

I From 1990 to 2000, there was widespread change in general education. What do the trends say?

A Decade of Change in General Education

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Those engaged in or contemplating changes in the general education program may find the trends uncovered in the GE 2000 (Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff, 1999a; Johnson, 2003) and CAO 2000 surveys (Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff, 1999b; Johnson, 2003) interesting and useful. These were complementary cross-sectional surveys in 2000 of 567 baccalaureate-granting institutions that were members of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The sample was approximately proportional to the number of baccalaureate colleges, master's-degree-awarding colleges and universities, doctoral-granting institutions, and research universities in the United States.

Two complementary questionnaires were devised drawing on the instruments and findings of two prior studies a decade earlier (Gaff, 1991; Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen, 1989) so as to permit analysis of that which had changed. The first survey was sent to chief academic officers (the CAO 2000 survey) to gather their institutional perceptions. In addition to sharing their own views, the CAOs identified the individual most responsible for administering the general education program at their institution. This person then was contacted and asked to answer more detailed questions regarding the general education program and its policies and practices (the GE 2000 survey). As might be imagined, many CAOs, particularly at smaller institutions, were also the primary administrator of the general education program and completed the GE 2000 survey themselves. After adjusting for undeliverable e-mail, the sample size for the CAO survey was 521 institutions, and we received responses from 278, for a response rate of 54 percent. Two hundred responses were obtained from the GE 2000 survey,

Table 1.1. The Year General Education Was Last Revised

<i>Year Revised</i>	<i>Number of Institutions</i>	<i>Percentage of Institutions</i>
Before 1979	17	6.1
1980–1989	46	16.5
1990–present	206	73.8
Missing responses to question	10	3.6
Total	279	100.0

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

which was 69 percent of the CAO responses. Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001) presented initial results from the surveys, and Johnson (2003) described fully the methodology and major findings. Here we focus on what they told us about change in general education.

Nearly all (99.6 percent) of the responding CAOs at the 278 baccalaureate-granting institutions said their institution placed a higher priority on general education in 2000 than it did ten years earlier. Over half of these CAOs (53 percent) thought faculty also placed a higher priority on general education in 2000 than a decade earlier. Curiously, though, most were dubious of the effect these new priorities had on students. Only fifty-seven CAOs (21 percent) believed their students placed higher priority on general education than those attending ten years earlier.

Not only was general education a higher priority for academic leaders and faculty; change was in the works. Nearly three-fourths of the CAOs (74 percent) reported their current general education program was most recently revised during the 1990s. Of those instituting change within the 1990s, more than three-fourths (81.0 percent) said their programs had been changed in the past six years (between 1994 and 2000). Slightly more than 16 percent (16.5 percent) had last changed general education in the 1980s, and only 6 percent had last changed their program prior to 1979 (Table 1.1). Most institutions modified their general education programs in either large or modest ways during the decade, and the majority of revision came in the latter half of the decade.

Which Institutions Were Changing Their General Education?

Changes in general education occurred in all types of institutions awarding the bachelor’s degree. Common arguments against general education, such as, “Our institution is just too large and complex to change its general education,” or “Our college is just too small and lacks the resources necessary to carry out a new general education curriculum,” simply were not sustained by the data.

A greater proportion of master’s institutions (82 percent) revised their general education programs between 1990 and 2000 than did either baccalaureate (77 percent) or research and doctoral institutions (67

Table 1.2. Year of General Education Revision by Institutional Type

<i>Institutional Class</i>	<i>General Education Last Revised</i>		
	<i>Before 1979</i>	<i>1980–1989</i>	<i>1990–Present</i>
Research and doctoral	6.3% (<i>n</i> = 4)	26.6% (<i>n</i> = 17)	67.2% (<i>n</i> = 43)
Master's	2.1% (<i>n</i> = 2)	15.8% (<i>n</i> = 15)	82.1% (<i>n</i> = 78)
Baccalaureate	10% (<i>n</i> = 10)	12.7% (<i>n</i> = 14)	77.3% (<i>n</i> = 85)

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

percent). Master's-degree-granting institutions were most frequently the site of change, and it was not clear from the data as to why this was so. However, more important, changes in general education were occurring in all types of institutions awarding the bachelor's degree (Table 1.2).

In 2000, at What Stage in the Change Process Were Institutions?

Were the colleges and universities surveyed merely talking about change in general education? Had they designed new curricula? Were they in the process of implementing reforms? And were they evaluating the impact of changes on student learning? General education administrators (GEAs) at institutions surveyed answered these and related questions (Table 1.3).

