

Gen Ed: Its Past, Present and Possible

Future

Moving beyond today's smorgasbord of disconnected courses.

By [Steven Mintz](#)

Nostalgia—the desire to turn back the clock and return to a seemingly superior past—can be healthy and even therapeutic, but it's often a trap, a pathology and a temptation that must be resisted.

In most cases, that imagined past turns out to be bogus. It consists of a set of highly romanticized myths that bear scant resemblance to the world as it actually was.

The memories on which nostalgia rests are highly selective. Like a photographer, we trim, we crop, we sharpen, we screen out and, today, we Photoshop. Memory retrieval involves a process of construction, as our mind fills in gaps, adds detail, making our recollections prone to error and distortion.

Nostalgia can be damaging. It not only encourages the embrace of narratives of decline but stymies fresh thinking. We must avoid getting caught in the nostalgia trap and look forward instead.

Yet as my friend Stephanie Coontz, the great historian of marriage and the family and celebrated debunker of myths about the “traditional family,” [has observed](#), we're also vulnerable to another powerful temptation: to overidealize innovation and paint excessively rosy pictures of the future. The allure of the novel, the newfangled, the groundbreaking and the state-of-the-art can also lead us down a primrose path.

What we must do instead is to strive, as dispassionately as we can, to understand the dynamics trends, forces and processes that created the past and will shape the future.

Here, I'd like to discuss the history of general education: its rise, fall, current status and need to be radically rethought and reimagined.

First, however, self-disclosure. I taught in Columbia's core curriculum, and I consider it a model of what a lower-division undergraduate education can be. That institution's first- and second-year seminars ensure that all the campus's undergraduates acquire fluency in masterworks of art, literature, music, political and moral philosophy, and theology and the frontiers of the biological, brain and natural sciences.

Columbia's core is anything but perfect: it remains much too Eurocentric and fails to engage sufficiently with the social sciences or the pressing issues of the present. But compared to what exists elsewhere—a smorgasbord of disconnected disciplinary classes that does little to ensure that undergraduates obtain the foundational communication, analytical and critical thinking skills and cultural literacies expected of a college graduate—the Columbia approach strikes me as a sort of Platonic ideal.

Columbia didn't invent gen ed singlehandedly, but it did play a crucial role in the process.

General education as we know it today arose out of two key developments. The first was the demise, toward the end of the 19th century, of the classical curriculum (Yale abandoned its classical language requirement by 1905) and the rise of electives. Electives served both faculty and student interests, by allowing professors to teach courses in their areas of disciplinary specialization and giving students greater choice. In 1900, Harvard required a single course, in composition.

But every action breeds a reaction, and there was a growing sense, even among electives' most ardent proponents, that many undergraduates were ill prepared for advanced classes and that a college education should be more coherent. It's not surprising that there were mounting calls to coax order out of chaos.

The other major contributor to the rise of general education was war. World War I, World War II and the Cold War played crucial roles in initiating, institutionalizing and reinvigorating gen ed, until the Vietnam War brought earlier conceptions of a gen ed core to a crashing end and ultimately laid the groundwork for the very different approaches to general education that we see today, which combines elaborate distribution requirements and extensive choice.

Even before the introduction of the first gen ed classes, leading universities had, alongside the advent of the seminar, begun to implement the delivery model that would come to define gen ed. As Gilbert Allardyce observed in his [history of the Western Civ survey course](#), in 1882, only five Harvard classes enrolled 100 or more students; but by 1901, 14 had over 200 students. Meanwhile, as early as 1896, Harvard had begun to use graduate assistants to quiz students and in 1903 inaugurated the “Harvard method,” in which a faculty member lectured and graduate students led discussion groups.

U.S. entry into the First World War posed an existential threat to many colleges as military conscription prompted fears of a catastrophic loss of students and tuition. As a workaround, campus leadership and the War Department devised the Students Army Training Corps. By fall 1918, over 125,000 men on 500 campuses underwent military training while taking a War Issues course. As the program director explained, “This is a war of ideas and ... the course should ... give to the members of the Corps some understanding of the view of life and of society which they are called upon to defend and of that view against which we are fighting.”

Combining economics, government, history, literature and philosophy, War Issues was “general education by government decree: compulsory, interdisciplinary, an exercise in common learning for the duties of citizenship,” in Allardyce’s words. War Issues, a product of U.S. wartime propaganda, served as the progenitor for later general education classes and helps explain gen ed’s Eurocentrism.

