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*How do evolving academic priorities influence the review and reform of a pioneering general education program?*

## The Reforms in General Education at American University

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If general education programs purport to embrace a universe of knowledge, at least a universe as defined by a particular institution, then in practical terms, they must also reflect widespread sanction, sustenance, and supervision within the institution. In practice, such programs are interdisciplinary and inhabit interjurisdictional surroundings. In order to review or alter such programs, the academic community must look past traditional boundaries and old antagonisms to the contemporary realities that shape an institution's academic affairs.

### **Origins of American University's General Education Program**

American University in Washington, D.C., is a private, comprehensive, selective, Carnegie Doctoral Extensive institution. Many of its students come from all fifty of the United States, and more than 15 percent call some 150 other nations home. Most are drawn to Washington, D.C., for the obvious benefits of place, the plentiful possibility of public sector studies and connections, and internships and other experience-based programming considered both essential and excellent. American University students generally sit to the left of center in their political views and are likely to volunteer for community service, the Peace Corps, or Habitat for Humanity. They rally to opportunities for service and real-world experience at high levels of government, politics, and the media. Furthermore, they count on the immediate and palpable linkage of such experience to their classroom and campus life.

Six schools and colleges comprise the university: the College of Arts and Sciences, the Kogod School of Business, the School of Communication, the School of International Service, the School of Public Affairs, and the Washington College of Law. All except the law school offer undergraduate instruction.

American University was an early adopter of what most would consider the classic archetype of general education: value-, goal-, and objective-oriented courses arranged into five broad curricular areas representing the universe of human knowledge. These areas are coherently tied into sequential clusters, and proceed from broad foundational experience to more specific inquiry. For all the deliberate structural detail, the framers of the American University program nonetheless sought to safeguard choice and flexibility for the university's five thousand or so undergraduates. From its launch in 1989, the program has proved both intellectually and structurally durable, even against a scenario of considerable institutional change and growth.

Rarely do widespread curricular reforms grow out of thin air. At American University, administrators equated reforming general education with enhancing the quality of undergraduate learning. Faculty designed the program in the mid- and late 1980s under the direction of the dean of academic development and founding general education director, Ann R. Ferren. Ferren drew together divergent university constituencies and interests by mooring the task at hand to the university senate and its committees charged with academic oversight. The senate, in turn, established the General Education Committee specifically composed of senior (and therefore presumably steadfast and wise) faculty members. The mandate put before the community rang simple: improve the academic rigor and coherency of undergraduate education at American University. The response engaged the entire community in serious discussion, debate, and unprecedented levels of faculty development, faculty service, and curricular advancement. In two and a half years, from early 1987 to fall 1989, 150 courses, nearly 80 percent of them entirely new or substantially revised existing ones, found their way through an all-embracing approval process, were banded into more than forty cohesive clusters, and appeared in the catalogue.

### **Curricular Areas**

Although scholars can organize the whole of human knowledge in myriad ways, American University's general education schema divided learning into five expansive segments and fitted courses from across the colleges and schools into the appropriate areas:

Area 1, The Creative Arts: Art; computer science and information systems; philosophy; literature; performing arts

Area 2, Traditions That Shaped the Western World: Art; history; Jewish studies; language and foreign studies; physics; philosophy; literature; American studies; justice, law, and society; anthropology; communications; psychology; sociology; government

Area 3, The International and Intercultural Experience: Anthropology; language and foreign studies; philosophy; international studies; sociology; economics; literature; history; government; communications; international business

Area 4, Social Institutions and Behaviors: Anthropology; American studies; history; sociology; women's and gender studies; economics; finance; government; communications; philosophy; psychology; education; health and fitness; justice, law, and society

Area 5, The Natural Sciences: Biology; anthropology; chemistry; health and fitness; psychology; physics

Early in the formative process, the university committed itself to front-line teaching and resources sufficient to its general education teaching mission. "Front-line" teaching denoted full-time professorial course staffing. With 545 full-time teaching faculty members attached to the six colleges and schools, the overall campus teaching ethos warranted some consideration. Professors who pictured their role, expertise, purpose, and passion as aimed at graduate training or upper-level undergraduate lecturing faced the not insignificant question of how to educate predominantly first- and second-year students successfully without resorting to formulaic solutions.

