7

Change in general education is changing, and there are lessons to be learned in reenvisioning the curriculum.

Re-envisioning the Change Process in General Education

James L. Ratcliff

Planning has played an ever increasing role in the reform of general education. The majority of those undertaking change in the past decade, as reported by the CAO 2000 and GE 2000 surveys (Johnson, 2003; Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff, 2001), did so by linking general education closely to institutional mission. Changes in the general education curricula at Franklin Pierce, American, and Hamline were undertaken in part to relate the program to institutional mission better. Cascadia's general education goals were derived from institutional mission.

Many of the innovative and imaginative curricula of the past decade came about in the absence of systematic planning, program review, or assessments of student learning; yet as general education has increased in priority across campuses, increasingly it has become subject to more formal planning and review processes. Simultaneously, the grand redesign of curricula and programs has given way to a new incrementalism of change based on assessment and review, self-study, and overall institutional strategy, of which general education is regarded as but a piece. Over the past two decades and across the globe, planning and evaluation processes have been implemented, then modified, replaced, or augmented with more stringent policies and procedures (Neave and van Vught, 1994). Change in general education has followed these patterns.

How Changing the Curriculum Has Changed over the Decade

Between 1984 and 1994, over twenty national reports and proposals for reform were issued (Stark and Lattuca, 1997). These reports were generally critical of the undergraduate curriculum and had specific relevance to general education. The reports proposed knowledge, skills, or experiences that should be common to undergraduate education and advocated various specific elements of the curriculum—core requirements, collaborative learning, and assessment of outcomes, to name a few—as essential or desired ways of improving educational practice. Most important, they set the stage and channeled the discourse on general education reform that was occurring across campuses during the 1990s. In many respects, the shape, character, and direction of the reforms followed those advocated by these national reports.

In *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (1984), the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, William Bennett, argued that student election of course work resulted in a disintegration of the humanities core; he proposed a core curriculum of great books as the cure. *Involvement in Learning* (1984), a National Institute on Education report on the conditions of excellence in higher education, found undergraduate curricula to be fragmented and not engaging or enlightening to students; it urged "clearly expressed, publicly announced, and consistently maintained standards of performance for awarding degrees—standards that are based on societal and institutional definitions of college-level academic learning" (pp. 15–16). It would have change in general education begin with clearly defined and communicated curricular goals and standards.

Ernest Boyer (1987), president of the Carnegie Council for the Advancement of Teaching, pointed to curricular friction between career and liberal learning aims of college and promoted the integration of disciplinary knowledge into seven areas of inquiry that all students should experience. *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (Association of American Colleges, 1985) advocated that students be provided with experiences leading to the development of abilities rather than be given traditional introductions to the disciplines. *Integrity* claimed nine such experiences were essential for a broad and relevant collegiate education: inquiry, literacy, understanding numerical data, historical consciousness, science, values, art, international and multicultural experiences, and study in depth.

In 1989, Lynn Cheney, director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, campaigned for a prescribed curriculum, referred to by the title of her book, *50 Hours,* to improve students' knowledge of literature, philosophy, institutions, and art in their own and other cultures. Bloom's widely read *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) argued for a return to a great books curriculum based on Western values.

The importance of teaching about other peoples and cultures was a focal point of debate. D'Souza (1991) insisted that the inclusion of diversity courses had split institutions of higher education on moral grounds, leaving them inherently racist, sexist, homophobic, and class based. In contrast, the 1995 report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum,* recommended that every institution include a course that is "an extended and comparative exploration of diverse peoples in this society; with significant attention to their differing experiences of United States democracy" (p. 25).

The impact of the reports was not uniformly manifest in curricular changes. Credits allotted to general education in the baccalaureate degree never rose to Lynn Cheney's desired fifty, and the core curricula that she, Bloom, and Bennett advocated were not widely adopted. Assessment of student learning outcomes as urged by *Involvement in Learning* has yet to be fully adopted. Nevertheless, the changes to general education over the decade did clarify goals, limit student course choices, refocus programs from the introduction to disciplines to interdisciplinary groupings around themes, clusters, and learning communities, and courses on diversity widely became part of most programs. Students' skills, capacities, abilities, proficiencies, and talents became far more important. Less fragmentation, more coherence, and active learning were the broad aims of the changes undertaken. It was a decade of broad, reflective reforms set afoot by a national debate and a heightened priority given to undergraduate education.

Perhaps of equal significance is how these changes came about. In the late 1980s, national reports stimulated debate and discussion across campuses and within the major associations of higher education. For example, an Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) annual meeting served as catalyst for the remaking of general education at Portland State University. The university's faculty were introduced to the national discourse on the undergraduate curriculum, came to recognize that there was a referent literature on effective undergraduate learning, and began to consider what a complete overhaul of the general education curriculum might look like (Reardon and Ramaley, 1997). These events and their parallels were replayed across the country as campuses engaged in discussions, reviewed research, garnered counsel from consultants, and crafted new curricula. The bases of change were the imagination of campus leaders and the affirmation of associated research on good practices. By and large, change was not necessarily a result of strategic plans, program reviews, or student assessments. Examples are manifest in this volume: the Hamline Plan, the Pierce Plan, the reform model at American University, and more recently, the "Cascadia way." Broadly, they are also the reforms and results benchmarked in the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys.

While this may have been the profile and pathway to change in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, it is not necessarily how change is proceeding today. As the reforms of the 1990s were taking root, other changes

also were adopted in college administration that had import for how change in general education was to proceed in the foreseeable future. The general education reforms of the 1990s fully embraced the nomenclature of goal setting, goal clarity, harmony of goals to mission, and the linkage of goals to requirements. Today, strategic planning, program evaluation, assessment, and continuous quality enhancement frame curricular reform and quicken the pace of change, making it an ongoing process. Guy Neave was first to note, warily, the emergence of the "evaluative state" in higher education (1998, p. 278). While the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys uncovered few reforms initiated from program reviews or assessments of student learning, it is clear from their reports that today's general education programs are subject to such reviews and incorporate student assessments (however incompletely) as well.

