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Most want a more coherent curriculum. Few succeed.
What works, and why?

Creating Coherence: The Unfinished Agenda

D. Kent Johnson, James L. Ratcliff

Nearly everyone has a stake in general education. Consider all the constituents participating in general education reforms at American University; the critics claimed the prior program was an amalgamation of the political interests across campus. Because so many of the institution's stakeholders had varying perspectives and interests, tensions ensued at several levels. Tensions are the result of conflicting or divergent perspectives, including those held by a single individual with conflicting roles (departmental faculty member and member of the general education task force).

At the course and program level, tensions exist as to what to teach, how to organize the curriculum, whether classic or contemporary texts should provide focus, to what extent the needs of the individual or creation of community should prevail—to name but a few (Association of American Colleges, 1988). Another source of tension emanates from the role that general education plays in undergraduate degree programs and, in particular, its relationship to majors (see Chapter One). Although many institutions, like Franklin Pierce, are integrating general education into all four years of the baccalaureate degree, others view it as the introduction and precursor to specialization and professional socialization. A further source of tensions comes from the relationship between the academic programs of the institution and social expectations. These are expressed locally and within a state over such issues as student transfer policies, statewide general education requirements, the assessment of student learning, and the expectations that various career fields, professions, and disciplinary majors place on the general education program. These tensions are reflected in national discourse as well.

Curricular Tensions and General Education Reform

Between 1984 and 1993, twelve national reports appeared that were critical of undergraduate education; eight others proposed specific reforms with direct implication for general education (many were reviewed briefly in Chapter One and are described more fully in Chapter Seven). Collectively, they claimed that the baccalaureate degree had lost meaning, advocated that the curriculum should resonate more clearly with the broader collegiate experience, and called for general and liberal learning to be regarded as "the most important course of study during the undergraduate years" (Stark and Lattuca, 1997, p. 62). As we have noted elsewhere, the reports and reform proposals of the late 1980s and early 1990s set the stage for a wave of revision and reform on campuses across the country.

There continue to be substantive areas where tensions in the curriculum are likely to emerge. Newton (2001) identified four perennial dimensions of general education likely to generate tension in curricular reform:

- Unity versus fragmentation (knowledge)
- Breadth versus depth (student learning)
- Generalists versus specialists (faculty competence)
- Western culture versus cultural diversity (content)

These tensions, left unresolved, inhibit general education reform.

In addition, the CAO 2000 survey (Johnson, 2003) indicated three areas of ongoing tension leading to curricular change in general education:

- How to increase curricular coherence and meaning
- How to address changing student and faculty needs
- How to update and renew the general education program

Survey responses and anecdotal comments confirmed each as a source of ongoing tension (Johnson, 2003). The Association of American Colleges (1988), Stark and Lattuca (1997), and Newton (2001) reported similar areas of tension, suggesting they are perennial in nature. In the broadest sense, the impetus to change invites questions of what and how to teach, how to best meet individual and community needs, what the role of faculty is in delivering the curriculum, and how the curriculum is best organized to address these potentially conflicting needs. Answers to these are many and varied.

Reform of general education is often regarded as an overwhelming complex, time-consuming, and politically fractious endeavor. However, the GE 2000 survey and the cases presented in this volume show that revising the general education curriculum is not only possible but also prevalent. Conventional approaches to change often call for broad campus consensus. From this perspective, failure to resolve endemic tensions in the general

education curriculum is a barrier to change (Newton, 2001). Nevertheless, the research presented here suggests that tensions are inherent in general education change and may generate new patterns of general education, embracing the notion of continuous change (as described in Chapter Seven), and consistent with the recommendations of *A New Vitality in General Education* (Association of American Colleges, 1988; Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff, 2001; Johnson, 2003).

Many of these tensions center on creating a coherent curriculum and specifically on how best to provide common meaning for students enrolled. What creates the common experience in general education? Is it that all students must experience the same courses (that is, the core)? Is it that all students must achieve the same aims (common outcomes)? Is it that students must share the same college experience regardless of major (learning communities, clusters, or something else)? What should students experience in common through general education has been asked philosophically (mission and goals), substantively (great books, core curriculum), structurally (distributional requirements, articulation agreements), and experientially (learning communities, freshman seminars). The issue of commonality begs the larger one: What makes for a coherent curriculum and a meaningful experience in general education? In this chapter, we examine these questions.

