

Keeping General Education Vital A Struggle Against Original Sin?

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During one of my recent campus visits, a senior faculty member offered an intriguing metaphor for efforts to revitalize general education. “Are you the same person who wrote about experimental colleges in the late 1960s and 70s?” he asked. I affirmed that I was indeed the same one, and expressed surprise that he had read my work, remembered my name, and connected it with his university’s current work on curriculum reform. He thought for a minute before observing that it wasn’t really educational “reform” that I had been pursuing during my career. Rather, he suggested, the work is more like a struggle against “original sin.” It involves trying to overcome academic pride, he said, the tendency of faculty to focus on their own discipline, research interests, and individual autonomy rather than on the most fundamental knowledge and skills their students need from a curriculum.

Of course, the pendulum is a more common metaphor; attention to the core curriculum is said to come and go. Yet it is curious that the emphasis on general education continues today, a quarter of a century after the most recent revival, begun when, in the late 1970s, the Carnegie Council on Higher Education declared general education a “disaster area.”

In a survey conducted in 2000,^{*} my colleagues and I found that 57 percent of four-year institutions—including a majority of all Carnegie types—were conducting a formal review of general education. Further, 64

percent of chief academic officers reported that, as an institutional priority, attention to general education had *increased*; only 2 percent reported a *decrease*, and 33 percent reported *no change*. If attention to general education used to be episodic, my sense is that it has become a sustained concern at most institutions.

Why Has the Attempt to Improve General Education Become a Constant Concern?

There are several reasons. First, when a faculty decides on what learning is most important for all students, it usually identifies a configuration of educational goals so important that they cannot easily be ignored or neglected.

Second, many institutions that have revised their curricula have also created new governance arrangements that provide ongoing leadership for general education. These often include a dean or director of general education; directors of writing, freshman seminars, and other components; and an institution-wide committee for general education. Individuals specifically assigned to provide leadership for general education have a responsibility to keep it vital.

A third reason is that there are always some unfinished agendas in improving general education programs. For example, our survey found that 73 percent of the chief academic officers said their program had

clear goals either *very much* or *quite a lot*. The same response was given by 62 percent when asked whether their curricular requirements were directly linked to the goals; 38 percent reported that their program had a coherent sequence of courses, and 32 percent said they assess student learning in relation to the goals. Clearly assessment, forging coherence, and connecting the curriculum to goals are all ongoing challenges—even if a faculty agrees on common learning goals.

Finally, to paraphrase a dictum in AAC&U’s classic *Integrity of the College Curriculum*, it is a constant challenge for the faculty *as a whole* to take responsibility for the curriculum *as a whole*. Engaging faculty understanding of, and support for, general education is an unending task.

As with overcoming original sin, it may be impossible to permanently achieve a student-centered and learning-centered general education program. But it is, nonetheless, essential to answer persistent student questions: “Why do we need general education?” and “Why do I have to take this course?” As long as a broad general education is valued as both preparation for a good life and for professional success (see the forthcoming report from AAC&U’s Project on Accreditation and Assessment), the effort to make that happen is not likely to go away. Better to join the ongoing struggle than to wait for the pendulum to swing back again. ■

^{*} Ratcliff, James L., D. Kent Johnson, Steven M. La Nasa, and Jerry G. Gaff. 2001. *The status of general education in the year 2000: Summary of a national survey*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.