The clear majority of GEAs (80 percent) reported that their general education programs were currently being revised in 2000; only one in five GEAs (19 percent) reported that revisions were not under way. Three overlapping thirds of the respondents are worthy of note. First, a third of the colleges and universities surveyed (32 percent) were discussing changes to their general education programs. Second, a third of the institutions (31 percent) were conducting a formal review of their programs at the time of the study. A third (32 percent) were assessing their general education programs. Also, forty percent of the institutions were implementing changes to general education that year. These responses were nonexclusive of one another; several institutions were engaged in some combination of discussing, reviewing, implementing, and assessing general education. These findings remind us that change is often a messy process; it does not typically move in a straight line from discussion, to design, to implementation, and then to evaluation. The majority of institutions were implementing a recent set of revisions while initiating ongoing discussions of further changes.

Table 1.3. Planning and Implementing Change to General Education

	<i>Planning Change Next Year</i>	<i>Not Planning Change Next Year</i>
Changing program	73 (42.4%)	66 (38.4%)
Not changing program	27 (15.7%)	6 (3.5%)

How Long Does It Take to Change a Curriculum?

A survey is admittedly a single snapshot and therefore an imperfect indicator of change over time. Nevertheless, the GE 2000 survey did provide some clues as to how long colleges were taking to plan and implement their changes. Table 1.3 shows that 43 percent of GEAs indicated that they were revising their curricula in 2000 and that they planned to continue that activity into the next academic year, making it a multiyear initiative. Slightly less than that, 38 percent, were revising their general education program in 2000 but were not contemplating further revisions in the following year. Sixteen percent had not yet begun curriculum revisions but were planning to do so in the next academic year. And only 3.5 percent were neither revising the general education program in 2000 nor contemplating doing so the following year. Over 96 percent of all GEAs were either revising their program or were planning to revise their programs the following year. Clearly, if revision of the general education curriculum is complex and difficult, these institutions and their leaders were not shy in giving priority to, reviewing, and designing formal plans for change.

The CAOs at these institutions saw general education programs to be ever changing and saw such change as largely incremental rather than a one-time comprehensive overhaul event. One noted the curriculum “is dynamic” and requires “constant revision and updating.” Another stated that changing general education was a “long process” and that the goal for general education reform at the institution was to create “a more integrated and responsive general education curriculum” that was “more manageable and assessable.” Another characterized general education reform as a continuous process, observing, “The last full revision followed an extensive review of undergraduate education. It has changed in small ways several times since and is under ongoing review.”

What Qualities Did General Education Programs Possess?

We asked the CAOs to rate several aspects of their programs using a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much.” Most of the general education changes in program characteristics appeared to be mission driven. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that general education goals were closely related to institutional mission “very much,” and nearly 38 percent believed their general education goals followed the institutional mission “quite a lot.” Mission, more than student needs and expectations or social issues and context, guided the design of general education.

Within the context of conventional curricular components—goals and objectives, sequence and organization, instruction strategies and delivery, and assessment and evaluation—it is interesting to note where the CAOs believed their general education programs had strengths and weaknesses.

General education goals were clearly stated “very much,” according to 36 percent of the CAOs; an additional 36 percent believed that their goals were clearly stated “quite a lot,” indicating that some required further work. Less than 17 percent thought that their general education goals were somewhat unclear or not clear at all. Goal clarity apparently was a curricular priority largely achieved in 2000.

Were the general education course requirements clearly linked to the goals? Were there, for example, corresponding goals to the requirement that students complete nine credit hours of social science course work? Or did the curriculum have a clear means for students to develop critical thinking or leadership goals? Slightly more than one-fourth (28 percent) reported that the linkage between goals and course requirements was “very much” the case, and 36 percent stated that most requirements were linked to goals “quite a lot.” In harmony with conventional curriculum planning perspectives, most CEOs reported having general education goals that were tied to institutional mission and regarded them as clearly stated. A third of the institutions linked the specific general education course requirements to those goals.

Although coherence is a commonly stated aim of general education, it is difficult to achieve in practice. When asked whether their programs had coherent sequences of courses, the CAOs acknowledged that this was the case “very much” or “quite a lot” in only 38 percent of the cases. Distribution requirements, the most common form of general education, permit student choice, faculty autonomy, and ease of administration. But it is difficult to make linkages across courses developed, taught, and studied separately.