Large, impersonal lectures, except in specific and deliberate circumstances, could not suffice as the "one-size-fits-all" key to general education. Neither could "introduction to the discipline" courses if they skirted unalloyed the program's values, goals, and learning objectives. Those central goals and objectives, either program-wide or attached to specific curricular areas, saw to it that no viewpoint could lay claim to the whole answer or that no course or discipline was a territory sufficient unto itself without need of stretching past its own limits. What were these objectives?

### **Institutional Values, Goals, and Learning Objectives**

With consultation from the whole faculty, the General Education Committee articulated six major objectives that would not only touch but also consciously influence courses in the program:

- Writing experience to enhance basic communication skills
- A critical thinking component to enhance the ability to make and analyze judgments based on reasoning and evidence
- Recognition of the ethical issues pertinent to the field or discipline
- Development of quantitative and computing skills

- Development of intuitive, creative, and aesthetic faculties and the ability to connect these with reasoning skills
- Attention to a variety of perspectives, including those perspectives that emerge from new scholarship on gender, race, and class as well as from non-Western cultural traditions

Faculty members from each of the five curricular areas also collaborated in enunciating area-specific goals. These specialized objectives covered the essentials of inquiry into the area's disciplines. Taken together, the program-wide and area objectives certified that American University's model of general education would be distinctive, that it would convey the mind and character of the university, that it would bring students to a fuller grasp of a complex, fast, and shrinking world, and that pedagogy and classroom environment would, of necessity, change. Faculty could choose to stay put with erstwhile exemplars of teaching, of undivided dedication to major and graduate education, of hide-bound disciplinary limits, or they could purposefully reevaluate teaching mission and style.

### **Curricular Reform: Impact and Lingering Questions**

Large-scale curricular modernizations often bring serendipitous and unpremeditated benefits. For all the off-putting sniping, squabbling, posturing, and sophistry, curricular debates almost always advance institutional goals and help focus emerging mission and common purpose. American University had to mull over the effect of a thirty-credit-hour general education load on its majoring programs and on students increasingly enamored with double majors, major-minor combinations, internships, and opportunities to study abroad. (An additional nine credit hours of university-wide requirements, two semesters of college writing and one semester of finite mathematics (or above), puts the sum of undergraduate requirements at thirty-nine hours before counting a major or minor, although six credits of general education may count toward a specific major.) In founding the program, the university had to allow for stringent professional accreditation standards in individual professional disciplines (like business). It had to overcome student perceptions that general education amounted to a rigid knot of regulations meant to throttle choice, creativity, credit for prior experience, or interest. It had to demonstrate that general education contributed significantly toward possibilities for a career or job. It had to reenergize senior faculty, co-opt their leadership and wisdom, and recruit new faculty capable of the masterful teaching and intellectual scope vital to invigorating the general education classroom. It had to match its intellectual commitment to general education with concomitant resource allocation policies and practices in times of both relative scarcity and plenty.

These figured to be crucial issues in the fall of 1989 as students first entered American University's general education classrooms. How did American University fare in the decade following, and how did the program develop and experience further reformation?

### **Program Assessment as Prelude to Review and Reform**

Projects like general education are magnets for continuous appraisal. General education directors and boards thrive on gathering and interpreting data, in part because such knowledge arms them for dealing with deans and department chairs, governing bodies, and administration, but also because the underlying conventions of general education demand it. The assertion that attention to students' writing skills should take prominence in a general education course, for instance, necessitates validation down the road. General education programs must assess themselves and must do so continually.

From the outset, American University's General Education Program left the door open to curricular revision. Variables like staffing, shifts in departmental emphasis and expertise, curriculum innovation, and prospects of refining and improving general education stipulated some degree of course changes and reclustering. Many faculty members, however, distrusted the established process, calling it cumbersome and bureaucratic. Because of the 150-course ceiling mandated by the university senate, no proposals, no matter how innovative or worthwhile, could be accepted into the program unless others were retired. It is no wonder that general education directors sneaked out on curricular search-and-destroy missions in hopes of finding chronically underenrolled or poorly evaluated courses in their crosshairs.

