JOSEPH M. INCANDELA

Seven Lessons Learned from General Education Reform at Saint Mary's College

AT SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE, a single-gender Catholic institution in northern Indiana with approximately 1,600 students, we have just revised a general education curriculum that had been in place for nearly forty years. The board of trustees unanimously approved the new curriculum in April 2010. In reflecting here on how we reached this point, I will discuss seven key lessons we learned along the way.

Our work on general education has apparently led to the reevaluation and modification of other parts of the curriculum

1. Do not rush

My primary responsibility as associate dean of faculty, which was made very clear to me when I was named to this position in 2006, was to lead the college's effort to reform general education. A new president, who had taken office the year before, had made the reformation of general education her top academic priority. Our general education curriculum was an amalgam of courses in search of some higher, more encompassing identity—which, as a pure distribution model, it could never have. Throughout my time at Saint Mary's, criticisms of general education were common, and every three or four years, there was a great flurry of activity: some group of faculty would get very exercised by a litany of deficits, enlist the support of like-minded colleagues, and then start working on a successor curriculum; much discussion, many meetings, and a good bit of writing would ensue, always to the same unhappy end—people got busy, arguments arose, the task loomed too large, and things stopped.

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I was entirely conscious of that history when I assumed my new responsibilities, and I was convinced that a campus with a history of failure at curricular reform would not abide an especially long process. Nobody with the slightest sense of what had come before could be expected to commit to any open-ended attempt to fashion a new program. The window of opportunity was exceedingly narrow, I thought, and was narrowing further by the day. In about November of that first fall semester (2006), I proposed coming up with three new models to take to the faculty for their feedback. The ad hoc committee on general education (which I chaired) named them, stirringly enough, Model A, Model B, and Model C. They each had a catchy subtitle and several innovative features. But the most important thing they shared was an approach that sought to jazz up the distribution model we already had. When we took these choices to the faculty, the feedback was decidedly mixed, and no clear victor emerged. That was the first of many "what do we do now?" moments. In retrospect, we were probably naive to think we'd get anything other than this result, as these models began and ended in largely incommensurable places. It was hard to weigh or combine them in any meaningful way. Worse still, discussions that even attempted to do so took time, and time was what I was sure we didn't have.

My best intentions to speed toward a new curriculum before anyone could come up for air long enough to lose interest were frustrated. As the spring semester of the 2006–7 academic year came and went, we faced an uncertain future. So, in near desperation, we purchased plane tickets to Rhode Island, where the

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Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) was hosting its annual Institute on General Education that summer.

2. Avoid attempts to be too clever

One of things that surprised me most about the reform process was that so many faculty maintained their interest in what we were doing for so long. That's testimony not only to my error in thinking we didn't have much time, but also to the good people with whom I was working. From the outset, I was convinced that our general education committee should not be constituted as a typical faculty committee. I believed that assigning representation of elected members to a specific cluster of departments or programs would likely balkanize the process from the beginning, virtually ensuring that the pursuit of competing interests would overwhelm the prospects for cooperation in service of some greater good. Accordingly, I worked with the chair of our faculty assembly to create a committee made up (initially) of six faculty members, plus myself. Three of the members were elected by the faculty assembly, and three were appointed by me. (Since I had just recently come into administration from the full-time faculty ranks, I probably enjoyed more trust at that point than many other administrators would have.)

I was both surprised and pleased that the election netted two untenured faculty members, and I went on to appoint an additional untenured member to the committee. Having this core group of faculty who were relatively new to the institution—and, thus, didn't have firsthand experience of our previous, unsuccessful attempts to reform general education—ended up being a godsend. It meant that we were forced to look seriously at all ideas without those of us who were longer in the tooth summarily dismissing proposals that had been tried years earlier. It also meant that when we encountered additional "what do we do now?" moments, we were less inclined to consider giving up than we might have been if all of us had known the same previous disappointments. Throughout the four years of our work as a committee, failure truly was not an option.

Before we even got started, however, I made a mistake that threatened to derail the whole enterprise. Saint Mary's has several robust professional programs that, together, account for over one-third of the degrees we award each year. These programs—in education, nursing, social work, business, and communicative disorders—have never been part of general education. That fact, along with the college's historical identity as a liberal arts institution, had left many faculty in these departments feeling marginalized. And so I thought that if a way could be found to incorporate contributions from these departments into the new general education curriculum, the reform process could perhaps help redress this sense of marginalization.

