The Ecology of General Education Reform

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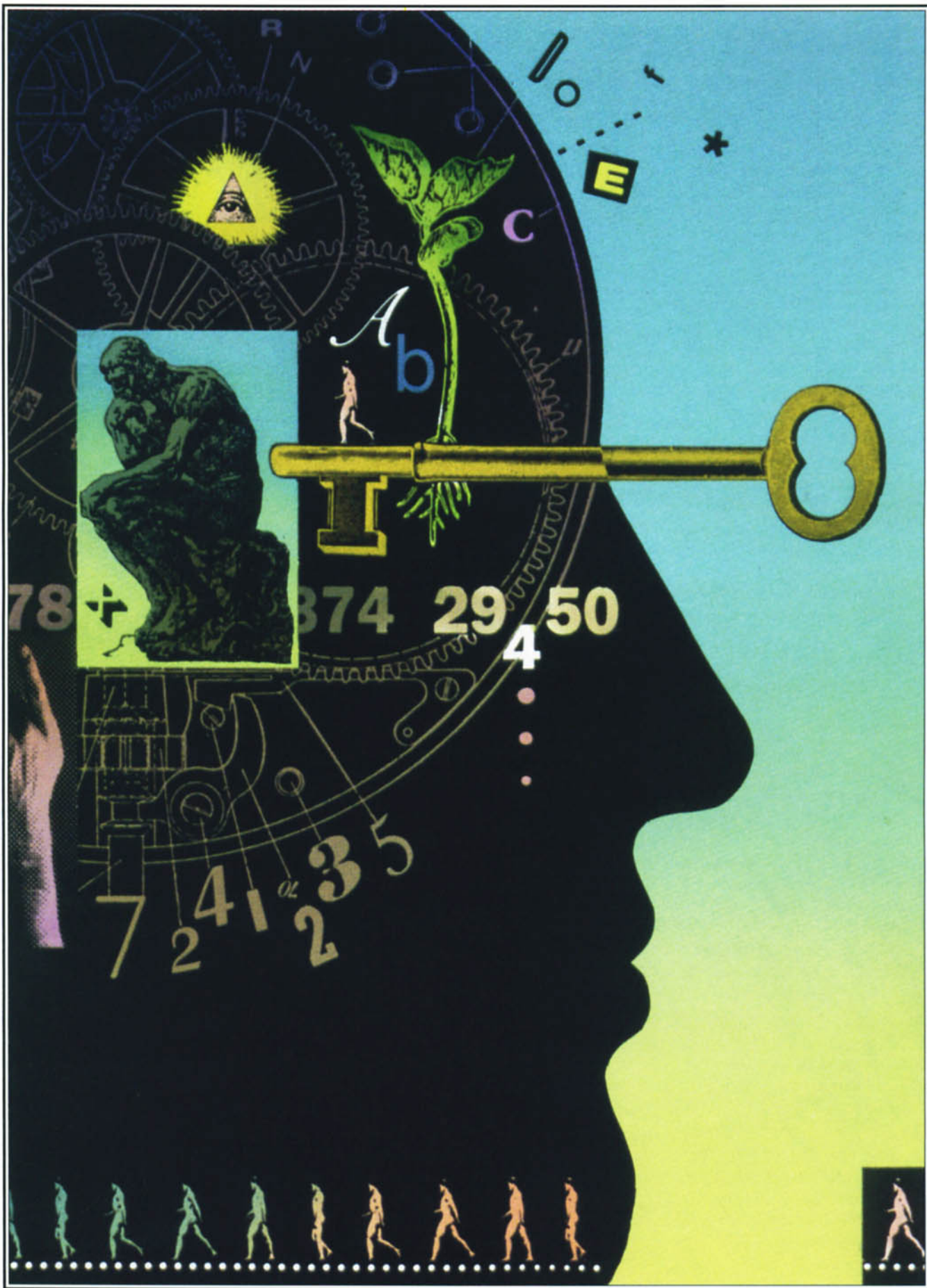
THE ECOLOGY *of* GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM

BY GORDON ARNOLD AND JANET T. CIVIAN

G eneral education is a perennial topic, spurring countless debates inside and beyond the academy. Critics point to its failures, reformers champion schemes for renewal, and institutions of every sort—rich and poor, large and small—bravely launch major general education reform efforts. An enormous number of colleges and universities have grappled with this issue over the past decade, with decidedly mixed results.

"Success" in reform is sometimes achieved, but often with a sense that something more could have been accomplished. Despite hard work and good intentions, an institution can end up with a general education program that's not much different from what it had before. Moreover, even a modest general education reform effort can be a costly enterprise. In addition to financial, opportunity, and political costs, there are all-too-real human and organizational costs: a reform effort can exhaust an institution. One might justifiably ask, "Is general education reform worth the effort?"