Coherence: The Elusive Element

Creating a coherent curriculum has been a primary aim of general education reforms. Noticeable in the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys, however, was the lack of a consistent view of what curricular coherence is. Most saw coherence as somehow related to conveying meaning to students, faculty, or other constituents. Many institutions used their general education program to convey institutional values and mission to key constituents. As such, general education represented a key, albeit implicit, policy statement, as well as a definition of a major element of the undergraduate experience. Most leaders believed that increasing curricular coherence results in programs that more clearly articulate the knowledge and skills associated with a college education.

Many general education leaders and chief academic officers thought that their most recent rounds of general education revisions fell short of the mark in improving coherence. As has been the case in the past (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Gaff, 1991; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence, 1984; Weingartner, 1992; Zemsky, 1989, Ratcliff, 2000), they nonetheless continued to work toward increased coherence as a principal remedy for an undergraduate degree perceived to be fragmented.

General education leaders associated reducing and tightening distribution requirements, establishing and refining core programs, and integrating courses across disciplines with creating coherence. These practices,

consistent with the academic planning paradigm (Stark and Lattuca, 1997; Tyler, 1950), assumed that curricular coherence comes from faculty work in refining courses and conducting assessments that conform to preset goals. From this view, understanding results from clarity of goals and tying requirements and assessments to the goals. It requires no input or action on the part of the student, and it does not take into account student perceptions of the curriculum (except as perceived by faculty working on revisions). In short, faculties plan coherence, and as a result, students achieve integration (Stark and Lattuca, 1997).

Coherence may be better seen as also happening in the minds and discourse of students. In this sense, students make connections among ideas, assimilate them into their own conceptual frameworks, and apply them to problems and situations they care about. Faculties and the curriculum facilitate this learning process wherein knowledge, skills, and attitudes are developed. The implication of this alternate frame for coherence is that coherence is an ongoing process of reconciling tensions to facilitate complex meaning in the minds of individual students rather than an attempt to resolve tension to communicate a singular vision to all students.

Coherence may be better encouraged by bringing together competing tensions in general education. The process of curricular change involves tension between unifying (centripedal) and stratifying (centrifugal) forces. The expansion of knowledge, the subspecialization of curricula to meet the diversification of students and their abilities and interests, and the elaboration of courses to meet the social, technical, economic, and political priorities of society all serve as centrifugal forces of curricula. The search for coherence serves as a centripedal force, working to bring pieces of knowledge and representations of meaning into relationships that are understandable to learners and others. The tension between centrifugal and centripedal forces in the curriculum assumed a politicized form of "culture wars" in the 1980s: the battles among academics as to the canonization of texts within fields (Graff, 1992). One can imagine a body of knowledge, pushing itself asunder and packing itself together by the power of centrifugal and centripedal forces of debate within the academy, with these swings reflected in the general education program (Ratcliff, 2000).

The tremendous changes in the knowledge base making up the disciplines and professions, profound social and demographic changes, and increasing public scrutiny of higher education conspire to generate centrifugal forces on the curriculum. Inaction, from this vantage point, does not lead to status quo but rather to the erosion of coherence over time. Under such conditions, it is not surprising to see widespread concerted efforts to counteract these centrifugal tendencies through revisions aimed at improving coherence.

An emerging trend found in the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys was using curricular themes to help students make sense of the general education program. Themes were exemplified in the Franklin Pierce and Hamline

plans. Themes were thought to give students a basis for making curricular choices on the substantive focus of the theme, potentially increasing the students' involvement in making connections among courses. Similarly, themes linked courses together toward perhaps a more concrete end than the broad general education goals or a philosophy statement on the purpose of liberal learning. These trends suggested that general education leaders were moving beyond purely structural solutions to coherence, emphasizing the connectivity of curricula.