To avoid creating the impression that this was the primary agenda of any particular member of the committee, I purposely did not appoint anyone from the professional programs. I figured that if a groundswell to include the professional programs came from faculty completely outside of them, the cumulative force of the case would be compelling. Yet, when no one from the professional programs was elected or appointed to the committee, the prevailing sense of marginalization was actually reinforced. I can still remember the phone call from the dean saying that she thought I had "a bit of a problem" on my hands. I could take refuge in my good intentions, but good intentions can be the noble cloak of both incompetence and tyranny, and I had no desire to associate myself with either. My failing, as I later came to see it, was simply trying to be too clever by half. Forever after, my horizon was humbler, as was my own estimation of how successfully I could conduct this process on marionette strings. With the reluctance that comes from wounded pride, I followed my dean's advice and appointed an excellent faculty member from one of the professional programs who brought a wealth of experience and wisdom to our deliberations that would otherwise have been excluded by my grand plan.

3. Start with the end

At the AAC&U Institute on General Education, five members of our committee had what amounted to a transformative experience that shaped the rest of our work. Most significantly, we encountered the idea of learning outcomes—probably old hat to many, but new to us and to our institution. For us, the notion of learning outcomes provided a possible foundation on which to build as well as a way to structure conversations about what most mattered in the education Saint Mary's offers.

It gave us, in short, what we never had with Models A, B, and C, namely, a vehicle for achieving commensurability. We could now be talking about the same things, which made agreement more likely, disagreement more productive, and compromise less elusive.

In the fall of 2007, we crafted three primary learning outcomes derived from the college's mission statement: (1) knowledge acquisition and integration of learning; (2) cognitive and communicative skills; and (3) intercultural competence and social responsibility. This set of outcomes formed the backbone of our effort to reform general education. We worked with both students and faculty to refine the text that accompanied each of the learning outcomes.

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sponsoring congregation, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, and proved to be especially energizing for our campus. It helped us clarify our Catholic identity—a notoriously slippery matter for many Catholic institutions—while also reaffirming values that might otherwise have dissipated entirely, given the diminished presence of the congregation on the faculty. Adopting this third outcome enabled us to recommit the institution to its heritage, and it fostered the sense that the reformed general education program would be tailored to the distinctive education we offer at St. Mary's College.

As an ethicist, I came (belatedly) to see in learning outcomes an analogue to old-fashioned Aristotelian teleology. We start with the end, the *telos*, which governs our actions, makes

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progress meaningful, and keeps us on track. Learning outcomes do all of these things. While those of us who went to the AAC&U institute came back very committed to this, our eureka moment did not immediately transfer to everyone we had left behind. I'm sure some wondered what flavor of Kool-Aid they served in Rhode Island. Two things helped here. The first was the arrival in the summer of 2007 of a new academic vice president/dean of the faculty who was committed to the learning-outcomes approach. The second was the patience of our colleagues, both inside and outside of the committee. We just continued to use the language of learning outcomes, demonstrating the benefits it had for our work and for how all of us thought about our teaching. Eventually, I began to hear this language coming out of the mouths of those who had formerly resisted it, and it was being used constructively to speak about general education and about teaching in particular disciplinary contexts.

4. Technology enables transparency and group ownership

We were very fortunate to be undertaking general education reform at a time when technological advances had put at our disposal several helpful tools that were unavailable to previous reform attempts. By providing new ways to collaborate and to inform, these tools enabled greater transparency and lessened anxiety about what the committee was doing behind closed doors.

We used several such tools, including, for example, an online survey that enabled us to gather feedback about the then-current general education program and about the kinds (and levels) of change faculty most desired. We also used clickers, which gave us real-time feedback about wording and various turns of phrase as we developed the learning outcomes. This use of clickers helped build a sense of ownership among faculty and students. Clickers also provided a visual record of support for various elements of the reform effort and, thereby, helped us move forward. A clear depiction of the lack of support for a given proposal generally allowed the majority to proceed free of filibusters for favored causes,

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while also leaving those with minority viewpoints satisfied that they had been heard.