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RESEARCH RESULTS

This article reports our observations from participation in research conducted by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, funded by the Exxon Education Foundation. The study investigated the design and implementation of general education programs at campuses throughout New England. Seventy-one institutions were surveyed by telephone, and 15 intensive case studies were carried out. Although the study focused on resource-dependent institutions in New England only, our own wider experience and feedback from peers elsewhere convince us that what we found is restricted neither to our region of the country nor to just one institutional type. (For a fuller treatment of the issues that emerged in the study, see Kanter et al., in box.)

PROCESS AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

"The devil is in the details," the saying goes, and so it is with general education reform. The way a reform process is initially structured has a lot to do with the odds for its success. This point cannot be overemphasized. Mundane as the matter seems, there is a payoff in attending to such simple matters as the way in which committees are appointed, who is consulted (or not) in the design process, and the effect of proposals on the status quo, as well as in hammering out the details of implementation in advance. This may all seem obvious, but our inquiry found that the obvious is often ignored, forgotten, or given short shrift. Indeed, much trouble can be avoided simply by attending to the obvious instead of assuming that someone else will do so or that nobody will notice that it has not happened.

The point regarding consultation is particularly important, since it is rare to find a faculty member who does not have an opinion about general education. After all, faculty are products of general education programs themselves and, in most cases, have taught in them. It may not be immediately apparent that faculty sentiment is strong about general education, since initial participation in an institution's general education reform process may not elicit much of a turnout. It is a mistake, however, to conclude from this that faculty therefore must not care. Indeed, when proposals for change are forthcoming, faculty mobilize quickly.

Change in general education is organizational change, and the consequences for faculty—both symbolic and tangible—can be significant. To start, there are the philosophical and political implications of what is or is not included in a general education program. Declaring what all students must know, after all, reveals much about what an institution collectively thinks about the world.

On a pragmatic level, the implications of such change for faculty can be even greater. Changes in general education curricular requirements can lead to shifts in the distribution of students among departments. Deleting or adding a given requirement can have severe consequences for an institution's internal faculty labor market. Thus, aside from the oft-cited arguments about the merits of one curricular plan over another, there are a host of issues that can affect the everyday working life of faculty.

These concerns muddy the general education waters. Although the faculty may convene with the best of intentions to define clear and fully articulated goals and expected learning outcomes for a new program, this turns out to be easier said than done.

Obviously, it makes sense to have an understandable set of goals for a general education program, one that is tied to an institution's mission and tailored to its student body. These goals provide a framework against which proposed courses and teaching methods can be gauged. When goals are sufficiently specific, they enhance coherence and integration in the new curriculum, but unfortunately, we found very few examples of campuses able to accomplish this feat. From an organizational-political context, most institutions followed the path of least resistance: they settled on goals for implementation and student outcomes that were vague and poorly defined and could be broadly interpreted.

These are the sorts of issues that make general education reform a tricky business. To navigate around some of these difficulties, it may be instructive to think of general education reform as an ongoing process in which each iteration has strengths and weaknesses. While each reform effort may include innovations that leave the present academic generation's mark on the institution, it also typically includes some marginally satisfactory compromises. Campuses are often disappointed with this result.

One reason for the disappointment has to do with elevated expectations engendered by high-profile design committees. These committees, typically populated by well-respected and highly influential faculty members, inadvertently carry the message that the general education "problem" will be solved, if not permanently, at least for the foreseeable future.

While these "big-decision" committees lend the crucial expertise and legitimacy nec-

essary for significant curricular change, raising the stakes increases pressure to hold out for large-scale, dramatic changes. Opportunities for smaller, yet valuable, changes can be lost. Curriculum reformers might well consider their efforts as works-in-progress that will be improved upon later—if not by them, then by their successors. A willingness to accept incremental change is often helpful, since achieving something, as opposed to nothing, is often no small accomplishment. More improvements and refinements can—and will—come later.

LOADING UP THE PROCESS

Years of graduate training and a pervasive ethos of rational argumentation produce academics who know how to make rational choices. But it can be quite difficult to keep a general education reform project from taking any number of side excursions. The "garbage can" decision-making model elaborated by Cohen, March, and Olsen (see box) aptly describes many reform projects similar to those we encountered. All manner of institutional issues can end up in the mix. The project may ostensibly be about general education, but participants and observers alike often attempt to use it as a means to accomplish something else.

Attempts are commonly made, for example, to use the new general education program to shore up a department's declining enrollments. In addition to delivering students to the department's door, achieving a spot on the general education roster also has much symbolic value. It indicates the importance of particular disciplines in fulfilling the institution's educational mission. While it's always possible to find faculty who prefer not to teach general education courses, it's much rarer to find a department that does not wish to have its course offerings included in the plan.