In the words of the progressive historian Charles Beard, “The civilization of the United States has always been a part of European or ‘Western,’ civilization.” Therefore, the lower-division curriculum should focus “on the development of democratic ideals and practices, on the accumulation and spread of knowledge and learning, on the advance of science, technology and invention, on the abiding traditions of the unity of Western culture and its growing integration in world culture.”

The University of Chicago under President Robert Maynard Hutchins played a critical role in devising a vision of general education that we’d recognize today. All lower-division undergraduates were to receive a critical understanding of the key organizing ideas and system of thought that underlie the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences, with an emphasis on analysis, method

and theory and intellectual and cultural configurations, rather than on chronological development.

The Second World War, like the First, fueled interest in general education, but as the Cold War intensified, a reaction arose. Social science departments led the way, arguing that their courses were too technical and specialized to be subsumed within more interdisciplinary gen ed classes. Students joined in, demanding more electives and choice.

The ideal of a common core of learning was already fading even before the student protests of the later 1960s turned their ire against Western Civ requirements—with their implication that liberty and culture were a solely product of European culture.

Although Harvard's 1945 Redbook, *General Education in a Free Society*, with its call for a common educational experience, became "scripture in the general education movement," the core courses it called for in the humanities and natural and social sciences were never instituted. Instead, students could meet those requirements with an ever-expanding list of options. That proved to be the model that most institutions followed.

Although the late 1960s and early 1970s saw requirements dismantled at leading liberal arts colleges and research universities, beginning in the late 1970s, the pendulum shifted yet again. Gen ed requirements were gradually reinstated—often far more complex than those in the past.

But something profound had changed. The ideal of a common core of knowledge that all college graduates should master had faded. So, too, did the campus tests that had assessed competence in areas like writing proficiency or swimming. Insofar as a vision underlay the new approach, it was a smattering of this, a smidgen of that. It was a tasting menu rather than a broad, interdisciplinary, nonspecialized approach to knowledge. This was the cafeteria model that persists today.

If the emerging approach was less rigid and doctrinaire than its predecessor, its objectives were also less compelling and the skills and knowledge it was intended to convey less well defined. A by-product of a series of rather unsavory political compromises, designed to placate various interests and prop up enrollment in departments lacking substantial student demand, gen ed has

become a box-checking exercise that can be met through an extensive list of options.

But if some things had changed, a base reality remained the same. The gen ed courses were staffed largely by the academy's helots and proletariat: adjuncts, lecturers and graduate students. A report from 1960 described the staffing of gen ed courses "as 'alarming,' with morale low, turnover high, ranking professors few in number and various junior instructors merely going through the motions."

It's not an accident that no campus has, since World War II, tried to institute a common lower-division educational experience. Neither faculty nor students show any interest in such an approach.

But the approach that we have adopted, mandating ever larger numbers of requirements that can be met with an extensive array of courses, strikes me as undesirable on multiple grounds. Not only does it intensify the trend toward ever narrower classes, it fails to ensure that graduates have attained the level of cultural literacy, numeracy or communication skills that every degree holder should possess. It creates the veneer of a liberal education, but not its substance.

We can't turn back the clock and reinstitute a common educational experience. But we can take meaningful steps forward.

Your campus might follow the example of Purdue's Cornerstone, a 15 credit-hour undergraduate certificate program, or Austin Community College's Great Questions seminars or Harvard's Humanities 10, which give students, irrespective of major, the opportunity to engage with core texts in discussion-based courses led by faculty who are passionate about their success. Or you might consider something like Harvard's Humanities 11 Framework courses, designed to introduce undergraduates to the arts of looking and listening and reading.

In each case, the impetus for innovation came not from above, but from teams of engaged faculty members who shared a vision of a lower-division education that is more coherent and meaningful than the cafeteria-style curriculum that now predominates. It may well be beyond our ability to resurrect gen ed's founding vision, but that doesn't mean that we can't accomplish something that resembles that ideal.

Consider creating clusters of interconnected lower-division courses that deal with existential issues: ethics, evil, identity, love, tragedy, as viewed through multiple literary, philosophical and theological traditions; or that approach the humanities from explicitly international and cross-cultural perspectives; or that treat social science methods and theories more holistically; or the examine the urgent issues of our time—climate change, equity, immigration—from multidisciplinary perspectives.

Much as we can't resurrect the dodo, the passenger pigeon or the woolly mammoth or rebuild New York City's much lamented Penn Station, we can't transplant Columbia or Chicago's core curriculum to other institutions. But teams of faculty can create more meaningful lower-division experiences. It's largely a matter of will.

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