While the pace and intensity of planning and evaluation activities have accelerated greatly, their record in improving general education programs and the students enrolled in them is less clear. The question is open as to whether the current processes of academic planning and evaluation, now so firmly entrenched, have specific limitations in the improvement of quality in general education and in the learning of students.

Program Improvement as a Quality Enhancement Activity

Unfortunately, program quality itself is a problematic concept. A variety of scholars have approached the topic, but the definitional dilemma is portrayed well in Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance:*

> Quality. . . . you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. . . .
>
> But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously, some things are better than others. . . . but what's the "betterness"? . . . So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels, and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? [1974, p. 179]

It is this contradictory nature of quality that has real and practical consequences for the reform of general education, and it has specific implications for the extended use of the planning and evaluation paradigm in general education change. Purpose relative to quality helps define the direction of programs. Rudolph noted, "In describing its structure, we compute courses, semesters, lectures, departments, majors, and so forth. In exploring the substance of the curriculum, the stuff of which the learning and

teaching is made, we are in the presence of quality, whether good or bad. . . . Judging quality requires some notion of what the curriculum is expected to do" (1997, p. 2). As Rudolph notes, structure and substance are two different program attributes, quality and quality improvement pertaining largely to the latter.

Lee Harvey's review of literature (1997) points to multiple, not always harmonious, views of program quality:

- Quality—meaning the *exceptional,* where quality is related to the conception of excellence
- Quality—meaning *perfection,* where quality has consistent and error-free attributes
- Quality—meaning *fit for purpose,* where quality fulfills the perceived requirements of stakeholders
- Quality—meaning *value,* where a government agency, subsidizing employer, or agency finds optimum benefit relative to cost
- Quality—meaning *transformation,* where quality necessarily involves a change from a current to an ideal end state

The Pierce Plan (described in Chapter Two) was created to make the college distinctive from its competitors and thus attract students (quality as being exceptional). It also sought to use best practices in undergraduate education (quality as perfection). The Hamline Plan (explored in Chapter Five) also sought to be a distinctive program stressing "practical liberal arts" (being exceptional), but the reform also came about because the old curriculum was judged out of date and not tied to institutional mission (quality as fit for purpose). The reforms at American University (set out in Chapter Three) were to craft a distinctive curriculum (being exceptional) and to increase rigor (perfection) and coherence (quality as fit for purpose). Cascadia (described in Chapter Four) designed a curriculum derived of its mission (fit for purpose) while meeting requirements for transfer and articulation (quality as value). Both Hamline and American found that the full ramification and requirements of the reforms originally implemented became known only as each program evolved (quality as transformation). Thus, changing general education to improve program quality and the associated student experience takes multiple directions and calls for discourse on different visions of what quality is. This, in turn, determines how change is envisioned and implemented.

Program Improvement as an Academic Planning and Management Activity

Planning and evaluation models typically examine the structure and functions of general education. American University, for example, began its reforms by deriving goals from institutional values and course objectives

from program goals. It divided the realms of knowledge into five areas and allocated a maximum of 150 courses to service those areas. Changing the structure and function of general education resulted clearly in a more viable program. The use of academic planning models in changing general education curriculum was increasingly prevalent during the 1990s.

Also useful was the formalization of governance relative to general education. Many institutions provided ongoing administrative leadership for general education, including a dean or director of general education and directors of writing, first-year seminars, and other components to complement the institution-wide committee for general education. With individuals specifically assigned to provide leadership, general education was more likely to remain an institutional priority and have continuous direction to maintain its vitality.

However, structural and functional changes to general education may not fully address those factors or forces hindering or facilitating student learning. Functional and structural changes rely on a predetermined formal order. Adopting a common format for core courses, for example, may bring greater curricular consistency but not necessarily greater student engagement. As academic planning becomes formalized, so do the solutions emanating from it. The result may generate positive incremental changes but may be of limited use when the charge is to rethink or remake general education as a whole.

The problem of transformation, by its very nature, calls for moving beyond the current established order. If the existing design, structure, or function fails to engage, enlighten, and enliven students and faculty adequately, then it may not be the best starting point for reenvisioning the curriculum. Similarly, using the same academic planning model to generate a new general education reform may mask the source of problems in the old and embed those problems in the new. The literature on program redesign is replete with examples of failed change of this nature (Corder, Horsburgh, and Melrose, 1999; Toombs, 1977–1978; Toombs and Tierney, 1991; Trowler and Knight, 1999).

George Mason University used the academic planning model of Ralph Tyler in designing its often-cited general education curriculum (Blois, 1987). Tyler (1950) proposed that quality curricula possessed clearly stated and interrelated purposes, processes, organization, and evaluation. More recently, the ideas of Stark and Lattuca (1997) have been widely used in academic planning. They also advocate systematic curricular planning of structure and function, including description of purpose, content, sequence, learners, instructional resources, evaluation, and adjustment. The model has proven useful for design and evaluation of curriculum at the levels of lessons, courses, programs, and institutional academic plans. Stark and Lattuca also recognized certain "dynamic issues" in academic planning, "especially those that involve the interactions of people and the processes that concern people" (p. 378).

