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The General Education Curriculum We Need

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The time to rethink and reimagine general education is long past due.

Surveys suggest that students view gen ed requirements as little more than a checklist. Certainly, the value of gen ed isn't self-evident to many students, who consider it an obstacle course and a diversion from the true interests.

"Irrelevant" is a word that crops up again and again. And I can assure you, irrelevant won't cut it following this summer's protests.

Some students also point to the hypocrisy of baby boomer faculty imposing requirements that they themselves didn't have to fulfill during their college days.

Distribution requirements remain the dominant form of general education, and we're all familiar with the criticisms:

- That many gen ed courses simply repeat subjects already covered in high school.
- That distribution requirements restrict student freedom and choice.
- That students can acquire the skills gen ed purports to offer -- including writing and critical thinking -- in virtually any department.
- That the real motive behind gen ed requirements is to prop up enrollments in low-demand, less-expensive-to-staff departments.

Even those academics who are sympathetic to the view that students should receive a well-rounded liberal education and be introduced to subjects that they haven't previously encountered often concludes that the dominant approach to gen ed results in the worst of all worlds: unmotivated, disengaged students; overly complex, prescriptive and confusing requirements; and an overabundance of narrow, disciplinary-focused courses that do little to advance the true goal of general education, to provide sweeping introductions to the texts, ideas, methodologies and modes of analysis and interpretation that every educated person should be familiar with.

The history of the college curriculum [2] has, for the past century and a half, involved swings between programs emphasizing choice and courses of study mandating certain requirements.

In a reaction against the rigid, highly prescriptive curriculum of the early American college, the late-19th-century research university embraced electives. Indeed, in 1900, Harvard had just one required class, English composition.

But the early 20th century witnessed a reaction, with the advent of the first general education requirements. Gen ed's founding principles were twofold:

- That in addition to acquiring the specialized knowledge to prepare students for a career, undergraduates needed to receive a general education to ensure that they became well-rounded college graduates.
- That a liberal education required all students to absorb a common body of knowledge, become familiar with their shared cultural heritage and understand the development and guiding principles of Western political institutions.

A few institutions, led by Columbia, embraced a common core of required courses. A few others, like Reed, introduced a core course, to be taken by every undergraduate. Still others instituted thematic or problem-oriented courses, like the University of Chicago's interdisciplinary classes on American political institutions, personality and culture, and freedom and order.

But most institutions adopted distribution requirements as the most scalable and cost-effective way to ensure that students acquired a basic understanding of humanities and the arts, contemporary social issues, and mathematics and science.

With the turn toward mass higher education following World War II, general education struck many as more important than ever. Reports from Columbia, Harvard [3], the University of Chicago and a presidential commission [4] upheld gen ed as a way to give coherence to a fragmented curriculum, familiarize undergraduates with liberal and humanistic traditions, and cultivate responsible citizenship.

But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, choice was ascendant again, with many institutions abandoning distribution requirements. Many students and faculty did not lament their disappearance. A 1977 Carnegie Foundation report concluded that general education had become so "poorly defined and so diluted with options that it has no recognizable substance of its own."

Then the tide shifted yet again, with many campuses reviving gen ed requirements, partly in response to the increasing diversity and perceived academic

unpreparedness of entering students and in part to ensure breadth, a common skill set and exposure to topics deemed essential by faculty.

UC Santa Cruz's gen ed curriculum illustrates the extensive range and specificity of such requirements. It includes courses in composition; cross-cultural analysis; ethnicity and race; the interpretation of arts and media; mathematical, statistical and formal reasoning; scientific inquiry; and textual analysis and interpretation, plus a choice of classes in such areas as collaborative endeavor, the creative process, environmental awareness, human behavior, service learning and technology and society.

Many states and many public university systems have standardized the gen ed curriculum to make it easier for students to transfer from one institution to another -- often provoking resistance from faculty ^[5] who consider this a threat to their control over the curriculum.

At the same time, a number of private colleges, like Hiram College ^[6], have looked to gen ed as a way to differentiate their institution within the highly competitive higher education marketplace. Hiram's Urgent Challenge Curriculum is organized around skills and themes: ways of knowing (which includes creative, interpretive, modeling, experimental scientific and social and cultural analysis methods); responsible citizenship (including an understanding of international issues, foreign cultures and diversity within the United States); and meaning, ethics and social responsibility.

However quixotic the idea may seem, the time has come, I am convinced, to radically rethink gen ed and increase student choice once again. But this need not mean abandoning the idea of a uniform undergraduate experience altogether. We need to give students attractive options.

At public colleges and universities, where curricular coherence is a pipe dream, some Purdue University faculty found a workaround. Their Cornerstone certificate program offers first-year students an experience somewhat analogous to that provided by Honors Colleges. Students take two courses on transformative texts, followed by three courses that address cultural impact and representation in one of five areas: science and technology, environment and sustainability, health care and medicine, management and organization, and conflict resolution and justice.

Georgetown initiated a series of modular courses that engage in interdisciplinary topics and projects and give students the opportunity to work with faculty from a

variety of disciplines. Current topics include challenges in childhood and society, climate change, and social justice immersion experiences.

A number of faculty at CUNY's Hunter College have taken another different tack. Humanities 20100 combines off-campus arts experiences at museums and archives, and dance, music, theater and opera performances with a signature seminar led by a faculty mentor, along with visits by New York City's cultural professionals, in which students investigate the historical contexts and the aesthetic, cultural and philosophical significance of the works they see and hear.

Students encounter both contemporary and canonical works that address timely and timeless issues involving justice, identity, power and privilege, prompting insights into ethics, psychology and the dynamics of social and cultural change.

If I am right, if the history of general education has been a pendulum swaying between choice and prescription, then the time has come to break the cycle and draw on the best of the past and imagine something new. We might consider replacing distribution requirements with:

- An integrated first-year experience that focuses on a particular problem or challenge from interdisciplinary perspectives and that incorporates skills building in the areas of written and oral communication and quantitative reasoning and mathematical and statistical analysis. How about integrated experience dealing with racial inequalities, their roots, persistence and the possibilities for change?
- Or a meta major that prepares students for a broad range of potential careers in a high-demand areas like business or health care and that focuses on professional identity formation from humanistic, social science and scientific perspectives.
- Or a learning community with a thematic focus that provides faculty mentorship, dedicated advising and a host of co-curricular activities.

In my studies of the history of childhood, I argue that contemporary upper-middle-class society has juvenilized and segregated the young and given them few ways to demonstrate their growing competence, apart from sports. Their parents worry incessantly about their mental and physical well-being and whether they are bored and fail to recognize that children, even young children, are far more capable than we generally assume. To perpetuate their class status, these parents shower their children with adult-directed enrichment activities.

Let's not juvenilize our college students. Let's give them options that do precisely what gen ed is supposed to do: promote student development along multiple vectors -- cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and ethical -- expose them to a variety of

methodologies and interpretive strategies; and teach them to look, listen, read, think, speak and write critically and analytically.

Let's not dictate a single path, no matter how carefully considered or well intentioned. Let a thousand flowers bloom.

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[2] <http://www.jstor.com/stable/27796755>

[3] <https://archive.org/details/generaleducation032440mbp>

[4] https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.89917/2015.89917.Higher-Education-For-American-Democracy-A-Report-Of-The-Presidents-Commission-On-Higher-Education-Vol-I---Vi_djvu.txt

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/06/former-cuny-official-her-book-about-pathways-program>

[6] <https://catalog.hiram.edu/undergraduate/academic-program-core-curriculum/core-curriculum/>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/users/steven-mintz>