Less effort had been given to assessing what students learned as a result of their general education program. Only 14 percent of the institutions reported that student learning was assessed “very much” in relationship to the general education goals. Another 17 percent said that student learning was assessed “quite a lot,” and 30 percent said that such assessment occurred “somewhat.” Another one-quarter (24.5 percent) stated “not very much” assessment took place, and a final 15 percent confided that assessment occurred “not at all.” Although it has been an expectation of higher education curricula for nearly fifteen years, assessment of the broad goals of general education has been limited. Determining how much and in what areas students have successfully mastered the capacities intended for them in general education has yet to be a guide in choosing what programs to revise and how.

What Practices Were Included in the General Education Curricula?

Drawing on recent literature on curricular change and innovative practices, we asked the CAOs to report the extent to which some of the most frequently mentioned innovations were included in their current general education programs (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4. Prevalent Curricular Innovations

<i>Curricular Innovation</i>	<i>Mean Response</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Interdisciplinary courses	3.51	1.20
First-year seminars	3.37	1.66
Common learning	3.32	1.24
Advanced courses	3.13	1.50
Honors courses	2.99	1.46
Experiential learning	2.74	1.27
Paired or linked courses	2.64	1.33
Senior thesis	2.42	1.51
Service-learning	2.40	1.27
Internships	2.14	1.30
Independent study	2.09	1.25
Remedial or developmental	1.99	1.30

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratchiff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

The general education programs of these institutions were more likely to have incorporated interdisciplinary courses, first-year seminars, common learning experiences, advanced courses, and honors courses. They less frequently included experiential learning, paired or linked courses, a senior thesis, service-learning experiences, internships, independent study, or remedial or developmental courses. These findings were consistent with what Gaff (1991) found ten years earlier. Many of the innovations he reported as important curricular trends in 1990 were now integrated in the general education programs. Others, however, remained largely topics for discussion and debate but were not yet widely adopted in the curricula.

Different types of institutions were more inclined than others to adopt particular innovations or practices. Common learning experiences were slightly more likely features of general education programs in baccalaureate and master’s institutions than in research universities and doctoral institutions. Research universities and doctoral institutions were more likely to provide honors courses in general education than were master’s or baccalaureate institutions.

Did the Changes in General Education Alter the Credit Distribution in the B.A. or B.S. Degree?

In 1991, Gaff reported an average forty-nine credit hours were allotted to general education, noting that slightly less than 40 percent of the total hours in a baccalaureate degree were general education courses. Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) found that forty-seven semester credits (38 percent) and sixty-five quarter credits (35 percent) were allotted to general education for the B.A. degree (Table 1.5). In the GE 2000 survey, general education composed 38 percent of the credits for the B.A. and 38 percent of credits for the B.S. degrees. The mean number of semester hours

Table 1.5. Credit Hours Required for B.A. and B.S. Degrees and General Education

	<i>Mean Hours Required, B.A. Degree</i>	<i>General Education as % of B.A. Degree</i>	<i>Mean Hours Required, B.S. Degree</i>	<i>General Education as % of B.S. Degree</i>	<i>Mean Hours General Education</i>
Hours	125.46	37.59%	125.83	37.48%	47.16
SD	17.43		19.38		13.02

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

for general education requirements was 47.¹ Thus, although most colleges and universities were changing their general education curricula, they did so without altering significantly the amount of total credits required or the proportion of credits attributed to general education in baccalaureate degrees.

We should note, however, that there was large variation about these means, indicating that the number of credits in general education varied greatly from institution to institution, as did its proportional credit role to the total baccalaureate degree requirements. Unlike Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989), we did not find the required number of general education hours to vary by institutional type. Also, the number of general education hours required of the B.A. and B.S. degrees was nearly identical, and this finding did not vary by institutional type or control (public versus private).

What Role Did Program Review Play in the Change Process?

Program evaluation can be an important means to identifying discrepancies between desired and actual performance or capacities, the discrepancies then becoming the directions for change (Gates and others, 2002). To what extent, then, was change guided by formal program reviews? When institutions conducted such a review, they focused on the clarity of its goals more frequently than any other element or component of the program. This was consistent with the priorities that the CAOs and GEAs gave to goal clarity. Other program characteristics regularly subject to review were the extent to which the curriculum contained diversity perspectives, provided a synthesis of learning experiences, afforded students smooth transition to collegiate studies, and developed specific skills, competencies, or proficiencies. These foci of program review paralleled those found a decade earlier by Gaff (1991) and Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989). As Table 1.6 illustrates, program review in general education remained confined to certain conventional elements of the curriculum.