In general education, academic plans have provided a reliable and consistent way of designing and evaluating curricula. They call attention to the purpose and organization of the program, number and types of courses included, and how it is to be evaluated and adjusted to achieve its goals and objectives (Stark and Lattuca, 1997). The GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys indicated that campus leaders worked to link general education goals to institutional mission, clarified those goals, and specified curricular requirements that met those goals. These actions, based largely on an academic planning framework, helped free general education from disciplinary turf wars and introductory courses arranged in distributional smorgasbords and permitted the creation of interdisciplinary courses clustered together in sequence through themes and learning communities. Academic planning models that stress structure and function may have been the right approach for the time. Yet more of the same medicine may not be the best prescription for the lingering maladies of general education. Recall that a principal aim of the reforms of the past decade was to make general education more coherent, yet only 38 percent of chief academic officers (CAOs) in the CAO 2000 survey said their plans achieved this.

Program Improvement as a Relational Activity

Persistent problems of linking coherence and student engagement may benefit from a fresh approach to general education reform. An alternative is to envision general education reform as a relational communication process. Howard (1991), for example, contends that general education could be better understood through Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative competence. Applebee (1996) sees curriculum as a conversation between teachers and learners, representing "traditions of knowing and doing" (p. 35). The process of improving general education involves transactions among stakeholders where fields of knowledge, sets of skills, values associated with intellectual inquiry, and personal development get defined through discourse (Ratcliff, 2000, 2001, 2003). Curricular design is an act of communication involving oral (through advising, for example) and written (through the catalogue, for example) representations of institutional policies and practices in settings of dynamic discourse (the general education task force meetings). Changes in general education are dialogic in that they are shaped by the change process itself, the actors or stakeholders in that process, and their socially constructed understanding of what a quality program is.

What is a quality general education program? The word *quality* refers to an attribute or set of attributes. Individually and collectively, people select and assemble the attributes that constitute quality. The quality attributes a politician may associate with general education (such as the number of hours required and its effect on time to degree) may be different from those of students (which may encompass connection to career,

interactions with the instructor, and assignments required). As the quality attributes are selected, the individual constructs meaning around the idea of general education, which serves as a filter to subsequent information regarding the program. Each stakeholder constructs an idea of program quality from a few select attributes, with those attributes varying from stakeholder to stakeholder.

Program quality and change therefore are not only individual and personal but also social and dynamic. Faculty members' discussions with peers and students and students' interactions with fellow students and faculty influence the construction of what general education means on a day-to-day basis. How individuals across campus assemble their understanding of general education constitutes the communicative and relational dimension of the curriculum (Ratcliff, 2001).

General education is an organization of knowledge. Its basic building blocks are courses. Courses have conventionally been aligned with how disciplines organize knowledge (Clark, 1983), but as the GE 2000 survey shows, they are increasingly clustered across disciplines according to themes to be socially or personally relevant. The quality of general education courses, individually and collectively, is influenced strongly by the formal and informal communication of departments. Advisers may tell students to avoid a course, get it out of the way, or select it as an important complement to their program. Faculty peers develop high regard for courses and sequences that convey their rigor and relevance. This communication facilitates multiple social interactions fundamental to teaching, learning, and research. Such communication is the basis for the socialization and intellectual development of students (Trowler and Knight, 1999).

The complexities of communication are important to making changes in general education. The students, the faculty, and the administration, writ large, will attach interpretation to the reports of the general education committee, the discourse about general education in faculty meetings, students' electronic assessment portfolios, and the like. The extent to which communication engenders understanding and conveys the values of the program is critical. Students first encounter general education in their undergraduate program, and the first years of college are where most dropouts occur. For most institutions, student success, retention, and thus tuition revenue are fundamental to their political and economic well-being.

Quality as a Social Construct

What is and is not seen as a quality general education program is very much the result of educational philosophy, beliefs, values, normative positions, and power within and between departments within the institutions and among institutions competing for students and resources (Barnett, 1992; Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983; van Vught, 1994). The Pierce and Hamline plans, for example, were to be distinctive programs, helping prospective

students and their parents distinguish their undergraduate programs from others. These curricula were intended to be personal and social constructs meaningful to their stakeholders.

A curriculum represents knowledge, culture, scholarship, and perspective from which students of various backgrounds, interests, and abilities experience, discover, and gain understanding (Shulman, 1987; Ratcliff, 1997). When individual faculty members create the curriculum as an atomistic assemblage of single courses, lectures, and seminars, the quality of the curriculum as a whole is problematic. Quality becomes embedded in the various values and expectations of individual faculty rather than the faculty as a whole. The result is a general education similar to that at Hamline prior to reform, a "two of everything" program that students "got out of the way" rather than regarded as a meaningful learning experience. Such a distributional program provides students with little guidance in improving their learning and little common ground as to its outcomes. The quality of general education is as much a social construct as is the institution in which it is organized (Clark, 1983; van Vught, 1994).

Relational Dialectics and the Study of Contradictions

These observations regarding change in general education are drawn from relational dialectics (Altman, Vinsel, and Brown, 1981; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). From this perspective, general education and the undergraduate experience exist through people's communication with one another, wherein they articulate multiple and opposing tendencies. Discussions of general education are social discourses that are unfinished and ongoing and involve "a polyphony of dialectical voices" (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 4) all struggling to be heard, and through that struggle, the stage for future struggles is established. The Association of American Colleges' *A New Vitality in General Education* made a similar point: "Tensions exist over what to teach and how to teach; whether great books or contemporary literature should be selected as texts; how much and what type of in-class and out-of-class learning should be included; how to best address individual and community needs in the curriculum; and what students want and what institutions think students need" (1988, p. 5). While certain issues are easily accessible through structural solutions, others are not. If certain students are underprepared in the mathematics, remediation may logically follow. If assessments show that students need to improve their writing, strengthening the writing program may be an appropriate step. Yet broad campus and social concerns about curricular quality and coherence emerge from tensions endemic to the concepts themselves and are not so simply solved. Oppositions regarding such issues as quality or coherence generate a dynamic that both propels and impedes change. The disciplinary department and major are specific centrifugal weights on general education (Gaff, 1991).