Three questions in the CAO 2002 survey help color how academic leaders are tackling the challenge of improving coherence. The first of these asked the chief academic officer (CAO) what the primary reasons were for the previous curricular revision. The second asked the CAO to describe the most notable feature of the current general education program. A third asked the CAO to look to the future and to describe the greatest challenges for general education at their institutions. Collectively, the responses to these questions portrayed how colleges were planning for greater coherence and connection in general education.

Planning for Greater Coherence

Most institutions tried to improve coherence through increasing programmatic structure. Although the total number of required credits and relative proportion of credit hours for general education did not change from 1990 to 2000, the knowledge domains required in general education expanded (see Chapter One). The modal number of credits within conventional categories, especially in the broad areas of the humanities, social sciences, and foreign language, decreased, while a wide range of particular content and skill areas was added. In this way, general education became both broader and more prescribed. Many CAOs thought that reducing choice and increasing prescription led to increased coherence.

Coherence was further tied to structuring general education to align with goals better, more effectively integrating general education with the major, and increasing the extent to which general education courses related to each other. One CAO commented, "We need to tie general education to mission; the current curriculum is out of date and does not address coherency or needs." Continuing, he described the new general education program as "a common core through four years that is interdisciplinary and team taught, includes a capstone experience and service learning." A core curriculum, within this context, is one that prescribes what the student takes, although many cores do not include interdisciplinary courses.

Core curriculums were popular solutions to curricular fragmentation in the general education literature (Bennett, 1984; Cheney, 1989; Boyer, 1987). Yet a core curriculum alone was not able to render coherence, according to the comments of one CAO: "The previous core curriculum was too disparate and lacked focus. It had weak control over what was considered a core

course. It lacked obvious coherence." When the structure afforded by a core failed to produce the desired coherence, more structure was seen as the solution. This time, a common format for all core courses was the proposed solution: "Coherence is established not by blending substance and crossing disciplinary lines but by establishing a common form for all core courses." Programmatic coherence came from a common format for core courses, and coherence within the individual courses came from the disciplines offering them.

CAOs at institutions with distributional plans also gravitated toward structural solutions to coherence. Similar to the changes at American University, general education goals were reexamined and clarified in the light of institutional values, and the number of course choices afforded to each distributional category was reduced. For example, in discussing a 1997 revision to general education, one CAO commented, "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." The CAO next described how general education had been changed:

> We have a much more precise set of aims and goals driving the program. There are fewer course options (approximately 95). We now have a general education capstone class, which is intended to be taken near the end of the students' gen ed experience. It is designed to serve two primary purposes: (1) to integrate the students' gen ed experiences in a writing- and discussion-intensive class, and (2) to focus on a major public affairs issue facing the USA and/or world in the next century. This latter purpose allows us to integrate our institutional mission in public affairs into the curriculum. We also have an upper-level writing class that is designed to permit students to learn how to write in their intended major.

Whether the general education program was a prescribed core or a conventional distributional requirement, the changes undertaken frequently did not result in greater coherence. While fragmentation and lack of coherence were the primary reasons for changing the general education program, only 38 percent reported that the resulting changes led to coherent sequences of courses. Although further planning and additional structure were preferred solutions, only 39 percent of GEAs reported regularly reviewing the coherence of the general education program. And although coherence was a primary reason for reform, it was not a predominant criterion for curricular reviews (Johnson, 2003).

Tackling the Sources of Incoherence

As suggested previously, coherence exists in the minds of students as well as in the creation of curricular structures (Gamson, 1989; Ratcliff, 2000). Moving attention from transmission (that is, the design and delivery of the

curriculum to students) to how students receive the curriculum requires a different set of conceptual tools. First among these is to see the curriculum as a form of communication and discourse, not only from the institution to the students but among and between students, faculty, and academic leaders. As a form of communication, curriculum can be deemed incoherent if it appears irrelevant, offers too much or too little information, appears obscure or indirect, or appears inaccurate or incorrect (Ratcliff, 2000). Incoherence is in the eyes of the beholder.

One CAO described the principal strategy for bringing coherence to the curriculum as "linking courses throughout the general education curriculum by common themes. Interested faculty agree to infuse their courses with a focus on a given theme. Students with an interest in having an integrated thematic connection among several courses may take them whenever they are offered and fit into the student's schedule rather than having to try to take several in a single semester or year."