When we arrived at the final wording of the three primary learning outcomes, assisted by the group editing process described above, we then turned to a wiki to generate and refine the sub-outcomes that attached to particular curricular slots. These sub-outcomes were organically related to their parent outcomes, which, in turn, related directly to the college's mission statement. We allowed all faculty members to edit all the outcomes. Most tended to work only on those that pertained most particularly to their disciplines (which was not unexpected). But putting everything out there for everyone to view, and potentially to modify, conveyed more clearly than words alone that the general education curriculum truly does "belong" to all faculty members.

Finally, throughout the process, we kept a blog that chronicled our meetings (minutes were posted) and made available other resources, including links to relevant articles, PowerPoint presentations, and handouts from public meetings or lunches at which general education was discussed. Throughout the four years, we rarely heard any criticisms about a lack of transparency.

5. Words matter, but so do pictures

At many steps along the way, we were reminded of the power—and limitations—of words. We learned early on that some faculty placed certain words on their forbidden index of that which cannot be uttered. The postmodernists, for example, never seemed to let pass an opportunity to tell us just how much they objected to any references to the "self" or to anything that connoted a fixed identity, especially since, for them, the latter tended to presuppose the former. Keeping track of minefields in the lexicon and watching where we all collectively stepped helped foster greater linguistic clarity and precision. And by developing the ability to anticipate and avoid tripwires, we were better able to diffuse criticism.

Another lesson I learned about words is how best to speak about a reform process. I noticed that when advocating for reform it was very easy to fall into a rhetorical posture

that implies what came before was bad, and what will succeed it (with our time and your support) is, well, *good*. I never said this explicitly, but I'm sure I conveyed it from time to time. Bad message. Many faculty had invested careers in our current program, and we had graduated generations of students whose education was organized according to a distribution model that had numerous evident deficits, wasn't a *program* in any meaningful sense, and certainly didn't exploit what was

most distinctive about our institutional identity as a Catholic women's college in the tradition of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Yet, there they were: great faculty who were excellent teachers, researchers, and creative artists; and accomplished alumnae who were articulate, committed to worthy enterprises, and highly successful in their chosen fields. Once I (re)learned these things—really, I already knew them, having invested twenty years of my own life at the college, mostly teaching

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general education courses—I was better able to express what was very *good* about what we had, while being clearer about what was *better* about what we were proposing.

Finally, one of the most unexpected lessons about words concerned how quickly people with initials after their names, who have made a career trafficking in precise vocabulary, seemed to leave all this behind when presented with a diagram. Early on, we thought that anything visual was ancillary to the closely reasoned text that we asked our colleagues to consider. We were wrong. Diagrams were the first things that our colleagues looked at and considered. Occasionally, we were surprised by what our diagrams *said* to some, even when we had thought the written word said the exact opposite or the spoken word carefully qualified. This, too, was a helpful lesson to learn; it encouraged us to think about a different way to make sense of the whole. In so doing, it gave us a quick way to connect with various audiences and explain how we saw the pieces fit together.

6. Parallel tracks help the train keep moving

Four years ago, as I was trying to get myself ready for what we were undertaking, I went through old files left over from past attempts to reform general education at the college. As I read through notes, minutes of meetings, records of faculty discussions, and so on, I was humbled to run across the names of individuals whom I regard as members of Saint Mary's pantheon of legendary faculty—many retired, some still here. This made me even less confident of success, but it also encouraged me to think about what might be different this time around.

One important difference was that earlier attempts did not have clear administrative support. As mentioned previously, general education reform was a priority of our new president from her earliest days on campus. She mentioned it in talks and highlighted it in her strategic plan. Reform efforts that are initiated and led by faculty alone can certainly succeed, but they usually must operate without much of a safety net. Indeed, I've come to believe that a truly extraordinary confluence of moment, energy, and individuals is required to sustain faculty-initiated curricular reform. That said,

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I also want to be clear that, sometimes, the right kind of administrative support is to stand back and let conversations and work proceed, while continuing publicly to acknowledge ongoing efforts and ultimate goals.