Contradictions, Oppositions, and Change in General Education

Contradictions and tensions, such as the prescription or election of courses, disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, learning organized by cohorts of students and that arranged by sequence of subjects, are inherent in general education. Contradictions from this vantage point are not necessarily failures or inadequacies or targets for resolution or consensus. They also are the basic drivers of both incremental and transformative change (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Ratcliff, 2003).

Individuals find themselves in contradictory or conflicting roles when discussing, designing, and implementing change in general education. Faculty members recruited to represent their various fields of study are asked to reduce, condense, and translate their fields into modules that fit into interdisciplinary sequences, first-year seminars, and learning communities. In a single Franklin Pierce course, for example, faculty teach art, music, history, literature, and philosophy, drawing from the language of the specialists and disciplinarians, translating and synthesizing to the second-year undergraduates. Students create electronic portfolios in which this knowledge is interpreted and fused. Victoria Richart led the design of Cascadia's unique educational program, but she also must relate its features to accrediting standards and transfer requirements of the statewide coordinating board. Such tensions and opposing issues breed role conflict within and among the stakeholders in the change process (Katz and Kahn, 1978; King and King, 1990).

Contradictory roles represent the dynamic interplay of competing forces manifest in the thoughts and discourse of an individual. Roles are contradictory when they involve opposites that "are actively incompatible and mutually negate one another" (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 8). While opposites are important to curricular change, not all opposites are the same. A *logical opposite* involves a concept or issue and its absence; coherence and fragmentation (X and not X) are *logical opposites*. A *functional opposite* involves two distinct concepts or issues that function in incompatible ways, negating each other. Access and assessment provide an example of functional opposition. Assessing student learning on entry to college may help detect those students who are underprepared, but it may also discourage student enrollment among those at risk and who fear testing, thereby suppressing the number of underprepared students taking the assessment. Functional opposites lack negation as the basis of their opposition. Assessment does not negate access, or vice versa. Such functional oppositions also exist in a nondichotomous or nonbipolar environment. Few colleges can choose not to assess their students (due to accreditation standards), but they can choose how and what to assess. Few can effectively avoid serving underprepared students, but institutional policies and programs can be crafted to serve well those who enter without sufficient precollegiate education to succeed. If-then thinking and dualistic thinking will

not lead to viable solutions to such problems (Altman, Vinsel, and Brown, 1981; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996).

Confusing functional oppositions for logical opposites can impede the change process. Distributional plans and prescribed core curriculums are frequently portrayed as logical opposites in the general education. During the 1990s, many institutions decided that their distributional plans allowed a high degree of student choice, contributed to curricular fragmentation, and resulted in a lack of clarity of purpose. This was the case at both American and Hamline universities prior to the changes that these institutions undertook. Yet most of the curricular revisions of the decade chose a third way—courses clustered by theme—rather than shift to either logical opposite: a prescribed core as the preferred solution. Prescription and election were but one dimension of a functional opposition; another dimension was coherence, as was discussed in Chapter Six.

Conventional approaches to logical and conceptual oppositions involve efforts to eliminate them, usually through consensual decision making. However, each concept derives its meaning from one or more opposing concepts, issues, or characteristics. For example, the concept of a capstone course comes in part from the lack of synthesis among disparate courses. Organizing central concepts such as great books or key competencies presume curricula where student election is a predominant feature or central purposes are not articulated. This oppositional dynamic is part of the identity of each general education component and shapes the roles of individuals in teaching, learning, or changing general education.

The unity of conceptual oppositions illustrates how social dynamics may have both-and rather than either-or attributes. With regard specifically to change in general education, Gaff previously noted, "The issues are often posed as mutually exclusive alternatives: knowledge *versus* skills, Western *versus* non-Westerner cultures, the traditional canon *versus* new scholarship that challenges traditional assumptions. One need not be a genius to know that it is possible to have both. . . . Indeed, a successful strategy to reform the curriculum demands a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or' approach" (1991, p. 29).

Institutions and programs must contend with this Janus both-and attribute of general education and the quality of learning and the nature of the learning environment that result (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Elton, 2002; Ratcliff, 2001). This observation does not portend merely to the resolution of areas of contention in the curriculum but also to the way we understand change itself.

Understanding Change as a Dialectic Process

The wholesale remaking of general education, as we have seen in the case stories from Hamline and Franklin Pierce, exemplify transformative change. Academic folklore tells of a wise professor who remarked, "When

change occurs, things are different." Much of what we expect from rethinking general education is realized from the bottom up. Yet certain aspects require further modification and fine-tuning, others perform not as planned, and the results generate discourse leading to new changes previously not envisioned. Several campuses implementing learning communities or student portfolios as assessment mechanisms report the faculty time required to carry out each of these innovations far exceeds what had been anticipated. Many yearn for change but expect their daily lives to go about uninterrupted.

Both change and stability are inherent in social systems. General education reforms are intended as improvements. Yet change and stability as a dialectic unity of oppositions occur through the interplay of campus conventions and curricular transformation. When Harvard and Stanford made changes to general education in the 1980s, they were widely watched because the reforms were anticipated to be pacesetters to their traditions of quality; the notions of change and stability are inexorably intertwined in discussions of program improvement.