This turns out to be an interesting paradox. When general education is on the table, everyone wants to be assured a place because inclusion indicates prestige and importance. Yet when the time comes to implement the program, the chairs empty. The actual teaching of the courses can thus be less important than the symbolic value of inclusion.

Another common agenda in general education reform is a desire by administrators to develop a "distinctive" program that admissions offices can use as a recruiting tool. Finally, for some faculty, the opportunity to revisit general education can be a way in which differing world views seek to establish (or reestablish) their legitimacy, if not supremacy, on campus. The fight between proponents of "the canon" and multicultural-ism, or feminism, or deconstructionism often plays out in general education reform.

While these subtexts are inevitable and sometimes beneficial in organizational reform, satisfactory results for the main objective and subtexts alike are more likely to be achieved if all goals are explicitly acknowledged at the outset. Beyond this, participants are well advised to examine consciously how the process unfolds on their campus so that these side issues can be recognized as they emerge. Surprisingly, we found that at some institutions, participants did not seem to notice how they were "loading up" their general education reform projects with these other issues, many of which had the potential to swamp the original purpose.

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, COHERENCE

Although the cleavage that can develop between faculty and administrators is often discussed, the differences among the faculty receive less attention. The world views developed by the various disciplines and professions can be vastly different from one another, as can their use of language and ways of communicating. When an attempt is made to reform an institution's general education program, such differences can come to the forefront. The hot topics in one field may seem arcane, misguided, or even silly to faculty in another field, and vice versa.

Ideological disputes can easily spill over into efforts to revise general education. We observed, for example, how perspectives such as feminist theory, identity politics, and postmodernism entered the reform debate and how difficult it often was for a campus to find resolutions. A common conflict in the general education arena concerns the relative merits of curricula that consciously seek to preserve Western culture versus those that emphasize non-Western perspectives. Some argue that program coherence suffers unless one party or another prevails in these debates, which is ironic, considering that the concept of general education in modern American higher education suggests a multiplicity of world views. While program coherence is an essential element of successful general education reform, creating coherence—a long-standing struggle in the history of undergraduate curricular reform—can become unnecessarily entangled in these ideological disputes. (See Rudolph, in box.)

Beyond ideology, we find simpler strains on academic culture that can derail otherwise sensible general education reform projects. Of these, we are especially mindful of the differences arising from the competition between

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junior and senior cohorts within faculties.

On one hand, there are professors and experienced associate professors whose futures with their institutions are for the most part assured and who have grown accustomed to influence and prestige on campus. On the other hand, there are assistant professors yet to achieve full acceptance, who often must struggle for the right to participate in decision-making at their institutions. (Note that adjunct faculty, who often teach a significant portion of general education courses, are not even part of this picture.) Even at institutions that were otherwise successful in bringing about change, cohort competition sometimes alienated segments of the faculty from each other and from the newly created curriculum.

While general education reform can unintentionally widen existing fissures on campus, it sometimes can forge community across disciplinary and generational boundaries. Lively debate about general education often invigorates a campus, bringing faculty together as members of their guild to discuss their educational mission. While we would not recommend that a campus undertake general education reform as a way of building community among its faculty, such a result is a welcome by-product when it does occur.

BACK TO TEACHING

It is important to note that the most elegant general education curriculum design will not cover up lackluster, uninspired teaching. Unfortunately, those in higher education sometimes think about a curriculum with little regard to how and by whom it will be taught. (We might even wonder whether some general education reform proposals finesse questions of teaching by diverting so much of the faculty's attention to curricular design.) However, it is stretching credulity to think that students will benefit automatically from a good curriculum design, regardless of the level of teaching quality. It is even more implausible to assume that students will not notice the quality of teaching just because a new curriculum has been devised.

College and university faculty members generally have gotten the message that pedagogy merits more than a passing consideration. How general education courses, in particular, are taught deserves to be included in the planning from the beginning. Unfortunately, there can be enormous impediments to change in this area. Pedagogical innovations are costly, and resource-dependent institutions, in particular, experience difficulties finding the funds for such innovations. Trustees have sent many an exhausted reform committee back to the drawing board to re-

design a program so that it has no new costs associated with it, which meant program quality suffered. Attention to teaching—resources and methods—must be forthcoming in the early stages of general education curriculum reform. Failure to do so can handicap the new program for its duration.

Who is teaching general education? Institutions look at this issue differently, and there are often competing ideas within a single institution. On some campuses, for example, senior faculty teach general education courses in one department, while teaching assistants, adjuncts, or junior faculty teach most of these courses in another. Not only does the quality of the actual teaching vary, but an inconsistent symbolic message is sent when one department employs senior professors and another uses adjuncts to teach general education courses. Again, this point may be more easily lost on ourselves than on students.