As for new courses, faculty innovators steered their proposals through a two-year, five-tiered curriculum approval process with layer upon layer of consultation, feedback, and approval. Teaching unit heads and faculty councils, college deans and their educational policy committees, the general education director and committee, the university senate and its Undergraduate Studies Committee, and finally the provost each played a role in the approval procedure. Some faculty responded with subtle and clever subterfuge. Courses sometimes may have drifted in focus because of faculty staffing or shifts of interest, but also because some instructors chose to skirt the administrative barriers to change. A course entitled "Japan and the US," for example, became in practice "Japan, China, and the US," a change eventually discovered in routine syllabus review and sanctioned by appropriate committee action.

Furthermore, deans, chairs, and faculty members grew aware that general education enrollments influenced resource allocation significantly (indeed, many a small, archetypal college major had been rescued, if not completely reinvigorated, through its firm and extensive commitment to

general education teaching). Whereas departments once argued against increasing their effort, the academic culture had begun to change. It was clearly in the interest of academic units to preserve and cultivate their general education offerings. Offering more course sections or more seats in an existing section, actions requiring general education office approval, meant the likelihood of attracting a greater share of student registrations and gaining a competitive advantage against other units. Still, despite the incentives for change, both as arguable intellectual necessity and temporal reward, the administrative barriers to change proved formidable enough to prevent the program from major renewal. In ten years, only sixteen new courses had been introduced to the program, a hair over 10 percent.

Overall, students embraced the purposes of the program and, in particular, applauded the outstanding teaching in it, but they voiced increasing frustration with what they saw as restrictive and arbitrary course clustering. A few students argued that courses were not suitably rigorous; more asserted that courses were *too* rigorous. The university's exit survey of students rated the program somewhere near the seventieth percentile. The glass was certainly more than half full, but even a third of respondents claiming less satisfaction with general education than with majors or minors intimated a need for action.

Faculty agreed that some course choices and pairings reflected the arbitrary patterns of political dealing more than unsullied scholarly uprightness. Faculty also supported goals and outcomes with virtually no complaint (after all, they had been instrumental in authoring these), but a small number of teachers seemingly ignored these in their classes. Even that phenomenon carried a message. The objective of requiring students to write had been attached to foundation courses, which are typically more heavily enrolled than second-level courses. Faculty ignoring the mandates on writing work therefore validated complaints that work load was disproportionately heavy in general education foundation courses. Foundation course enrollments have typically been forty students as compared to second-level average enrollments of thirty-two.

## **Faculty Development and Resources**

To help faculty meet the demands of teaching general education courses well, the general education program proposed and found funds for a General Education Faculty Assistance Program (GEFAP), which enabled faculty to request small cash grants to pay hourly wages to undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants of their own choosing. The point was simple: innovative teaching, especially in heavily enrolled classes, often requires inventive techniques such as tutorials, discussions, simulations, and a broad array of distance learning and allied technologies. Developing such innovation stipulates time and support. Furthermore, many pioneering learning techniques are best dispensed from nontraditional and nonauthoritarian

sources. Student-to-student learning would best suit many of these new pedagogical purposes. Some teaching units, especially larger ones, already had graduate teaching fellows deployed in support of general education, but others did not. GEFAP would make available even-handed access to teaching help.

Given the budget and cost of student part-time wages, from twenty-seven to forty assistants have been funded for up to sixty hours of work per semester, a number representing between 10 and 13 percent of all course sections. In seven years of providing GEFAP assistants to faculty teaching general education courses, the number of applications has increased with regularity. The magnitude of that increase has reflected overall trends in undergraduate enrollment. Thus, faculty members have come to regard GEFAP as a beneficial tool in personalizing uncongenial large classes while student evaluations of teaching have consistently disclosed higher levels of satisfaction with courses staffed by GEFAP assistants.

GEFAP guidelines do not sanction busywork, errand running, or grading of undergraduates by undergraduates. However, nongraded peer evaluation is both appropriate and encouraged. Commentary on writing drafts, for instance, constitutes appraisal and contributes significantly to the improved quality of student writing in general, but it does not directly entail the origination of a grade.

Just as students must evaluate faculty teaching in each course, they must also evaluate GEFAP assistants. These assessments tender a valuable glimpse into classroom activities. They also detect problems or misunderstandings in the use of GEFAP time. GEFAP evaluations and anecdotal feedback have furthermore certified that the best GEFAP assistants are students who have previously taken the course, not so much because they know the course material or even the style and demands of the instructor, but because they have insights into process and mode of inquiry typical of the discipline. Remarkably, GEFAP assistants often come from majors outside the field in which they serve, a reality strengthening the interdisciplinary filaments of general education. Students accept the credibility, for instance, of a nonscience major serving as a laboratory assistant or a nonmusician coaching them on hearing patterns in a Bach fugue. The temptation to shunt aside offers of help predicated on the suspicion that "you understand it because you have prior talent or experience" vanishes.