The role of the disciplines is invariably a focal point in discussions about changing general education. One CAO 2000 respondent commented that his institution "will continue to hire and develop disciplinary experts rather than generalists," and coherence in general education will be achieved "not by blending substance and crossing disciplinary lines but by establishing a common form for all core courses." Here stability is embodied in the very characteristics of a discipline (Ratcliff, 2000). The terms, concepts, models, themes, and theories used, the modes and methods of inquiry employed, and the conventions regarding arriving at conclusions and constructing generalizations are components of disciplines that add stability to discourse. Also, curricula do more than embody professors' interpretations of recurring teaching and learning situations. Curricula also guide interactions in teaching and learning situations so that they resemble each other in premeditated ways. As the classroom changes materially (as in the addition of technology) and in the students' and professors' perceptions of it, the categories of knowledge and the representation of them undergo ongoing, incremental change (Ratcliff, 2001). Thus, discourse about the role of disciplines in general education necessarily accommodates both stability and change.

Conventional views of change see it as the overcoming of the status quo. By adopting interdisciplinary course clusters, the influence of departments and disciplines will be removed—or will it? Without faculty development to accompany a new interdisciplinary, clustered curriculum, instructors may gravitate toward familiar territory, asking students to do the synthesis of fields of knowledge while they teach from the paradigms and content of their fields. To bring about true interdisciplinary teaching, curricular change should be regarded more holistically, attending to more than the structure of the program. So what might be an alternative, more holistic view of change?

Aristotle made a distinction between efficient causation and formal causation that is useful here. Efficient causation describes cumulative cause-effect relationships. Formal causation refers to patterns of relationships among phenomena (Rychlak, 1977). Efficient causation is at the heart of strategic plans, program reviews, and assessments of student learning. General education reform, in contrast, often involves questions of formal causation: how things and people fit together into patterns, how programs and people develop over time, and how patterns within the institution or among students and academics shift and change. In formal causation, no single component or person is changed by any single prior event or factor. Oppositions are not independent change agents in formal causal situations in the conventional sense of independent variables whose effects on other phenomena can be measured (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). They are endemic to discourse and change and fit into holistic patterns. A leadership challenge is to capture and portray oppositional dynamics as they evolve among students and staff, among departments and divisions, between general education and other curricular and extracurricular components. To understand change from a relational viewpoint is to focus on how people and events interact rather than on how one policy, person, or event changed the program.

A central question in many general education reforms is whether the focus should be on the improvement process itself or a set of desired outcomes. The latter presumes a teleological aim; that is, change is to be directed toward an ideal end state. Great books curricula strive for ideals framed as what students should know; competency-based curricula endeavor to teach students a specific set of skills and abilities. Both aim for an ideal state. The general education program, its instructional staff, and the students enrolled are judged relative to the attainment of the course and program goals on the assumption that they will be pulled toward the attainment of these goals as ideal outcomes.

In contrast, learning communities are implemented to ensure that students encounter the curriculum together as a cohort. Internships provide students with an experience related to the world of work, the outcome of which may or may not have precise objectives tied tightly to content or skill goals, and student portfolios may ask students to make judgments about their best work rather than provide a basis for determining how well the general education program is achieving its goals. Cascadia's Teaching and Learning Academy and Employee Learning Institute and American University's General Education Faculty Assistance Program and Center for Teaching Excellence are units designed to facilitate change and improvement. These innovations put improvement processes in place and are judged by the extent to which these processes lead to improvement. From this vantage point, change is not driven by a particular ideal (other than "improvement is good"). Change is manifest in ongoing processes that simply bring the program, its faculty, and its students to different intermediate places along a longer road of enhanced general education.

Transcendent change is where the general direction is known, but because the changes are so profound, the shape and nature of the outcomes are not known (Toombs and Tierney, 1991). In many respects, this is how the 1984–1985 Hamline reforms were characterized. With transcendent change, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis dynamic is breached, and new paradigms for understanding emerge (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Kuhn, 1962). While the Hamline reforms included interdisciplinary course work, only recently has campus discourse refocused on the pedagogy of interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Not everyone subscribes to transcendent change, supporting in its place a continuous process model of change. Certainly, the majority of change reported in the GE 2000 survey was not the grand redesign of general education leading to a signature curriculum and the remaking of the institutional culture. General education reforms, transcendent or incremental, may or may not result in progress.

Often reform efforts generate a sense of curricular churning rather than programmatic progress. A worthwhile distinction can be made between cyclical and cumulative change. Cyclical change is that distinguished by a recurring pattern. The dynamics of reform discourse moves from one opposition to another and then back again. Such movement reifies concepts and understanding, may generate a sense of churning about an issue, but may result in a redefinition of the relationship of opposing concepts or issues (Altman, Vinsel, and Brown, 1981; Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Werner and Baxter, 1994). Conventional views of general education reform have described it as a "perennial" (Newton 2001) or an episodic activity resulting from the interplay of faculty committees and administrative resolve, leading to program revision or redesign.

Cumulative change is a progression of nonrecurring actions through which the program, its faculty, and its students are permanently altered. The change can be viewed as a positive, negative, or neutral occurrence, but its result becomes lasting. The reforms at Franklin Pierce College and American and Hamline universities permanently changed general education; what followed were evolutionary refinements of those reforms. Cumulative change, like its cyclical opposite, can be found in both transcendent or process models of change.

General education reform inherently entails change processes that, more often than not, comprise formal causation rather than simple, efficient cause-and-effect relationships. Yet campus discussions gravitate toward the simple cause-and-effect characterization of change, oversimplifying the relationships. State legislatures or higher education governing boards may mandate that certain subjects be taught in general education or that it consist of a set number of credit hours, such as has occurred recently in New York, Illinois, and Colorado, assuming these will cause improved student learning. Cause-and-effect explanations like these grossly simplify such situations. The complexities of program

improvement activities require consideration of multiple, conflicting forces and views to effect meaningful reform. When change becomes cyclical, it does not mean that it is unproductive thrashing about or that it will not lead to improvement. When change is cumulative, it does not guarantee improvement either. The nature of change can be neither presumed nor ignored in curriculum reform activities.

