymous with the required elements of an undergraduate curriculum, in which students must enroll in courses reflecting a variety of subject areas, such as literature, history, science, mathematics, natural philosophy, religion, fine arts, and foreign language (Bastedo, 2002; Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Engagement with the subject areas traditionally referred to as the “liberal arts” disciplines\(^1\) is a means of achieving the aims of a general education program.

- **Liberal education.**\(^2\) Liberal education draws on the idea of a free or “liberating” education consistent with the liberal arts (Cronon, 1998); liberal education reflects a philosophy of education whereas the concept of liberal arts points to subject areas (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Perhaps no other confluence of terminology creates as much confusion as the relationship between liberal education and general education. Some have argued that liberal education and general education are fundamentally different (Boyer, 1987; Boyer & Levine, 1981; Flexner, 1908; Miller, 1988; Van Doren, 1943). Others have argued that the two are one and the same (Harvard University Committee, 1945; Hutchins, 1936; Meiklejohn, 1922; Thomas, 1962). Still others have contended that the concepts mean the same thing but that liberal education is a more accurate reflection of general education in a particular time and social context (Hanstedt, 2012; President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947). A generative distinction is that liberal education references an educational ideal whereas general education is a curricular model established as a means of achieving it (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).

- **Common learning.** The phrase “common learning” has also been used to reference general education, sometimes referring to the whole of general education and sometimes in part. Ernest L. Boyer used the term interchangeably with general education; this application is consistent with his philosophical formulation of general education as the “learning that should be
common to all people” (Boyer, 1981a, ix) precisely because it was grounded in “common experience” (Boyer, 1982a, 1982b). Cohen and Kiskar (2010) suggest that “one of the more lasting definitions [of general education] is that all students should gain a common body of knowledge so that they can take their place as members of a community with shared understandings” (p. 154). Common learning can be variously defined to mean everything from common content, as in the same texts or courses being engaged by all students, to common learning objectives, as in all students developing similar competencies, such as verbal and written communication. Common learning, like liberal education, is a broad and complex philosophical ideal for which general education is a means.

- **Core curriculum.** As is the case with common learning, core curriculum is often used interchangeably with general education. However, a more accurate definition of a core curriculum is a tightly structured and often interdisciplinary series of prescribed courses intended to ensure that students gain a common foundation of knowledge (Bastedo, 2002; Lattuca & Stark, 2014). The core curriculum is a specific design for achieving general education, one that emphasizes the design of a set of interdisciplinary required courses as opposed to a distribution requirement where a general education is achieved by exposure to a variety of subjects.

Across these terms, general education is a means to achieving varied aims of higher education. As such, general education encapsulates a variety of forms and diverse ideas regarding its content. At the same time, general education represents a way of framing a philosophical ideal that reflects something valuable about an education that empowers individuals and gets at something bigger than any single academic discipline.

**Purpose and Organization of Monograph**

This monograph addresses some of the consequential questions surrounding general education today, focusing on the 4-year college or university context. The central purpose of this text is to sharpen understanding of the complex
picture of general education in U.S. higher education and, by extension, to illuminate avenues for realizing and sustaining purposeful general education programs.

Toward this end, this monograph provides a comprehensive overview of general education's functions in higher education today. This overview clarifies elements of general education, identifies various forms of general education, considers how these evolved historically, and points out how general education's aims are achieved in the current context. The text examines both historical context and current trends in order to consider multiple frames of reference and identify shared ideals and common practices for general education. Furthermore, the monograph considers the complex intersection between general education and current priorities and concerns for higher education. In doing so, it aims to provide valuable guidance to practitioners and researchers attending to advance renewal of general education within higher education's current context.

This monograph addresses timely questions. General education matters for how one frames and pursues the effective preparation of U.S. college and university graduates in the 21st century. General education matters for how one responds to questions of accountability, including the affordability and value of higher education. General education counts for how faculty members are rewarded for teaching within and beyond their disciplinary specializations. It matters for who actually teaches general education courses in today’s new realities of contingent faculty (Selingo, 2013; Ginsberg, 2012; Umbach, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). It also matters as one considers the contribution of cocurricular educators and programs to the aims of general education.

The monograph also addresses timeless questions. The purpose and significance of general education is not a new question (Bell, 1966; Boning, 2007; Boyer, 1988; Boyer & Levine, 1981; Harvard University Committee, 1945; Miller, 1988; Stevens, 2001); yet this is a query that each social context must consider anew. General education renewal in the current context raises the “same questions that general education has always been asking: What is an individual’s role in society? What is the good life? What are ethical decision-making criteria? What is the national and international context in which we
act?” (Kelly, 2006, p. 6). General education raises important queries of individual and social significance.

The following chapter surveys the history of general education, emphasizing the connections between general education and broader social and educational contexts. This historical backdrop is valuable context for educators who work with and around general education. By understanding the wide range of ideals espoused for general education and how they emerged over the past 300 years, educational leaders are better prepared to navigate the complexity of the present. The current context is a minefield of various assumptions around general education, and an informed comprehension of how multiple understandings of general education came to be is crucial for engaging the present.

We then turn to the contemporary conversation on general education. The third chapter begins by describing the conditions that influence general education, including various expected functions. This chapter also classifies and illustrates prominent models of general education as well as variations of the models and emerging trends.

The fourth chapter builds on the conceptual foundations previously described and turns to pragmatic questions that undergird effective general education in the current context. The chapter describes elements of effective general education in various institutional contexts, identifies and responds to concerns regarding general education and higher education policy (e.g., faculty reward structures, institutional costs), and describes the relationships between general education and other higher education priorities, including tenure and promotion, cocurricular programs, campus environments, and employer expectations. This chapter concludes by focusing on the close connections between general education and assessment.

The final chapter reflects on what it means to realize general education’s purpose in the current context of U.S. higher education, and furnishes higher education researchers and administrators with ideas for shaping general education renewal.