Table 1.6. General Education Areas Reviewed

<i>Targets of Formal General Education Program Review</i>	<i>Number of Institutions Reviewing</i>	<i>Percentage of Institutions Reviewing</i>
Clear goals	107	60.5%
Diverse perspectives	89	50.3
Synthesizing learning experiences	88	49.7
Making transition to school	76	42.9
Skills in field	72	40.7
Coherence	69	39.0
Overcoming deficiencies	59	33.3
Working with others	57	32.2
Integrating in-class and out-of-class learning	52	29.4
Students shaping their learning	42	23.7

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratchiff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

It stands to reason that if an element of general education is deemed important, it should be included as part of the formal review criteria for the program. This is what we found. A chi-square analysis showed that when a priority was placed on setting clear goals, the GEA reported including goal clarity in the program review process ($p < .001$). Also, GEAs who gave priority to coherent sequences of courses were likely to review the extent to which such sequences helped achieve goals ($p < .001$). However, although coherence was given as a principal reason for revisions and reforms, most institutions did not specifically review their programs for coherence. Fewer than half (43 percent) reported reviewing courses designed to assist students' transition to college. More than half (58 percent) reported reviewing first-year seminars, a major vehicle for facilitating the transition to collegiate studies. Half reviewed the provision for teaching diversity issues in general education, and of those institutions, 43 percent required specific diversity courses in their general education programs. With the exception of program coherence, our survey results gave a consistent picture of the alignment of general education priorities with program review criteria.

Comments from the CAOs indicated that some institutions began the reform process with a program review—for example, “It had been over ten years since we last reviewed the curriculum and the statistical (and actual) quality of the entering students had significantly changed.” Still others started from a general sense of the faculty’s desire for change. One CAO, for example, reported that general education reform at his institution was “based on faculty wishes to provide a coherent and distinctive general education program for students reflective of both the institutional mission and liberal arts tradition.”

Thus, while general education was most frequently subject to periodic program review, it was not clear the extent to which these reviews were used as a basis for improving the general education programs.

What Role Did Assessment of Student Learning Play in Reform Efforts?

Along with program review, assessment of student learning commonly is thought to provide valuable information on what is working and what is not in curricular programs and to be an important guidepost to changing the curricula (Paloma and Banta, 1999). A decade earlier, Gaff (1991) found that assessment of general education was “increasingly common, both to identify problems that call for change and to determine the extent to which a new curriculum is effective” (p. 58). The study by Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) of catalogue descriptions of general education did not find comprehensive assessments of student learning in general education programs reported. It should be noted that publication of a practice in a college catalogue often follows rather than precedes the implementation of the practice, such as the addition of new courses or experimental activities. Toombs and his colleagues found that where student assessments were listed in the catalogue as required, they were used to determine specific skills through proficiency testing and to place students in an initial set of courses.

Had things changed over the decade? Had assessment of student learning become an important part of the change process? We compared those institutions making changes in their programs with those that were not relative to their reported use of assessments of student learning outcomes in general education.

Table 1.7 shows that only 15 percent of institutions had assessed student learning outcomes at the time they were implementing changes in general education, and 25 percent were making curricular changes without the guidance of student assessment information. Another 18 percent were assessing student outcomes but not implementing any changes to their general education program. Clearly, having an overall assessment of student learning as a component of general education was no guarantee or indicator that such information would be used in the change process. After nearly twenty-five years of the student assessment movement in higher education and the urgings and the discourse on the subjects by national associations, such as the American Association for Higher Education’s Assessment Forum, and by the requirements of state coordinating and governing bodies, through the guidelines of the regional accrediting associations, and by the stipulations of various federal programs affecting higher education, it was disconcerting to see so little implementation and apparent use of comprehensive assessments of student learning outcomes in changing the general education curriculum. Yet the survey facts provided a sharp contrast to the rhetoric regarding student assessment. Only 32 percent of the CAOs and GEAs reported assessing student learning in their general education programs. Thus, less than one-third of institutions evaluated whether students were accomplishing the goals of their general education programs.

Table 1.7. Assessment and General Education Change

	<i>Making Changes in General Education</i>		<i>Not Making Changes in General Education</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Assessing student outcomes	23	15.3%	27	18.0%
Not assessing student outcomes	38	25.3	62	41.3

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

Although the comprehensive assessment of student learning within general education programs was present in less than one-third of institutions, there were assessments of specific general education content or skill areas in considerably more institutions (see Table 1.8). Component-specific assessments were far more prevalent in general education than were comprehensive assessments of student learning. These findings reinforced the view that disciplinary departments remain highly influential over the conduct of general education, including the assessment of student learning.