People, Praxis, and Change

People are proactive agents in the change process. Yet remarkably, people—students, faculty, and academic leaders—are often viewed as passive dependent or independent variables (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Stark and Lattuca, 1997; Toombs, 1977–1978). The dynamic, interactive communication of individuals is a precursor to the choices and actions taken by those people, who in turn shape the change process. *Praxis* is a term used to describe the effects and actions of people engaged in discourse (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). The students joining in a learning community form peer structures for study groups, recreation, and socializing. Social life is essentially recursive of academic life; what people do in teaching, learning, and socializing and what social structures are intended by general education (such as learning communities, interdisciplinarity, and teamwork) are implicated by each other. People are both proactive and reactive as ideas and actions are shared among the stakeholders, and their identities become reified in normative and institutional practices such as the general education program.

Reification involves the development of patterns of thought and behavior that extend to and guide future ideas and actions. Reification leads to conventions and traditions that provide a certain amount of stability in stability-change dynamics. Institutional policies and practices, such as general education, consist of the rules, rituals, and routines of academic life (Cohen and March, 1986). As structural frameworks within which change may occur, they may appear to stakeholders as reified norms that understate their "changeable, flexible and plastic" nature (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 80). The divisions of knowledge in the curriculum, or the number of credits assigned to a particular division, may appear sacrosanct, inhibiting the committee charged with revision to overlook a full range of choices in the change process. This may explain why general education is thought to be such a knotty issue, such a difficult part of the curriculum to change, and yet the GE 2000 survey reports four out of five colleges and universities undertaking change in general education.

Reification of thought and action has been observed within the academic disciplines (Ratcliff, 2001) and has been demonstrated in research on proposal writing, student essays, and the evolution of drafts of scholarly articles submitted and then revised for publication (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995). Change proceeds through a process of reification wherein

disciplinary and administrative rules, rituals, and routines constrain the interactive and dynamic communication of choices by stakeholders in the change process. However, these same people give life to the oppositions that challenge conventions, affirm the plasticity of the social organism, and make it possible to bring about change. The very forces most often cited as forms and sources of intractability also provide the impetus for change. Each of the actors challenges the reification of actions governed by institutional norms, disciplinary boundaries, and departmental prerogatives. For example, one respondent in the CAO 2000 survey reported that the "current curriculum is out-of-date and does not address coherency or needs, also does not have adequate assessment." The inadequacies of the past (dated, lacks coherence) and the needs of the future (student centered, assessments) propel the changes of the present. Every exchange among stakeholders is informed by past exchanges and shapes future ones as well (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Documenting the inadequacies of the current curriculum and the future needs that the reform should address are useful activities in bringing about meaningful changes.

Holistic Understanding

Viewing general education as a set of interactive and iterative relationships requires us to see the reform process holistically. As my colleague Jerry Gaff has recently said, "It is a constant challenge for the faculty as a whole to take responsibility for the curriculum as a whole. Engaging faculty understanding of, and support for, general education is an unending task" (Gaff, 1991, p. 31). People, programs, and perspectives need to be understood in their relationship to one another. A holistic view, then, is not merely a comprehensive one but also one that views a social environment as a series of relationships, processes, interactions, and interdependencies. This raises three important issues: how conceptual oppositions and issues are situated relative to the change, the nature of their interdependence, and the context within which they interact (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996).

To understand how oppositions are situated, our focus needs to be on the interplay and interaction of individuals and not on the individuals in isolation, whether students, academic staff, or administrators. Change involves more than merely stating a clear educational goal to which faculty teach and students learn; it also attends to how that goal is discussed and understood by faculty and by students and how it becomes manifest in the course work required. To elaborate, student learning alone should not be the focus of general education reform either generically ("What is an educated person?") or particularly ("Students should be able to think critically and analytically"). Rather, to understand the change process, we also need to understand such learning in the context of student interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Through these interactions, past exchanges shape communication, choices, and actions and influence future

discourse, decisions, and directions. It is the interactions (and not merely the goal) that give shape to the extent that students and faculty become committed to lifelong learning or critical thinking from the general education program. Contemporary interactions develop patterns that extend to future actions. Close reading of a text, reflective discussions among peers and among students and mentors, and the habits of the mind and heart become socialized through the programs we create.

The interdependence of conceptual oppositions and issues is acted out situationally and contextually rather than generically: "As people come together in any social union, they create a host of dialectic forces" (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 15). The tensions in student, academic, staff, or administrative discourse get defined through the interplay and interaction of the actors involved. In general education courses, faculty members may be both experts (of specialties and as teachers) and learners (of interdisciplinarity, teamwork, curricular innovations in general education). Students can show what they know (demonstrating the mastery of the general education goal) and what they do not know (illustrating their own human deficiencies against the goals of the program). Such oppositions are both social and interpersonal, and the praxis of instruction reframes and redefines what is learned by whom and how.

Role conflict often results from this dialectic interplay of such oppositions. Those leading change need to guard against conceptual oppositions and issues emerging from the discourse about being reduced to stereotypes ("that's the position of administration") or interpersonal conflicts ("Ronald and Jeffrey always disagree about what should be expected of students"). As changes in general education proceed, oppositions among or between students, the faculty, and academic administrators need to be defined contextually ("What do Ronald's and Jeffrey's views tell us about setting academic standards?"). Therefore, those leading the reform effort must strive to keep the discourse holistic in perspective, focusing conversation on how the dynamics of interaction create impetus for change.