Several points are illustrated by the example. First, the students need to see the relevance of the curriculum. This was evident in the comment that course work supporting the major helped students understand the relevance of general education. Second, the CAO valued finding creative ways to maintain high student interest in the general education program. Using a thematic approach was intended to cause students to replace scheduling constraints as the primary basis for course selection. Naturally, the inherent interest of the theme to the student has direct bearing on the success of this approach.

A second source of incoherence is information overload or underload (Ratcliff, 2000). A recent graduate summarized his undergraduate experience as the required reading of hundreds of books and articles without any context beyond that provided by the individual course, resulting in the student's perceived inability to incorporate ideas into meaningful pursuits (Haworth and Conrad, 1997). The student's complaint illustrates how too much information without sufficient time and concerted energy devoted to analysis and synthesis may lead to perceived incoherence. A purpose of the seminar in the liberal arts at Franklin Pierce and many capstone seminars is to render meaning from disparate forms of knowledge, thereby reducing the prospect of information overload.

Similarly, several CAOs believed that themes not only increased the meaning to students but also promoted deeper learning and helped students to make connections between the subjects they were studying. Meaning could come from the connection between courses within the theme or between the theme and the student's major.

A third source of perceived incoherence comes from the program as being seen as too abstract or obscure. For many career-oriented students, liberal learning by and large and general education specifically do not relate immediately to their career goals and ambitions or to the role they see a college education playing in achieving those ends. The emphasis at Hamline on a practical liberal arts education and the focus on core competencies

needed in the workplace as a centerpiece for the Cascadia curriculum are program characteristics intended to make general education less abstract and more accessible to students.

Another means to make general education less abstract and obscure is to tie it to the needs of the local community or region. One CAO described an institutional plan to "infuse the general education experience with themes reflecting our institutional commitments to the Appalachian region." The use of themes allowed the largely nontraditional and career-oriented student population to see liberal learning and general education as concrete manifestations of the institution's involvement in the communities and issues of the area. Also, by affording students the opportunity to integrate general education course work with regional concerns, it gave them a more holistic view of their educational experience, making it less obscure and abstract.

A fourth cause of incoherence comes from when communication is seen as inaccurate or incorrect. This often has less to do with the content and organization of the curriculum and more to do with how it is communicated. If, for example, general education is seen as a "take two of everything" requirement to "get out of the way"—to use Garvin Davenport's description of the Hamline curriculum prior to the reform—then general education has no meaning beyond the time, effort, and expense required to accumulate the necessary credits. Also, it sends the message that certain courses (those in the major) are more valuable than those in general education. Even if the catalogue states clear goals and links general education requirements to those goals, that clarity can be quickly sacrificed when faculty advisers or fellow students imply or say that the general education course work serves little purpose other than as an obstacle to entering the major or achieving graduation.

Coherence: The Unfinished Agenda

Creating coherence remains a great unfinished agenda for general education. The GE 2000 survey showed that the resultant general education designs were somewhat disconnected from a primary reason for undertaking the reforms in the first place. According to the CAOs, the perceived lack of coherence was one of the most common reasons for changing the general education curriculum. Yet at 38 percent of the institutions surveyed, coherence was not given a priority in the planning or review processes. Why is coherence not given greater attention?

That curricular coherence is often discussed in the literature but rarely formally defined may contribute to this disconnect. Another explanation may be the overwhelming reliance on the planning model implicitly used by academic leaders to create curricular change in general education. The model claims victory over fragmentation when purposes, processes, organization, and evaluation are tightly aligned. Yet the adoption of a core

curriculum or the reduction of choice in a distributional plan did not lead necessarily to improved coherence in examples cited previously.

Viewing the general education curriculum as a form of oral and written communication changes the conceptualization of coherence. As new information enters each field of knowledge, as new students with new interests, backgrounds, and experiences enter the institution, and as new institutional and social priorities emerge, the general education curriculum is caught in the tensions generated by these forces and their attendant stakeholder perspectives. Collectively, these represent centrifugal forces nudging the curriculum to fragmentation, creating the impetus to add new courses and choices and necessarily leading to ever greater disarray.