Over 75 percent of institutions have goals relative to the traditional content divisions of liberal learning—natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—and over half of those with stated goals assess student learning in the related general education component (Table 1.8). While over 80 percent have goals in reading or writing, or both, and mathematics, over two-thirds of these institutions assess student learning in these components. With the exception of collaborative work, lifelong learning, global studies, and cultural diversity, over half of institutions having goals assessed student learning on those goals. Thus, when one examines specific components of general education, the profile of assessment of student learning outcomes becomes more positive.

As was the case with program review, however, just because an institution assessed student learning outcomes relative to a general education goal did not mean that the assessment information was used in the change process. Evaluations of general education, whether they are program reviews or assessments of student learning, continue to play an uncertain role in reform efforts.

What Reforms Most Frequently Were Implemented?

We found most curricular changes undertaken over the decade to be modifications to existing general education programs rather than complete revisions or remaking of the courses of study. Although the CAOs indicated that general education had become a higher priority at their institutions, their changes to the curriculum did not alter credit requirements significantly. General education had about the same proportion of credits of the bachelor's degree in 2000 as in 1989. However, as we will describe in the next section,

Table 1.8. Student Assessment in General Education Components

<i>General Education Component</i>	<i>Institutions with a Stated Goal for the Component</i>		<i>Percentage with a Stated Goal for Component That Assesses That Goal</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Content areas			
Natural sciences	150	87.7%	57.3%
Social sciences	145	81.9	56.6
Math/quantitative	140	79.1	61.4
Humanities	131	74.0	54.9
Fine arts	124	70.0	54.8
History	105	59.3	61.9
Literature	101	57.1	65.3
Philosophy, ethics	99	55.9	58.5
Foreign languages	83	46.9	63.8
Physical sciences	71	40.0	56.3
Life sciences	68	38.4	57.4
Religion	66	37.3	59.1
Cognitive skill areas			
Reading/writing	156	88.1	77.6
Critical thinking	119	67.2	64.7
Speaking/listening	98	55.4	68.4
Computing	92	51.9	64.1
Other components			
Cultural diversity	113	63.8	44.2
Global studies	92	51.9	46.7
Interdisciplinary	70	39.5	52.8
Lifelong learning	57	32.2	40.3
Collaboration/teamwork	36	20.3	38.9
Leadership	19	10.7	63.2

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

the general education requirements became more prescriptive, reducing student choice. By and large, these institutions did not turn to a strictly prescribed core curriculum in making their changes. Rather, they relied on themes to unify required sequences and clusters of interdisciplinary course work to achieve their ends. This is a major shift from the 1980s, when student choice was a primary trait of general education curricula (Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen, 1989).

What Courses Were Added or Dropped?

Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) at Pennsylvania State University examined general education requirements in college catalogues. We compared these decade-old data with those from the GE 2000 survey to determine what courses had been added or dropped from general education requirements and what trends these changes might signify (Table 1.9).

Table 1.9. Course Requirements in General Education

<i>General Education Component</i>	<i>Percentage of Institutions Requiring Courses in Component</i>		<i>Modal Number of Course Credits Required in Component</i>	
	<i>Catalogue Study, 1989</i>	<i>GE 2000</i>	<i>Catalogue Study, 1989</i>	<i>GE 2000</i>
Interdisciplinary	19.4%	63.9%	3	3
Humanities	96.7	91.7	12 (6)*	3
Fine arts	53.3	86.8	3	3
Math-quantitative	64.8	92.1	3	3
Social science	96.1	93.9	6 (12)*	6
Natural science	93.7	89.8	6	6
Foreign language	33.5	59.0	6 (12)*	6
Physical education	52.9	67.9	2	2
Values	28.4	59.6	6	6
Computer	11.0	47.5	3	3
Other	32.2		6	
Collaborative work		15.8		3
Critical thinking		48.0		3
Cultural studies		66.2		3
Global studies		58.3		3
History		88.2		3
Leadership		2.9		3
Lifelong learning		9.3		3
Life science		59.1		3
Literature		83.3		3
Philosophy		73.1		3

*Denotes bimodal distribution.

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001); Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989).