Teaching quality can be the most problematic in interdisciplinary courses. These courses are often favorites of reformers, but the culture of the academy makes implementing them difficult. First, no department "owns" them, so leadership can be lacking in their design and administration. Second, resources for the release time and professional development faculty need in order to teach these courses well are rarely made available.

Finally, the reward system in most institutions offers disincentives for taking on an interdisciplinary course—especially for faculty who have yet to achieve tenure. As they learned in the unofficial curriculum of graduate school, the road to tenure and success is usually a very narrow one. Straying from one's specialty—let alone discipline—is unlikely to yield sufficient recognition in tenure review or professional advancement to make it worth the risk.

All of these considerations underscore the importance of paying explicit attention to how a general education program will actually be implemented. If general education is truly as central to campus mission as it is made out to be, then the goal must be to attract the most able teachers to participate in it. Given that the current reward systems at many institutions barely recognize this important service, there is a genuine need for creativity in helping faculty make the choice to teach general education (in those institutions where choice exists); faculty must see that such service is valued and rewarded.

Even at institutions, often smaller, where faculty have little choice about teaching general education courses, similar reasoning holds. The goal remains not only to encourage faculty to participate enthusiastically, but also

RESOURCES

■ **Cohen, Michael D., James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen.** "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 17, 1972, pp. 1-25.

■ **Kanter, Sandra L., Zelda F. Gamson, and Howard B. London.** *Revitalizing General Education in a Time of Scarcity: A Navigational Chart for Administrators and Faculty*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

■ **Rudolph, Frederick.** *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977. ∞

to provide a genuinely supportive atmosphere for them to do so. Sadly, at institutions of all types and sizes, we encountered faculty who were deeply alienated by the general education reform process or by its poor implementation. Talented faculty members refused to teach general education courses outright or did so with bitterness. These negative feelings can infect students, advisees, and colleagues.

OTHER IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

With all of the energy and focus necessary to reach agreement in designing a general education program, participants' attention may lag when the time to implement the plan finally arrives. Obviously, a new program requires sufficient and predictable resources to launch and sustain it. Less obvious, perhaps, is the need for a viable mechanism to support the fledgling program, as well as strong and persuasive leadership.

A clearly articulated mechanism will provide a procedural guide to implementation. It establishes lines of authority for a program as well as procedures for assessing and adjusting its progress. Leadership is needed not only to tend to the basic needs of staffing and scheduling, but to assure that the program maintains its definition and spirit. Without this leadership, the program loses its momentum and meaning for the institution; it risks becoming an orphaned enterprise.

The question of which party will have oversight for general education was treated in a surprisingly perfunctory manner by most institutions. Typically, a standing curriculum committee filled this role. Sometimes authority for a program was left with a curriculum committee, while responsibility for day-to-day management was assigned to an academic officer. Very rarely, however, was a

director appointed. Where they existed, director's positions were often ambiguous, placing the incumbent in an unenviable position between the curriculum committee and the departments, each with differing agendas and perspectives. In the absence of other arrangements, de facto power devolved to the departments (or divisions, in some cases).

While the general education directors we encountered were typically saddled with much responsibility and little authority, their leadership was instrumental in keeping the institution's general education program vital. Institutions without a director at the helm often experienced slow but steady retrenchment of their programs. The challenge is to devise a leadership position that faculty will view as legitimate. Future success of general education programs may depend on improvements in this area.

Program oversight was not the only area treated in a perfunctory manner. Plans for assessment were perfunctory at best, and largely absent. This derived in part from quest fatigue. The attitude was, "Let somebody else deal with that." While participants' fatigue was real, it is also likely that the crafters of the new program wished to avoid close scrutiny of the end product. First, as we noted earlier, institutions typically specified goals and outcomes in the vaguest of terms. In the absence of clear goals, it is impossible to assess the outcomes of a program. Second, in more than a few cases, the final design of the program was the result of an arduous process of compromise and accommodation. It is not difficult to imagine how the designers may have wished to avoid establishing assessment mechanisms that could later contribute to unraveling the curriculum, which was the product of a fragile compromise. Interestingly, weak programs often unraveled on their own and would have been better served by systematic assessment.

DELICATE BALANCES

General education appears deceptively straightforward. But as an expression of an institution's collective vision, it is subject to the scrutiny of myriad constituencies on and off campus. Defining what a student should know remains as elusive as ever, as philosophical, symbolic, political, cultural, and financial factors enter the debate. We know from the campuses we studied that to give a new program a fighting chance, it must be specifically tuned to an institution's goals, culture, and resources. Delicate balances among all these elements, though difficult to achieve, are nonetheless needed, and each institution must find its own way. This is best done with eyes and minds open. ◙