Yet another faculty development innovation has bettered the quality of general education teaching at American University. In response to a call from its strategic plan, the university established the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). The center amassed a range of established faculty development agendas and, together with the university's academic computing enterprise (branded "e-Academics"), adjoined learning and teaching technology to its activities. While the mission of the center never specified particular programs or levels of instruction, faculty members

teaching general education courses were obvious clients. By academic year 2001–2002, the center together with e-Academics had arranged for every American University course to be automatically authorized for use of on-line teaching technology. (While any number of courses may choose to employ e-mail, listservs, or class Web pages, the teaching technology of choice at American University has been Blackboard. Courses were set up in “passive mode,” meaning that nothing would appear in course listings on-line at American University sites or the Blackboard site until individual faculty chose to activate the account.) By fall 2001, the CTE reckoned that more than 25 percent of all courses were actively using on-line distance-learning techniques routinely, that countless more relied on e-mail as a primary means of communication between instructors and students, and that a significant number of these sections were indeed general education courses. Of general education course sections in fall 2001, forty-seven, or 26 percent, were active Blackboard users.

### **A Reassessment from the Ground Up**

A decade in the life of any academic program can amount to an eternity. Owing to institutional and market shifts and reallocation, student demographics, expectations of accrediting bodies, and the prevalent motivation of the academic community to embrace advancement, any program can safely presuppose periodic study and possible reform sooner rather than later. At American University, the call for further examination of the general education program came at the ten-year mark in academic year 1999–2000. It was an opportune moment coinciding with other institutional planning milestones: the final two years of strategic plan implementation, the presidential conversations with the university community regarding the institution’s future, and an upcoming accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools for which evidence of institutional assessment work was crucial.

The provost, Cornelius M. Kerwin, in consultation with university senate leaders, entrusted the general education review to a committee drawn equally from the General Education Committee and from faculty and staff representing constituencies with a stake in general education. These included students and faculty from each of the undergraduate schools and colleges, as well as the Student Confederation, registrar, dean of students, International Student Services, Enrollment Services, Office of Institutional Research, the University Library, and the general education program itself. During 2000–2001, the committee amassed data including surveys of student and alumni attitudes about the general education program (a questionnaire prepared and administered by the General Education Office went to current students in second-level general education courses, graduating seniors, and alumni from the class of 1995, one of the earliest classes to have graduated after the implementation of the current curriculum in



1989–1990), results of student and faculty focus groups, transcripts of student and faculty town meetings, reports of faculty and administrative attitudes from individual schools and colleges, and a wealth of existing and updated institutional data concerning curriculum, enrollment patterns, and course staffing.

General education programs may stand or fall on their perceived meaning and coherence. Recognizing this, the review committee put special emphasis on the particular relationship of intellectual and structural matters. The critics of the program complained about the lack of consistency between courses. They alleged that political covenants among units resulted in the curricular decisions that were the basis of the program. They pointed out that not all sections of a given general education course necessarily met program objectives and standards uniformly.

However, the review committee concluded that few, if any, of these criticisms justified hefty program redesign. A general education comprising five curricular areas, each offering foundational and second-level courses, connected across disciplinary and college boundaries, and united around intellectual themes, institutional values, and learning objectives, remained sound and current. But the review team also concluded that several questions demanded attention:

- Foundation and second-level course linkages needed new justification and renewal. Course drift, staffing changes, and curricular innovation since the inception of the program corroborated critics' protests about the validity of linkages. Nothing suggested, however, that the problem was political, only a matter of curricular evolution.

- Program values, goals, and learning objectives still reflected the characteristics of modern society and the world, but they needed updating in order to conform to the university's priorities and planning and to refine their focus. Strategic planning and institutional mission had come to recognize globalism and information literacy as new institutional emphases. How would these be reflected in the general education objectives?

- Courses had to be reexamined. Were they communicating the essential disciplinary content and mode of thought? Did they link validly within the cluster? Had they grown old? Were they rigorous? Was pedagogy up to date? Did they meet program objectives and goals?