Another key reason that a holistic perspective is fundamental to the examination of past policies and practices and to the consideration of future program features is that social environments, including those fostered on campus, contain not one but multiple oppositions, most of which are of the both-and rather than the either-or variety. These oppositions are at the heart of change processes and may explain why the quotation from Prisig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is so frequently used in discussions of quality and improvement.

Oppositions may be internal or external (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Internal oppositions, such as the extent to which student election should be part of the general education program, occur within the campus community. The general education program also may be subject to assessment criteria, credit hour limitations, or articulation agreements set by higher education coordinating or governing bodies. Employers may convey

expectations of what all college graduates should know or be able to do, and the quality of high school writing, mathematics, or science curriculum may influence the knowledge, skills, and abilities of entering first-year students; these were external oppositions manifest in the development of curricula at Cascadia Community College. To account fully for oppositions—their interplay and their characteristics—a holistic view of the social environment is required of the academic leaders and committee or task force responsible for the review and reform of general education.

Finally, dialectic tensions in programmatic change vary from one context to another. In the CAO 2000 survey, one chief academic officer reported that curricular coherence was to be realized through a common format for all core courses in general education. A second CAO reported that the general education program seeks coherence through a "high level of integration among disciplines. . . . Our 'Making of the Modern Mind' [course] draws from 250 years of literature, philosophy, music, and history and is team taught by faculty from those areas." Looking at the catalogues of each institution would lead to the conclusion that general education programs share a similar core structure. Also, both rely on disciplinary specialists to realize their aims. Yet one strives for coherence through common course formatting, while the other attempts for the same curricular aim through interdisciplinary, team-taught courses. Thus, both the particulars and the generic qualities of the program relationships need careful study. The act of examining the educational program redefines its qualities, and undertaking program reviews necessarily fosters change. Such change may be simultaneously viewed as positive, negative, incidental, transformational, cyclical, or cumulative by the multitude of actors in the process; the tension among perspectives and the praxis of playing them out inevitably make differences occur, which then fuel the impetus to further change.

Conclusions

General education changed greatly over the decade 1900–2000, and equally significant is how changing the general education curriculum is evolving too. The transformative changes described in the Franklin Pierce, Hamline, and American case stories were deliberative and deliberate actions, but they were less tightly tied to formal program reviews, assessments of student learning, and budgeting and planning processes as were the refinements and enhancements to their plans that came later. As colleges and universities have adopted more formal models of planning and evaluation, general education reform has become caught up in these activities. A positive outcome has been less fragmented curricular and greater administrative oversight of the program as a whole and its many components (for example, with directors of the writing program and coordinators of first-year seminars). While a major motive for general education reform has been to create a more coherent curriculum, the changes reported in the GE 2000 and CAO 2000 surveys fell short of their mark in achieving greater coherence.

Curricular attributes such as coherence or distinctiveness may not be fully or adequately understood through analysis of the structure and organization of the curriculum, as academic planning and evaluation models lead us to do. Their shortcoming may be a result of the formal order they impose on the reform process, which predefines the framework for the change process, unwittingly replicating prior programmatic assumptions about how knowledge is organized and conveyed. Certainly, transformative changes are always "over the horizon" in that their implications cannot be fully envisioned at the outset of the change process. It is difficult to set goals and objectives, much less to measure their achievement relative to issues, dimensions, and attributes that are not yet fully known or understood. Staying the course—committing to change resulting from academic planning and program evaluation—no doubt will assist many in making ongoing and incremental improvements to general education. Such improvements, by definition, will be within the structure and function of current general education programs and may not effectively increase coherence or promulgate a distinctive or signature curriculum reflective of institutional values (Elton, 2002; Toombs, 1977–1978; Ratcliff, 2000, 2001, 2003).

Essentialist and prescriptive definitional approaches to general education provide abstract and theoretical exploration of issues but fail to capture the ways in which program improvement occurs situationally and contextually; the ways it is guided by the rules, rituals, and routines of the campus environment; how it extends past behaviors and events into patterns constraining contemporary thought and action regarding change; and the way it presupposes and defines new issues and future interactions as an impetus to change. Thus, viewing general education and change as relational dialectic processes may help see change as vibrant rather than merely episodic or ongoing. In the words of one of the CAO 2000 respondents, "The curriculum is dynamic; it requires constant revision and updating." Perhaps of greater significance, a relational perspective on general education reform also may assist in better understanding important curricular attributes, such as coherence, quality, and distinctiveness. Those who toil in the fields of program improvement and general education reform want their efforts to make a difference. Understanding how people and programs change through the dynamics of general education reform is a worthy and necessary aspiration, albeit one to which a proclamation of victory cannot yet be made, and perhaps never should be.

Our aims and expectations for general education are rightfully lofty. Its place in the culture of our institutions is so embedded that the assumptions on which it rests rarely go fully examined. General education today is like the furniture in our house, the groceries in the neighborhood store, and the paths across campus. We are so accustomed to where to sit and read a good book, in what aisle to find the cereal, and what pathways are pleasant for reflection or that make a quick shortcut to the lecture hall. The fundamental features of general education—its purposes, its practices, its rewards, its

aims and the culture it seeks to foster—promise an extraordinary impact on how our students and our colleagues think, regard knowledge, lead and rely on one another, see the world and regard their role in it. With so much at stake, should not we take up the ongoing challenge of change in general education?

References

Altman, I., Vinsel, A., and Brown, B. B. "Dialectic Conceptions in Social Psychology: An Application to Social Penetration and Privacy Regulation." In L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Psychology*. Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1981.