From 1989 to 2000, general education course requirements changed in several respects. Most noticeably, the number of required components to general education had grown. Course work was now required in areas such as critical thinking, cultural studies, global studies, history, life sciences, and literature. Courses in foreign languages, computer literacy, and values education were added. However, these additional requirements came about while the proportion of general education credits required in the baccalaureate degree remained fairly constant. By 2000, student election of course work in general education had declined significantly as a greater proportion of institutions had specific requirements in all subject areas examined. The notable exceptions were in the general requirements in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.² The GE 2000 survey contained several specific disciplinary or skill areas that would be part of the broad humanities, natural science, and social science categories of Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989).

Among those general education areas common to both studies, the largest increases were in interdisciplinary studies, mathematics and quantitative skills, values, and computer literacy. Also in 2000, institutions prioritized students' understanding of other cultures (66 percent of institutions) and the complexities of global issues (58 percent of institutions). These increased course work requirements confirmed the continuation of trends first noted by Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) and Gaff (1991).

How Did Institutions Organize the Changes in Their Programs?

Were most general education programs still distributional, or was the trend in 2000 toward a core curriculum? Several respondents to the GE 2000 survey indicated that they found it difficult to report exact credit requirements to specific content and cognitive skill categories. These respondents noted that their general education programs had shifted from traditional content and skill distribution categories (for example, three credits in history, six in writing) to required themes or clusters of course work where required content and skills were integrated into interdisciplinary clusters and sequences and unified by themes. For instance, one GEA stated that the conventional categories of the GE 2000 survey did not "represent separate phenomena" in their general education program, as several of the skill areas listed on the questionnaire were now "embedded in the Integrative Studies courses" of the general education program. A second GEA commented:

Our lower-division learning communities create the possibility of interdisciplinary teaching and learning and require thematically linked content courses in either the sciences or the humanities or the social sciences. While we have no requirements specific to global studies, several of the learning communities have global themes. Both collaborative work and leadership are general education program outcomes and the learning communities are meant to incorporate activities and learning adapted to those outcomes.

Yet a third GEA described general education areas as "interdisciplinary areas of understanding that are not tied to disciplines or departments." A fourth described how general education skills were embedded in the program rather than individual courses: "Reading, writing, speaking, information literacy, critical thinking, and creative thinking are required in every general education course." Finally, another GEA observed, "Our choices do not mirror your categories. They include cultures and civilization and studies in aesthetic experience, for example." These comments explain the increases in institutions with interdisciplinary requirements (from 19 percent in 1989 to 64 percent in 2000) as reported in Table 1.9. Campus leaders saw the goal of required themes or clusters of courses to increase

coherence and provide greater meaning across the curriculum. Also, these leaders saw curricular themes connecting study across disciplines and permitting the inclusion of innovations such as learning communities, service-learning, reflective essays, and capstones.

Both CAO and GEA respondents claimed that themes were used to make the learning experience coherent, help students bring meaning to their general education program, and provide students the opportunity to make connections between their education and social issues. While the GE 2000 survey did not reveal any clear trend away from distributional elective curricula or toward prescribed core curricula, it did show increased prescription of courses in a greater number of curricular areas and the use of curricular themes and clusters to convey the organization of general education curricula.

Were the Changes in General Education Due to External Pressures?

Over the decade, a number of states and higher education systems implemented policies for student transfer and articulation of credits that may have affected general education. Also, many of these agencies mandated accountability and assessment reporting that may have influenced the general education program as well. Regional and specialized accrediting agencies changed their standards relative to general education (Ratcliff, Lubinescu, and Gaffney, 2001). The standards for the Accrediting Board for Engineering Technology and the Commission of Higher Education of the Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools, for example, strengthened standards with direct implication for general education. Thus, although there are many potential external influences on the curriculum (Garcia and Ratcliff, 1997), our survey examined those we thought most likely to have an impact on general education programs and those that had been examined in prior studies.

Nearly two-thirds of the institutions (63 percent) reported at least one external influence on general education. However, sources of influence varied greatly across institutions, and no single external factor that was identified affected a majority of institutions. Also, while the sources of external influence did not vary according to institutional type, they did vary predictably between public and private institutions. Over eighty percent (83 percent) of public institutions claimed that one or more external factors affected general education. Fewer than half of the private institutions (49 percent) reported one or more external source of influence.