- General education staffing and resources needed to service current enrollment patterns. In particular, attention needed to be given to some units where courses were chronically taught by adjunct faculty. (The university had depicted its commitment of excellent teaching in general education in the regulation that no more than 30 percent of general education courses overall, and in each college, school, or department, could be taught by other than full-time faculty.)

- Faculty and student enthusiasm about general education needed to be reinvigorated.

The General Education Review Committee made several dozen recommendations clustered around these themes to the provost and the university senate for approval and implementation.

Given the fast-paced change of institutional priorities and planning and the sometimes serendipitous vagaries of organizational behavior, parts of the implementation began to take on their own life. For instance, the committee tagged the seemingly innocuous and arguably good notion of reestablishing a university-wide advising council—a group bringing together the university’s professional advising community with others having a stake in advising—as a necessary but second-priority task. However, the university president, concluding his “Campus Conversations” planning process, called for a renovation of academic advising (as one of fifteen organizational and academic improvements). This encouraged immediate action on advising reform, pushing beyond the specific scope general education reform. Likewise, a learning resources project team, envisioned in the general education review as a means of delivering improved academic support to the program, became part of grander institutional priorities. In this way, different initiatives across the university conspired to mold and modify those undertaken under the banner of general education reform.

### **Reviewing Courses and Creating New Clusters**

The course appraisal mandated by the review committee proceeded as the university senate began its debate over other aspects of the overall program design. Thus, the basis for course realignment, new or redesigned clusters, and even the association of a course with the program in the first place, would be in hand at the same time that other innovations would be implemented. Course reviews consumed time. Each faculty member teaching general education courses was asked to contribute to the self-study, an assessment guided by a template of questions about the course, its association with other courses in the cluster, its approbation of technology and other pedagogical enhancements, and its concinnity with program values, goals, and learning objectives, both existing and proposed. The results of that assessment not only yielded a rich profile of general education teaching practices and pedagogies, a database already stout with information gleaned from course syllabi, but also was the primary apparatus by which the General Education Committee could make decisions about new course clustering.

The review committee had specifically suggested that the present “tight” course clusters be replaced by new “loose” clusters. That is, previously a student enrolling in any one of seven to ten foundation courses in a curricular area would be obliged to select subsequently from six or seven corresponding second-level courses of the area. Under the revised provisions, a student could take one of several foundations, any of which would lead to as many as a dozen second-level courses. Such clustering would give students lateral advantage in choosing foundation courses. The hope was that students could find the foundations courses appealing destinations

themselves rather than prerequisites to hoped-for second-level courses. In order to reckon such new alignments, the General Education Committee clearly drew on the facts disclosed in the course review.

### **The Future: General Education and the University College**

The latest iteration of academic planning has spawned a vision of a new pan-undergraduate foundation defined as the “university college.” The college is intended to further impress the institution’s core values on students during their first two years of study. Although thought about a university college remains nascent, some outcomes are predictable. General education will likely have a central place in such an all-embracing undergraduate enterprise. Under the most recent reforms, general education’s value and objective-based curricular methods have grown to affect the whole of the undergraduate core. A university college at some level would reinforce the strengths of the reforms already in place, and it would make general education’s intrinsic indisciplinary even more integral to students’ overall experience.

Academic and student life planners alike look to experiential learning and common student experience as key elements of a vibrant undergraduate program. As these emerging rudiments chew up more and more turf that had belonged strictly to the habitual academic empire, so learning activities have invaded the province of student life, once the realm of counselors, housing officials, Greek advisers, and chaplains. Overreaching the boundaries of learning denotes far more than purging the ramparts between academic units and faculty eager to do interdisciplinary work.

General education programs like that of American University devised the notion of learning and teaching unbridled by the tether of any single academic unit, another way of saying that all are engaged and thus all claim some ownership. The next phase of evolution as avowed in such innovations as university colleges, enhanced experiential learning opportunities, common experience courses, college life seminars, and residential life and learning programming guarantees that the faith and aspirations of the general education model will penetrate learning even further.

Though still a work in progress, American University’s reformation and review of its model of general education has taken a step toward a broader, cohesive, and universal plan for all its undergraduate students. The American University program insinuates that general education in the twenty-first century might well be termed comprehensive education.

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