Coherence appears as the result of efforts to bring together competing tensions in the curriculum. Thus, "from a relational viewpoint, efforts to achieve greater coherence can be seen as a countervailing force in a dynamic to generate meaning" (Ratcliff, 2000, p. 12). Coherence may be defined, then, as the extent to which students and faculty find meaning in the curriculum.

Classic areas of tensions in general education—unity versus fragmentation of the knowledge, breadth versus depth in student learning, generalists versus specialists in faculty preparation, staffing and development, Western culture versus cultural diversity in content—can be addressed but not conclusively resolved through curricular change. Instead, they represent dimensions of the ongoing challenges in addressing the multiple perspectives on the purpose and meaning of general education. An individual institution may adopt a general education program that answers questions of unity and fragmentation, depth and breadth, staffing and texts, but in doing so, it will not erase the multiple stakeholder perspectives and attendant relational dynamics that lead to further revision and refinement. As Garvin Davenport noted in Chapter Five, sixteen years after its initial implementation, the Hamline Plan is "still under discussion, still changing, and to some extent still controversial." Haig Mardirosian described in Chapter Three general education at American University as still a "work in progress." Such views complement and affirm those of Peter Senge (1993), who held that the impetus to change is derived from the gap between vision (what we want to create) and current reality, and this gap represents creative tensions within learning organizations. Similarly, for Jack Lindquist (1997), the "performance gap" between goals and current learning conditions was a primary driver in case studies of curricular change in the 1970s. Tensions in general education curricula stimulate rather than inhibit change. Change in general education is an ongoing process driven by the dynamics ensuing from tensions in the curriculum. (This conclusion and its implications for understanding change in general education are further explored in Chapter Seven.)

At American University, the next iteration of general education reform may be the university college. This boundary-spanning organizational structure for general education challenges the ownership of general education by

conventional disciplinary departments and the integration of student learning responsibilities of academic and student affairs divisions. The impetus for this boundary spanning between academic and student life domains was the need for a "broader, cohesive, and universal plan for all its students" (Mardirosian, cited in Johnson, 2003). It also fosters ongoing need for a curriculum that is adjustable and responsive to changes in student and societal needs.

Davenport noted how dialogue among faculty and industry leaders at Hamline had presented new challenges to providing a general education program true to the "practical liberal arts." While these conversations reaffirmed the goals of the existing program, they also led to a second phase of general education renewal aimed at more clearly articulating the values of a liberal education.

The need for ongoing change, revision, and reform offers a new perspective on coherence and helps formulate an answer to the question posed at the outset of this chapter: "What creates the common experience in general education?" Commonality is not generated automatically from all students taking the same courses unless the core conveys a set of values, an intellectual perspective, or an inclination to inquiry that is seen and shared by students and faculty alike. Common goals and objectives alone do not generate coherence. Goals are things that can be kept in mind and should be the objects of genuine student effort. General education goals may appear on the syllabi of courses, but unless they are something that faculty strive to teach and students are challenged to master, they will not produce coherence. And what about those innovations, like learning communities, linked courses, and course clusters, designed to have students experience the curriculum as a cohort? Do they produce coherence? Again, our answer relates to the emblems of meaning associated with the experience. Are students and faculty alike challenged, enlightened, and engaged? Several pathways can be beat to coherence, each conveying meaning and value to general education.

General education programs need to be reviewed regularly for coherence if improvement is to be achieved. We have proposed four simple criteria that can be employed in rooting out the incoherent: (1) irrelevance, (2) information overload or underload, (3) obscure or indirect content or learning processes, and (4) incorrect or inaccurate representations of the program. Coherence is in the eye of the beholder, and it is an important, if elusive, goal. If the goal is to be achieved, greater attention needs to be given to creating coherent sequences of courses—sequences that convey the values and goals of general education to the students and faculty. Coherence is an aspiration for which an academic community must continually search. Reflection, formal assessment, and much discussion are requisite elements. This is not a simple, one-time review task but an ongoing agenda.

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D. KENT JOHNSON is director of assessment services at the Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

JAMES L. RATCLIFF is president and senior consultant, Performance Associates Postsecondary Consulting, Pueblo West, Colorado.