The most frequently cited external influence on general education, regardless of institutional type or control, was the regional accrediting association. Thirty-eight percent of CAOs and 46 percent of GEAs saw the revision of accrediting standards as affecting change in the general education program. As Table 1.10 shows, this influence varied significantly by

Table 1.10. Influence of Accrediting Agencies on Changes in General Education

Regional Accrediting Association	Total Number of Institutional Members in Accrediting Region	Changes in General Education Reported to Be Influenced by Accrediting Agency Standards	
		Number	Percentage
Middle States	73	16	21.9%
New England	28	12	42.9
North Central	84	29	34.5
Northwestern	12	4	33.3
Southern	63	36	57.1
Western	19	9	47.4

Sources: Johnson (2003); Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff (2001).

accrediting region. Institutional members of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) most frequently (57 percent) found their general education programs affected by the association's standards. Nearly 50 percent of the reporting members of the Western and New England associations found that the standards of these bodies were relevant to their general education programs. Respondents from other regions less frequently cited their accrediting associations as influential over general education.

Specialized accrediting agencies, highly influential on requirements for majors in professional and career fields, were not seen as particularly influential on general education. One in four GEAs (25 percent) found that the standards of specialized accrediting groups played a significant role in changes to general education. One in four GEAs (24 percent) saw interinstitutional or statewide articulation agreements influencing general education reform. Only 12 percent of GEAs noted that the interventions and legislation of state government influenced changes in their general education programs, while 12 percent saw state coordinating boards influencing the changes in their general education programs. These forms of external influence were felt particularly in public institutions. Nearly four of ten GEAs (39 percent) at public colleges and universities saw their general education programs influenced by statewide agreements on articulation and transfer; only 12 percent of private institutions reported a comparable effect.

Respondent CAOs elaborated on the external influences affecting general education in open-ended portions of the survey. These were the increasing emphasis on student learning outcomes and competencies, the strengthening of specific components of general education, the mandating of course content through articulation agreements, and the easing of general education credit recognition for transfer students.

What Were the Major Reasons for Change?

While there was clearly external influence on the changes in general education during the decade, principally by the regional accrediting associations and particularly among public institutions affected by legislation and statewide coordination, the primary impetus for change came from within the institutions. In analyzing the open-ended commentary of CAOs to the survey, three reasons for reform stood out:

- The general education program was fragmented and had little coherence.
- Changes in the students or faculty required changes in general education.
- The program was outdated.

Analysis showed that 54 percent of the CAOs giving open-ended commentary on their surveys cited achieving greater curricular coherence or reducing curricular fragmentation as the primary reason for reforming the general education program. Nearly half (48 percent) also found the general education program failing to meet student or faculty needs and therefore in need of change. Over one-third (38 percent) described their programs as out of date and therefore deserving of change.

Achieving Greater Coherence. Most CAOs expressed needs to make general education curricula more coherent. Collectively, the respondents did not show a uniform notion of what coherence was or how it was to be achieved. They proposed a variety of paths, including tying general education to the major, to mission or goals, and to a reduction in general education course offerings. Most gave multiple reasons for a lack of coherence. For example, one saw the lack of coherence in general education due to inadequate integration with the major, stating that the “program was modified to integrate it more effectively with programs in the schools and departments.”

Many CAOs saw coherence best achieved through a closer linkage of general education purposes with institutional mission. One CAO explained, “Currently we are developing an entirely new general education program because we need to tie general education to mission; the current curriculum is out-of-date and does not address coherency or needs, and it does not have adequate assessment.” Other CAOs discussed achieving greater coherence through the reduction of distribution requirements, the movement to a core curriculum, or the tightening of existing core curricula. In 1991, Gaff reported that curricular leaders believed that reducing student options in general education would generate greater coherence. A decade later, many leaders continued to act on that belief, adding greater prescription and reducing student election in general education.

Over the past decade, there has been considerable discourse on fragmentation in the curriculum and the merits of focusing course work on specific skills or competencies to gain coherence. This appeared in some survey

commentary on change in general education. One CAO said the recent revision in general education was to “integrate the teaching of competencies across the curriculum.” Another noted, “The general education package of courses had grown uncontrollably over the years. There was a lack of coherency of offerings, with awful disconnection of learning and skill-building experiences.” Yet another illustrated the problem of fragmentation: “The previous program had become very unwieldy. It was a distributional model with nearly 350 course options. The aims and goals of the program were vague. It had been revised piecemeal over the years.” Although there is some question as to whether reducing course offerings increases coherence (Ratcliff, 1997, 2000; Stark and Lattuca, 1997), several institutions changed their general education curriculum for this reason. But as we have seen, only 38 percent of CAOs thought the changes adopted in general education brought about increased coherence.

Meeting Student and Faculty Needs. Changes in general education also came about as a result of perceived faculty or student needs. Faculty needs were often cited by CAOs as a primary reason for change. For example,

There was a sense of weariness among faculty who had carried the main teaching load in certain parts of the program. In particular there was a sense that it would be refreshing and possibly result in more effective pedagogy if we abandoned several of the common syllabus courses that had characterized our approach for many years in favor of common themes around which individual faculty would structure their own syllabi.