Applebee, A. N. *Curriculum as Conversation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Association of American Colleges. *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges, 1985.

Association of American Colleges. A *New Vitality in General Education*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1988.

Association of American Colleges and Universities. *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1995.

Bakhtin, M. M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (V. W. McGee, trans.; C. Emerson and M. Holquist, eds.). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Barnett, R. *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care*. London: Society for Research in Higher Education and the Open University Press, 1992.

Baxter, L. A., and Montgomery, B. M. *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*. New York: Guilford Press, 1996.

Bennett, W. J. *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984.

Berkenkotter, C., and Huckin, T. N. *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition, Culture and Power*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1995.

Blois, B. A., Jr. "The Page Program from Concept to Curriculum: George Mason University's Plan for Alternative General Education, 1981–1983." Unpublished doctor of education thesis, George Mason University, 1987.

Bloom, A. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Boyer, E. L. *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America.* New York: HarperCollins 1987.

Cheney, L. *Fifty Hours: A Core Curriculum for Students*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989.

Clark, B. R. *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in a Cross-National Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Cohen, M. D., and March, J. G. *Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President.* (2nd ed.) Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1986.

Corder, M., Horsburgh, M., and Melrose, M. "Quality Monitoring, Innovation and Transformative Learning." *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 1999, *23*(1), 101–108.

D'Souza, D. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. New York: Free Press, 1991.

Elton, L. "Quality Assurance Through Quality Enhancement." Paper presented at the annual EAIR Forum, European Association for Institutional Research, Prague, Sept. 9, 2002.

Furhmann, B. S., and Grasha, A. F. *College Teaching: A Practical Handbook*. New York: Little, Brown, 1983.

Gaff, J. G. *New Life for the College Curriculum: Assessing Achievements and Futhering Progress in the Reform of General Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
Harvey, L. "External Quality Monitoring in the Market Place." *Tertiary Education and Management,* 1997, *3*(2), 25–35.
Howard, C. C. *Theories of General Education: A Critical Approach.* New York: Macmillan, 1991.
Katz, D., and Kahn, R. L. *The Social Psychology of Organizations.* (2nd ed.) New York: Wiley, 1978.
Johnson, D. K. "General Education 2000—A National Survey: How General Education Changed Between 1989 and 2000." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2003.
King, L. A., and King, D. W. "Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity: A Critical Assessment of Construct Validity." *Psychology Bulletin,* 1990, *107,* 48–64.
Kuhn, T. S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
National Institute of Education. *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education: Report of the Study Group on Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984.
Neave, G. "The Evaluative State Reconsidered." *European Journal of Education,* 1998, *33*(3), 265–84.
Neave, G., and van Vught, F. (eds.). *Prometheus Bound: The Changing Relationship Between Government and Higher Education in Western Europe.* New York: Pergamon Press, 1994.
Newton, R. R. "Tensions and Models in General Education Planning." *Journal of General Education,* 2001, *49*(3), 165–181.
Pascarella, E. T., and Terenzini, P. T. *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
Pirsig, R. M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values.* New York: Morrow, 1974.
Ratcliff, J. L. "What Is a Curriculum and What Should It Be?" In J. G. Gaff, J. L. Ratcliff, and Associates (eds.), *Handbook of Undergraduate Curriculum: Innovation and Reform.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
Ratcliff, J. L. "A Model for Understanding Curricular Coherence and Transparency." Paper presented at the annual EAIR Forum, European Association for Institutional Research, Freie Universitat Berlin, Sept. 7, 2000.
Ratcliff, J. L. "Genre Knowledge and Curricular Excellence: An Examination of Curricular Dynamics and Curricular Grounding." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Research into Higher Education, Cambridge, England, Dec. 12, 2001.
Ratcliff, J. L. "Dynamic and Communicative Aspects of Quality Assurance." *Quality in Higher Education,* 2003, *9*(2), 117–131.
Ratcliff, J. L., Johnson, D. K., La Nasa, S. M., and Gaff, G. J. *The Status of General Education in the Year 2000: Summary of a National Survey.* Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2001.
Reardon, M., and Ramaley, J. "Building Academic Community." In J. G. Gaff, J. L. Ratcliff, and Associates (eds.), *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
Rudolph, F. *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.
Rychlak, J. F. *The Psychology of Vigorous Humanism.* (2nd ed.) New York: Wiley, 1977.
Shulman, L. S. "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform." *Harvard Educational Review,* 1987, *57*(1), 1–22.
Stark, J. S., and Lattuca, L. R. *Shaping the College Curriculum: Academic Plans in Action.* Needham, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

Toombs, W. "The Application of Design-Based Curriculum to General Education." *Review of Higher Education,* 1977–1978, *1*(3), 18–29.

Toombs, W., Fairweather, J. S., Amey, M., and Chen, A. *Open to View: Practice and Purpose in General Education 1988: A Final Report to the Exxon Education Foundation.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education, 1989.

Toombs, W., and Tierney, W. G. *Meeting the Mandate: Renewing the College and Departmental Curriculum.* Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1991.

Trowler, P., and Knight, P. "Organizational Socialization and Induction in Universities: Reconceptualizing Theory and Practice." *Higher Education,* 1999, *37*(2), 177–195.

Tyler, R. *Basic Principles of Curriculum Development.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950.

van Vught, F. A. "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Aspects of Quality Assessment in Higher Education." In D. F. Westerheijden, J. Brennan, and P.A.M. Maassen (eds.), *Changing Contexts of Quality Assessment.* Utrecht: Lemma, 1994.

Werner, C. M., and Baxter, L. "Temporal Qualities of Relationships: Organismic, Transactional and Dialectical Views." In M. L. Knapp and G. R. Miller (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communications.* (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994.

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