The problem with any single-track approach is that when progress is blocked or delayed for any reason, things either end there or get stalled long enough to discourage further efforts. If there are parallel tracks leading to the same goal, however, then even as progress is impeded on one track the overall effort can still move forward on separate tracks. The effect is to compensate for delays or to motivate those sidetracked by delays to find alternate routes, encouraging them to catch up with those who might otherwise leave them behind. I thought it very important, for example, to involve students in our effort and, to the extent possible, get them motivated about general education reform. Several times, I and other members of the committee briefed the student government about general education reform. And, in fact, the student government was the first group on campus to endorse the final proposal. In addition, I or other members of the committee gave presentations along the way to alumnae, donors, members of other divisions at the college, and trustees. By the end, too many people were invested in reform to let the process fail.

Related to this, I thought it important to involve as many faculty as possible by encouraging them to assume leadership roles in the process. At the AAC&U institute, I overheard a group at an adjoining table discussing faculty "design teams." I happily "borrowed" that idea. Our process included three design teams, one for each of the three primary learning outcomes we had identified. The teams had between eight and fifteen faculty members each and were led by individuals who were not members of the general education committee—though two committee members served on the design teams as well, largely to keep the lines of communication open. This was a way to get lots of different fingerprints on the final result and to foster the sense of shared ownership of what emerged. By the end, about one-third of the full-time faculty had been engaged in a role either on the general education committee or on one of the three design

teams. At some point, it becomes difficult to oppose what you yourself labored to produce. It also makes friendly amendments to other parts of the plan, well, *friendlier*, due to a sympathetic appreciation of the work and seriousness of effort that went into producing them.

7. Finitude always wins

I've heard many plumbers say that "water always wins." There's something about liquid abetted by time and pressure that frustrates amateur attempts to contain it. I don't want to draw too many parallels between general education reform and plumbing (though many came to mind over the past few years), but it's worthwhile to consider the various inevitable constraints on any curricular reforms—especially at a small institution like Saint Mary's. That is, it can be a fascinating thought experiment to imagine starting a new college and designing a curriculum from scratch, but most of us are not starting new colleges. Indeed, most of us are already swimming in the same streams we hope to rechannel. This means that there are established departments with tenured faculty (with families and mortgages) invested in particular programs with specific majors requiring certain general education courses as their foundations, and so forth. We don't start over from scratch. And alongside the human issues, there are fiscal issues that inevitably assert themselves. Even though fiscal resources can be grown or reallocated, they always win. One of my colleagues on the faculty used the term "finitude" to describe all of these kinds of considerations, and that stuck in our collective vocabulary.

When I began this process, I put together a kind of idea map. I put "general education reform" at the center of the page and then, for everything I could think of that would or could be affected by it, I drew spokes extending away from the center. Some of these spokes branched into others, and by the end, I had a pretty robust lattice. As I looked back at it recently, I was pleasantly surprised by how accurate the map turned out to be. But I was also embarrassed by what I had left out. At the outset, I had simply not anticipated several of the factors that could make or break whatever lovely proposals we may have come up with. I'm speaking here about everything that would come under the heading of "implementation." I mean by this not only staffing and budget

questions, but questions as seemingly mundane as whether Banner could track (or be configured to track) student progress in the new curriculum. Ultimately, implementation is another way that finitude wins. Had I to do things over, I would pay more attention to these issues much earlier than I did. I also never anticipated that our work on general education reform could spur similar movements within departments in terms of reforming their majors. But I regard it as a tremendously salutary development that our work on general education has apparently led to the reevaluation and modification of other parts of the curriculum.

It is a bit trite to say that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good, but it is truer in few other contexts than the work of curricular reform. I have often found it necessary to admit publicly that whatever the perceived benefits and innovations being proposed, the fact remains that all of our efforts were the work of finite individuals with finite amounts of time and finite amounts of experience at this sort of thing. I couldn't, therefore, guarantee that there would not be unforeseen problems. That's why it was so important to pay careful attention to the governance issues that would attach to the new curriculum and to reassure faculty that no matter what ended up getting approved, there would be specific avenues identified in the very approval process that could be used to amend it, if necessary. Were that assurance not offered, I don't believe we would have accomplished what we most wanted to do when we started our work, namely, to *finish it*. □

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