General education also was changed in response to student needs. Frequently, general education was changed to be more responsive to first-year students. Also, programs were changed to meet new goals specifying student learning outcomes and competencies needed for graduation. Some CAO respondents indicated that general education had been modified due to the need to assess student learning.

Student concern about the quality of course work and lack of full-time faculty involvement in general education prompted some reforms. One CAO commented, “The need to redesign our required freshman seminar was prompted by concerns about lack of involvement by full-time faculty across the disciplines and student concerns about variability in quality and confusion about intended purposes of the course.”

The skills and abilities that college graduates need provided the focal point for other reform efforts. One CAO noted, “It was time to revise our plan, given the significant changes at the institution and the various post-baccalaureate cultures into which our graduates were moving. We wanted to address development of competencies such as multicultural global issues and technology, and strengthen critical thinking and problem solving, for example.”

Many of the changes were incremental in nature, taking the form of an update rather than a wholesale revision. A respondent explained, "Our general education program was revised to update it according to student needs and to add an integrative capstone course."

In an era of tight resources and competition for students, several changes were made to attract and retain students and to respond to the changing demographics of the student population: "Student retention was decreasing. The preparation level of entering students is continuing to be lower than in the previous decade and their attitudes toward education and difficult work are also lower. As a commuter campus, we thought that a greater sense of community was needed."

Updating the Program. Several CAOs described the general education programs as having a "shelf life" and therefore needing periodic changes. One noted, "The old plan had been in effect for ten years and was due for review." Another tied the vitality of the program to broader social change: "Our previous curriculum was over fifteen years old and did not reflect realities of today's life." Still another thought that general education became outdated when it no longer related to the students. The programs had been revised in many cases by adding specific courses in diversity and multiculturalism, computer literacy and the use of technology, and understanding the impact of the increasing internationalization of society. The changes came at the expense, in credit hours, of the broad divisional categories of humanities and arts, social sciences, and sciences found in many of the predecessor distributional plans for general education.

A Decade's Worth of Change

The decade of change in general education was largely incremental and sustained trends noted at the outset of the decade by Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) and Gaff (1991). These curricular changes sought coherence using two primary approaches. First, student election of course work was reduced, while prescribed sets and sequences of courses increased. Second, course work was grouped into themes and clusters to better communicate the relationship between the different subjects, skills, and fields of knowledge contained therein. These changes were often associated with tying the general education program closely to institutional mission more than to meeting student needs or social expectations.

External factors seemingly played a relatively modest role in general education change. They swayed public more than private institutions. Regional accrediting agencies were influential over the general education programs of their members. However, the majority of change was brought about internally by the good efforts of faculty and academic leaders on campus.

Academic leaders increasingly saw general education as a dynamic program, needing to adjust and respond to the changing needs and interests of students, society, and the expanding realms of knowledge. The changes over

the decade were largely incremental and intended to make general education programs more coherent, to meet needs of students and faculty better, and to update their programs based on societal and institutional changes. These changes were largely structural in nature, including increased prescription of courses, increased attention to issues of diversity and global issues, increased emphasis on interdisciplinary study, and increased use of thematic curricular designs in general education.

In the chapters that follow, these decade-long trends in general education change are further unpacked in the case studies of four institutions. The stories illustrate that general education is tied inevitably to institutional context. Each curriculum differs in educational philosophy or philosophies, students served, programs offered, constituencies served, institutional mission, and other factors. The value of learning from others' experiences in general education reform, then, is one of analogy, allegory, and adaptation rather than adoption of approach and practice.

Notes

1. The Gaff (1991) and Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989) studies differed in a variety of ways but reported comparable results. Gaff studied institutions that were changing their general education programs, while Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen studied a randomized sample stratified by institutional type. Gaff surveyed chief academic officers, while Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen studied college catalogues. Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen reported the proportion of the baccalaureate credits assigned to general education only for the bachelor of arts degree. The CAO 2000 survey most paralleled that of Gaff in that it surveyed chief academic officers and drew its sample from AAC&U, an association that may attract institutions interested in change in general education.

2. Although the data showed that 3 to 5 percent fewer institutions had specific natural science, social science, and humanities requirements, this finding may be an artifact of differences between the GE 2000 survey and the catalogue study conducted by Toombs, Fairweather, Amey, and Chen (1989).

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